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In memory of Morse Hamilton, my teacher and friend

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I wanted to move freely: swing my arms and jump around. But the Devil wouldn't stop dirty dancing with me. He grinned through glistening red face paint, grinding his hips against my body. The attention was nice, but my thigh got stuck in his crotch for too long.

Finally he spun me out right at the beginning of "Love Me." When I turned around, I was facing a sneering Elvis with a microphone. It was one of those black mikes with an orange Nerf ball on top that you use when you're an eight-year-old living-room rock star. Elvis approached me, singing sincerely with hand gestures and all, as if he'd been waiting for this opportunity all night. Like he'd requested it. Before he got close enough to fully serenade me, the Devil pulled me back toward him, grinding slowly from behind. He spun me around so I was facing him and lifted me, twirling me in the air, making my gypsy skirts catch wind.

"Looks like I picked up the cutest girl at this party," he said, directly in my ear since the music was deafeningly loud.

Elvis circled around with us, lip-synching in my direction and making puppy-dog eye contact whenever possible.

The Devil put me back on the ground, which Elvis interpreted

as an invitation to cut in. Soon the three of us were dancing together; suggestive movements, since the Devil would have it no other way, and Elvis clutching his microphone. By the end of the song, Elvis had placed his mike in the back pocket of his leather pants, so our faces were much closer. Elvis fumbled with one of the strands of beads around my neck and kissed me — first little pecks, then longer and slower. The Devil's fingers crept up a different strand, tugging as they went. His hand bumped into Elvis's and Elvis stopped kissing me to push the Devil's hand away. The Devil quickly wrapped his arm around my waist and whisked me away and kissed me, too. Between kisses he bit my lips gently.

I'd never thought of biting as a good thing before.

When Elvis started stroking my hair, the Devil turned and kissed him hard on the lips, as if that would distract him from me. But it didn't seem to faze him. Elvis went along with the kisses, then broke away and grabbed me again. Soon we were all making out, taking turns with who got control. I could tell who was who without opening my eyes; the Devil kept trying new things like sucking my lips and blowing air into my mouth, while Elvis always had the same average French kiss.

Elvis's lips and chin were smeared with red makeup. Some from the Devil's face, some from my lipstick. The Devil's face paint was all splotchy, with bits of flesh showing through, especially around his mouth.

The more we made out, the more I realized this guy didn't look like Elvis at all. It wasn't anything specific, but he definitely was not Elvis. He began to lose his charm and I gravitated toward the Devil.

We both stopped giving Elvis his turn, so eventually he sauntered off. I was still smoothing the Devil at the end of the last song, and he offered to walk me home.

We left under the glowing exit sign.

Tea with the Devil

He held my hand and tried to warm it, squeezing my fingers between his own.

I wondered if the Devil had ever held hands with a gypsy before. Or with any person, for that matter. I thought his fiery hand would scorch my fingers off, but out there in the frosty night, it wasn't doing me much good.

I didn't have tights on and the chilled air danced around my legs. My teeth chattered.

"Cold?" he asked.

"Good guess," I said, shivering.

He put his arm around me. "Where's your place?"

"Number 301." I pointed down Artist's Row. "Kind of a hike."

"We're practically neighbors!" He squeezed me against his side. "I've got a better idea! Come to my place for tea. It's on your way, and you'll warm up faster. What could be hotter than the Devil's lair, anyway?" He winked.

"Nothing I can think of." I pressed up against him for warmth.

He lived in a small brick house that was set back from the sidewalk by a sparsely wooded area. We followed a path through the leafless trees, saying nothing as we walked, my beads clanking and skirts rustling. There were three studio apartments in the building. We got to his through the side door.

Inside, his steamy radiator banged and hissed. He was right; it couldn't have been much hotter without being a sauna.

I made my way through the sculptures of fire hydrants and fire hydrant parts that cluttered his floor. The floorboards were stained a slightly lighter brown than the wood paneling that covered the walls. The ceiling light radiated a dim yellow glow that didn't quite reach the outer limits of the room.

The bang of the radiator sounded like little guys with hammers were running up and down the pipes.

Since the frameless futon mattress was the only place to sit, I sat on it. As he went to the kitchen to boil water, I said, "I'm Ellie, by the way."

"Oh, I'm Satan," he said, walking back to shake my hand. "Nice to meet you. No, just kidding. Name's Nate. Nate Finerman. As in: You Never Met a . . ."

His eyebrows arched outward as he smiled. Removing his horns and thin red hood, he revealed a head of dark thick hair that radiated around his scalp as if he'd rubbed a balloon on it. I'd never seen anything like it.

He noticed me staring at his hair and said, "Like my 'do? It's been growing straight out like this ever since I shaved it. I want to see how long it'll get before it falls normally again." His teapot was like the one my parents have at home: the kind that whistles.

The refrigerator buzzed.

Down at futon level, some of the fire hydrant sculptures stood taller than me. The biggest ones were constructed with foam core and cardboard, and the smallest were in clay. The wall by his bed was plastered in pictures of him with various stylish women. Above those snapshots was a neat row of pages from magazines like *Cosmo*. None of the ladies were naked, but their clothes said that could be changed very quickly.

On the night table was one framed photograph, of a man wearing glasses, carrying a bag of golf clubs.

After he'd filled the kettle, Nate returned to sit with me. He put his arm around me and ran his fingertips against my scalp. I rubbed his cheek with my thumb, trying to smudge the red face paint back to an area where it had been displaced in a reverse lipstick mark. I laughed.

"What's funny?" he asked, pressing his fingers harder against my scalp.

"Nothing." I took a deep breath to regain composure. I didn't want him to know I was laughing because the last time I'd kissed someone was at a middle school spin-the-bottle party. Only in my dreams did someone make out with a loner like me. And I'd never imagined two guys would want me at the same time.

Two guys. I couldn't let that happen again.

The radiator shhhhed like an annoying librarian.

Nate brought my face toward his and started kissing me. He

kissed in a hurry like it was make-out rush hour. I withdrew to look at him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing."

He looked into my eyes as if he was hunting for something he lost.

I glanced over his shoulder at the red digits on his alarm clock. It was already several hours into tomorrow.

He slowly pushed me down so I was lying on my back, and draped one of his legs across my middle.

I stared at the cobweb in the corner of the ceiling.

"You're not ready," he said, almost accusingly.

"For what?"

He laughed. "You'd better go home before something happens."

He rolled off me. I sat up.

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked.

"No." He stroked my face. "The problem is, you're doing everything *right*. I don't want to ruin it."

More banging from the radiator.

He helped me get my coat on and dragged the zipper up at inchworm pace. When he reached my chest, he pulled it back down — so slowly, I heard the zipper hit each bump. He paused to look me in the eye, then zipped me all the way up.

"It's better this way," he said.

"I guess."

"Don't be insulted." He hugged me.

"Well, Happy New Year," I said, even though technically New Year's Eve had been two nights ago.

"Yeah, you too," he sighed.

I turned toward the door.

"Wait," he said, "I was going to walk you home."

"It's okay," I said. "It's only a few blocks."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Well can I at least come and visit sometime?"

"Sure, stop by if you want."

"You said 301, right?"

"Right. Big white place. One-F on the buzzer. But if you forget, knock on my window. Front right corner."

"You really should let me walk you home."

"I told you, I'll be okay," I said. "I'm from Manhattan. What're you so worried about anyway?"

He tucked my hair behind my ears. "You never know who's out there waiting for a looker like you."

Running at Night

I guess it was best that I left Nate's house. I didn't know anything about him except that he dressed like the Devil and lived down the street. The cold air stung my face, so I ran. I couldn't put my gloves

on because there was melted lollipop goo stuck to the fuzz. I'm always forgetting things in my pockets.

Clanking and rustling as I ran, I inhaled the cold. I ran faster and faster, swallowing mouthfuls of the tingling air.

My boots clomped along the pavement and my shadow grew and shrank and grew again as I passed street lamps. There was nobody else out, so I zigzagged from curb to curb, crossing the double yellow lines. Doing this back home would've been a death wish; drivers own the sleepless streets there. But here, the road was all mine.

When I was running, the wintry air didn't hurt my skin; it made my entire body feel fresh and alive. I sprinted past my apartment, to the end of the block. I made a U-turn at the stop sign and thought, "It doesn't get better than this."

I stopped, out of breath, at my building. It was an old mansion that used to be an insane asylum. Now it was full of college students.

I walked up the three thin wide steps and through the front door to the empty hardwood hallway. If anyone else was up, I couldn't hear them.

A pile of balled-up packing tape and Styrofoam peanuts welcomed me home. Boxes of books and bags of clothes were scattered around the living room. The bathroom and kitchen were all set up, though. My parents had seen to that.

In the bathroom mirror, my face was all smudgy with gypsy and Devil makeup. It took a while to wash it off. I had gotten used to no makeup at all since I'd removed it from my daily routine. I'd forgotten what a pain it was.

I tossed my costume on the floor in a heap and got into my pajamas.

I shut my eyes. There was nothing I wanted more than sleep.

Enveloped in my blankets, I wondered what would be happening at that moment if I hadn't left Nate's. Maybe we'd be drinking tea.

The glow-in-the-dark stars above met my sudden wide-eyed stare.

The kettle had never whistled.

The Stuff

The phone was ringing. It took me a minute to realize it wasn't a fire alarm. Nine A.M. Had to be a relative.

"Have you got the stuff?" asked a scratchy voice.

"What stuff?" I bolted upright. "Who is this?"

"It's me," he said, switching to his regular voice. "Who'd you think it was? Your other dad?" He laughed.

I didn't.

"Well anyway, how's life at Nekked?"

"It's NECAD, Dad. N-E-C-A-D. As in New England College of Art and Design. How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Might as well be Nekked, with all those *naked* people running around!" he said with a laugh.

"Oh yeah, there's just swarms of them running through the

streets, Dad. You'd think it was a nudist marathon." Sometimes I have trouble controlling my sarcasm.

"Maybe I should give you to your mother."

"Maybe." I tried to say it as straight as possible.

As he handed her the receiver, I heard a muffled "She'd rather speak to you." I rolled my eyes even though he wasn't there to see.

"Hey, El!"

"Hi Mom."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, everything's fine," I said. "Dad's just getting on my nerves. You know, his usual jokes."

"You could ask him to stop."

"I try. It's no use."

"Well, we didn't call to get you down. Are you settling in all right?"

"Yeah."

"Did you go to the Artist's Ball?"

"Yeah. Last night."

"Any cool costumes?"

"Some. One guy wore a chain mail suit. He made it himself."

"Wow. Did you have a good time?"

"It was pretty fun."

"Make any friends?"

"Kind of."

"Kind of?"

Well, Mom, you wouldn't believe it, but I made out with the Devil.

"It's hard to meet people when the music's so loud you can hear it pounding in your head the next morning," I said. "Right," she said. "Well, you'll meet people soon. This is a really exciting time for you. I bet there are lots of cute guys, too!"

"Why do you care so much about me making friends and meeting guys?"

"Oh, El," she sighed. "I just want you to be happier than you were in high school. It's nice to have friends. And to have boy-friends."

"I'll be okay."

In the background I heard Dad say, "Has she finished unpacking?"

"Tell him not completely," I said.

"I felt bad leaving without getting your place in order," she said.

"It's fine," I said. "You did more than you had to. I can take care of it."

"I know you can," she said. "But it's your first time on your own. If Dad didn't have to get back to prepare for trial, I would've stuck around till you were settled in."

"She'll be fine, Marsha!" Dad said. "Just tell her to make sure she unpacks soon!"

"Did you hear that?" Mom asked.

"Yes," I groaned. "Why does he care so much?"

"Your father is an obsessively tidy person," she said. "It drives him crazy to think that somewhere in another state, his daughter might have clothes strewn across the floor."

"No, I just want to know if she's unpacked. That's it," he said loud enough for me to hear.

"Okay, Len," she humored him.

"Why don't you let your mother talk?" I heard him say to her. "She's been waiting patiently."

"Grandma's over?" I asked.

"She's right beside me," she said. "I'll pass you over to her. Good luck in class on Monday. Call if you need anything. And don't forget to notify your father when you've unpacked!"

"Tell him not to worry," I said. "I'll hire a skywriter to write a message over the city: ELLIE'S UNPACKED."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate it," she said. "Love you."

"Love you, too."

She passed off the phone.

"Hello?" Grandma always answered the phone like she was making a guess to solve a riddle.

"Hi, Grandma," I said, lying back down. "How are you?"

"I'm well," she said. "But more important is how are you? The new place, the new peoples." Sometimes Grandma messed up her English. Mom said she did it on purpose because it sounded good with her German accent.

"I'm fine," I said. "I wore your skirts and beads last night."

"Your mother tells me you went to be a gypsy at the party."

"That's right," I said. A long sunny rectangle warmed my face through black bars over my window. All the first-floor apartments had them, to protect us from criminals.

"Is a good thing I gave you those old clothes," she said. "They were crowded in my closet, and I would have taken them to the Goodwill."

"Glad I could save you the trip."

She laughed. "And is there a young man in your life?"

"Oh, not really."

"No? An adorable girl like you?"

"I'm not in a big hurry."

What did she want from me? I hadn't even been here a week yet. Grandma must've been fast back in the day.

"I don't want to be keeping you long," she said.

"I like talking to you."

"Well, we're getting going tor brunch."

"Okay," I said. "Thanks for the clothes."

"You're welcome," she said. "Good luck and good-bye." She made a kissing noise.

I kissed back. "Bye Grandma. Have fun at brunch."

I hung up the phone and fell back to sleep hugging my pillow.

The sun's elongated shadow lines crept across my bed.



Most Individual

A rapping on the window made my heart jump. Nate's face grinned through the bars. I leapt out of bed.

"Not up yet?" he yelled. His face was faint. Only the high points of his nose, cheeks, and chin were illuminated by a light on the side of my building.