

The Cherry

by Sean Taylor

"I found blood in the sink again," she told James.

And those words had reminded him of three weeks prior when he had bit into the first cherry of his life, after holding out for thirty years.

"Oh, yeah, I bit my lip at work, there was this woman on the phone that was endlessly going on with "ummm and uhhh," it was the worst, I just started chewing on my lip, and by the time I had taken down all of her stupid information, and her increasingly long credit card stuff, I just had nothing left, I'm sorry, the stress shouldn't have gotten to me, I guess when I was brushing my teeth it broke back open."

"Were you brushing your lips, too?"

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He wasn't lying to her, or himself yet. Three weeks earlier In a Jazz club on sixteenth street he found himself staring at the shoulder blades of a beautiful woman, the shoulder blades, the neck line, and the back of her neck; which for all good reason, in such a cold climate, should have been covered instead of coveted.

It was freezing outside and she was backless in Alaska.

That night, in that Jazz club, after finishing his third Manhattan, a drink he had resigned himself to after ten years of whiskey-cokes, he found himself chewing deeply and hideously at his cheek. After five minutes of chewing and staring, chewing on his cheek, and staring at her neck, the last song by the last Jazz setup had finished. And as this woman, and the rest of the crowd, James not included, began to clap he realized that this was to be the last view of such a backline for the rest of his life.

James studied psychology, loosely, his mind was the last thing he sought to figure out in his twenties, when he still sought to figure things out, before his twenties came to an end. He knew association, he knew loss and he knew tight knots and holding hands the way

that synapses do. He had, however, never, by a combination of chance and texture, ingested a single cherry.

James, quickly, with far too many paragraphs for only one thought, as well as the knowledge of the sweet and amorous reputation of cherries in general, placed the sad whiskey soaked cherry from the bottom of his Manhattan into his mouth. His hungry teeth let off his bitten cheek as well as his bitten lip, and as he stared into her backline, he took one deep chew into the cherry and let the pulp remain. Then he bit again, it was his first, he had tasted cherry flavored drinks or cakes before, but never the pure fruit, and now he had to let it reside, up until she walked away, which is when he swallowed it down quite quickly, for as long as she existed the first time, the cherry must, and as soon as she was gone the cherry must be as well.

He then spent his walk home to his single apartment spitting up various textures of red, combinations of cherry and blood mostly.

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"You're always grinding your teeth," She said next.

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And these words reminded James of the first day they had finally met in a café, finally met, which was the very next day. She was one patron ahead of him and eager, still backless, strapless, her jacket caught upon a hook fastened tightly to her hips.

"Can you hear that?" she asked the customer between her and James.

"Hear what?" the customer said.

"It sounds like grinding, or frustration or impatience."

"Sounds like Monday morning," the other customer said.

It was the sound of James' teeth destroying cherries, reaffirming the association of her. He had found them in a parfait the café was selling and was self-serving, assuming the customers weren't up for stealing.

James, over hearing all of this stopped, stopped because he was grinding his teeth, because the cherries were mashed and bleeding, he stopped because the association was alive and breathing.

“Never mind,” she said, “I think it stopped.”

James then purchased his usual, plus the parfait, in which he didn't even have to speak of, which worked out quite well considering all the cherries that he had been hiding. The Barista gave him his double shot of espresso, for which he was using the distaste of to forget about a current employer he had as such been fighting.

He sat behind this girl, with his back to her and opened his laptop, today was his day off, and days off were days spent looking to find new jobs; that someday might eventually lead to more days off.

His days off were spent, attempting to produce more days off, which ultimately disqualified them from being days off.

“Excuse me,” she said to him, with her upper body back line curved, “Do you smell cherries?”

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“I can't sleep,” She finally announced.

And this reminded him of the first time she had made this announcement, though it was, at last, the last time, they would speak while being together.

The first time she had said “I can't sleep,” he mumbled in his, “Go to bed,” but said it so softly.

It had reminded him because he said everything softly in his sleep, because he had to wear a mouth guard, because she had reminded him endlessly of cherries, much like the first and last two that he would ever eat.

You see James had hoped this girl, should I mention, her name was Marie, would have disappeared after that night at the Jazz club. And whenever he had wanted to come to find her backline all he would have to do is sit at home and grind out a couple of cherries.

The association was simple, the pulp, her beauty, and his teeth.

Yet at the café that day, the day after the first cherry, they started talking, then after three weeks of dating all he could think of was her neck as they slept spooning, and all he could do was grind his teeth.

What else could he do, as he laid there, her bare neck directly in view, the last thing he would see before closing his eyes to sleep.

At the end of these three weeks, however, it felt like all she ever said was, "I can't sleep," and "You're always grinding your teeth."

So he left, and he swore off cherries, and he swore off Marie. He stopped drinking Manhattans and instead of hitting up his favorite Jazz club off of sixteenth, he headed to a strip club in North Beach.

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"You're not you anymore." She said to him.

Which were words he could never remember hearing.

She said this to him because at the strip club after talking in just with one of the ladies and then waiting after her shift was over to possibly get a drink with her, the bouncer had punched James square in the jaw. He went down quick and then limped home to Sixteenth, which was strange because his legs were fine and only his mouth was bleeding. When I say his mouth was bleeding I mean his lips were torn, his bottom jaw was pushed a quarter of an inch to the left, but he didn't lose any teeth. Upon his arrival home James found upon his doorstep a beautiful woman with a very large jacket, covering most all of her back, but her name was still Marie.

"You're not you anymore." She said.

Which were words he could never remember hearing.

And the quarter inch the bouncers' fist pushed his jaw out of line, has ever since kept James' teeth from grinding.

