

It oozed from her mouth like foam. A question that could only arise from the murk. It crept from her pale lips and hung, dribbling, bubbling, festering down her chin. What kind of a question was that?

“What kind of a question is that?”

Marie, terrestrial Marie, like a piece of pizza, bubbly, crispy, acidic.

“I’m asking you honestly,” she said.

To pass over in silence. If only that were an option. If only it been uttered electronically so it could be summarily dismissed with no reply (no reply necessary). But she had pinned him against the old linoleum countertop while he filled his coffee.

“I don’t understand why you’re asking.” Why the need for such pollution.

“Victor, look at me.” At the freckles. Pale cheeks. Loose strands of hair and candy apple nail polish brushing them back. “I need you to be honest.”

The faucet drip dropped. “When have I ever not been honest?”

“I guess I would have to say ...” the words were coming out automatically, formed by a mechanism over which he seemed to have marginal control, “you and I both know, anyone knows, it’s impossible to love someone you’ve never met.”

He took a sip of coffee, his senses, numbed from the flood of adrenalin, inhibiting his pain receptacles from transmitting messages regarding the scorching burn on his tongue.

He was about to walk into the dining room, make it natural, make the transition natural. Because it was. He was answering naturally. But before he could go, she asked: “Do you love her?”

On the wall in the dining room, he stared at the cloud of smoke in which a woman’s eyes hung; his poster of Chinatown, autographed by Faye Dunaway. His favorite movie. Every movie reviewer’s favorite movie. Tight. Nothing out of place, no stray lines of dialogue; everything there for a reason. If this right now, this situation in which he found himself, after 10 years of marriage, a decade of good, if not great years of being married to a very, how else to put it?, earthly woman, were a movie, what would his next line be? He pictured the screenwriter sitting back in his chair, rolling back from the table and gazing out the window, the screenplay nothing but a blur in the foreground, as he waited for the words to alight on his finger to be keyed into the screen.

It was taking too long, too many milliseconds. It was becoming unnatural. His line was called for. Line? Line! But there was nobody to tell him. Don’t think. Write.

"Do I love her?"

She left. Leaving the circles to ping out in the surface of his coffee: crest, trough, wave. Trebles. Her footsteps.

Next to his coffee, a newspaper. On it a picture. An image. A woman. She had been thrown onto the table as an indictment, yet the act of throwing her had been sacrilege. Amoxicillin Cox Villain (yes, that was her name), Moxie for short.

Celestial, corporeal, concupiscent: the source of his dichotomized existence over the past two months, Moxie: and now she was here, summoned by Marie, no less, conjured like a spirit to take earthly form: the woman, the mysterious Moxie, she was practically crawling out of the pulp onto the table: on all fours: there in front of Victor, on his countertop, naked ... at the ankle over the long, light curve of the calf, up the arch of the hamstring he could practically trace, he could feel, more than envision the absolute feminine meatiness of her thigh to where it rounded out and parted, only to slope to the small of her back and form the gulf up to the shock of platinum hair drenching his kitchen like a tidal wave. He, Victor Hoon, despite his troll-like lumbering hump of fleshy clumsiness, regardless of his sordid, bumped disease of putrid throbbing emittances, he would mount this GODDESS here and now, in this gateway between two planes, his kitchen, and join, reconcile, merge, form, create. He was tearing off his shirt; ripping down the zipper; he was hiking his knee on top of the counter, he could just FEEL the flesh of this pristine presence in his grasp; he was about to take her, to irrevocably alter his existence and unleash the bestial matter just as there came a rapping at the kitchen door.

• • •

The pile of olives lay glistening in his palm as he gazed through Victor's window as though it were a portal to another world. With his free hand, he dug into his pocket, extracted a pinch of salt and sprinkled it over the olives. The crispy nuggets adhered to the surrounding oil. "A little extra preservation never hurt a soul," he whistled in his cheerful, airy voice.

The cuffs of his Levi's were still moist from his foray into the toadpool. Behind him, wet footprints were disappearing from the sidewalk in the remaining heat of the day. Arty popped an olive in his mouth, chewing with the slow, unconscious reckoning of a man transported by his observations. He rapped his fist against the glass. His necklace jangled loose as he tucked its pendant back under his shirt. "Under Jaguar's Tongue," he muttered, "everything is possible."

Suddenly he noticed a subtle change. A turning of the knob. Arty turned his head with it, observing the slow circular sway as though being rotated by a claw. It continued to circle until at last the door gave. There was a crack, a way in. In stepped Arty.

"Olive?" he offered, staring at the heap of manflesh. "You probably think the carcinogens from a natural preservative are harmful, don't you, Victor? I can assure you otherwise. Preservation

techniques date back to ancient, one might say Biblical times. Are you listening, Victor? Why do I always get the sense that you're not absorbing what I'm saying? Sometimes it feels like we're from two different tribes."

"Where is it?" Victor croaked.

"You sound terrible, neighbor. Nothing a little yage can't remedy. I'll be back in a jiffy."

"What did you do with it?"

"I'm going to get it right now."

"The book."

"The book?"

"What have you done with the book?"

"What kind of book are we talking about?" Arty whistled. "Farmer's Almanac? You know those things don't count for a hill of beans. A field guide? A manual of some sort?"

"You know damn well what I'm talking about," Victor said. "Thief."

Arty dug into his pocket for a pinch of salt. He was rubbing the grains between his fingers meditatively, closing his eyes tightly as though trying to visualize something. He popped his salted finger in his mouth and slurped.

"What are you doing?" Victor said, brushing crumbs off his shirt as he leaned against the counter.

"I just can't see it," Arty said, "this so-called book. Can you describe it?"

"Stop it," Victor shouted. He grabbed Arty's t-shirt with both hands. His jaw was tense. His pulse throbbed visibly on his wrist. "Look at me," he said, staring into Arty's closed eyes.

The warm breeze swept in, opening the door fully. A fly bobbed against the window. A bloodhound howled. Someone started up a mower.

Arty's eyes slid open like trap doors. They were shards of darkness. Marbled blackness. Shark-like, discus eyes with a quality that was neither distant nor close; Arty could have been beholding anything with, or through, them. His expression was unchanged, still merry almost.

And then all of a sudden, something changed in Arty's expression, as though a spell had been lifted. "Victor," he said, "it's time we had a long talk."

• • •

Black, polished Wyoming leather boots rose through the air, their flat waxed laces lashed through 24 eyelets with the tied-up, draconian ardor of Ahab. Calves punched through the tops, poised, curled, tense as fists, concealed in black nylon leggings. Thighs like oars. Up they rose. Coiled knuckles hung on either side of an abdomen that could be mistaken for a cinder block. The elevator dinged. The doors flew open. Sheila O'Neil marched out. Her hair, a nest of eels electrified into unctuous, skeletal tracers, trailed, its crazed corpses a haze of black oil upon the azure light trickling through the row of prisoner-like windows of The Smokestack. Behind her, the man with the black winter's cap from the plaza, tried to keep up.

The clops of her boots echoed through the corridor. Office doors closed as soon as the elevator dinged. They knew.

Sheila cast open the door to her office. She made straight for her desk, pulled a golden pen from its sheath, and on a notebook of calligraphy paper began to write. The scratching of steel quill on textured pulp loaded the office with the sound of purpose, as though an executive order to kill a head of state were being inscribed. The winter-hatted man stood off toward the wall, hands clasped behind his back, watching Sheila puncture the paper with looping scrawls. The process went on for a full two minutes. Sheila would scrawl, pause, look to the clouds, return to the paper, scratch an itch on her oblique, then continue. At last she cast the pen to the notebook and swung into the chair behind her desk. "What phrasing do you prefer, Bacchus?" she said, extracting a small handheld fan from a drawer. Sebastian Bacchus neared the notebook. Still keeping his hands behind his back, he read aloud: "Ethereal urethra, unreal."

"That is option A," said Sheila, clicking on the fan.

"Unreal urethra, ethereal," read Sebastian.

"Option B," Sheila said, spraying her face with air.

"Ethereal, unreal urethra," read Bacchus. "Let me guess, Option C? I think they are all sublime, but I see no connection to the events. You are aware that Mr. Pestilentus tried to seize the book? Which incidentally, is down on the plaza as we speak, along with my review for the week."

"Droning," Sheila said, rising to peer down from her window at the pages skittering down the manhole. "We have matters of a higher purpose to contemplate."

"You do realize that the book ..."

"That, undoubtedly, is the hairiest butt I have ever seen." Sheila was now looking through a telescope that was screwed into her windowsill. "A horrible posterior. I am no horticulturist,

but I would venture to declare that we have discovered a new breed of fungus cultivated in a human canyon. And the way he uses it to heave into that poor woman on his desk. What is it called when bestiality meets office rape? Bacchus, please corroborate. Is that not the foulest buttocks your eyes have beheld?"

Bacchus expelled a breath through his nostrils, as if to indicate *ah well*, and peered through the telescope. "Vile."