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Effigy

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Effigy

He was eight, full cheeks brimming with youth and a toothy grin that refused to be contained behind thin lips. He was not quite plump enough to be taunted by his peers, and not yet old enough to be endearingly rotund. Henry Orsen blended into the world that seemed eager to forget him. He didn't care. From his place in the back of the classroom, side of the hall, or behind a book, he could see her, and that was all he thought about. She was the most adorable girl that he had ever seen—his first boyhood crush. She had skin the color of fresh milk and her hair seemed to devour any light that touched it. She was quiet, but brilliant with a colored pencil—though the combination never seemed to garner her any friends. Henry didn't care. She was going to be *his* girl, and she didn't even know it yet. But when he approached her, the occasions as fruitless as they were many, she would wish him away, indifferent to his persistence and adoration.

He would march up to her at the beginning of each day and proclaim, "I like your name. Violet is such a pleasant color," turning the very shade of which he spoke.

And she would say, "It's Violet the *flower*, not the *color*, stupid!" Turning her nose as far up as she could manage while still scouring him with her eyes, she would storm away so violently that from inside a classroom, one might have thought her to be an elephant parading through the foyer. But Henry didn't care. He was ensnared by her briny charm, tangled by her bitter tongue like a lame rabbit caught in a rusty fence.

They successfully avoided each other as they climbed upward through elementary and middle school. Occasionally, they had classes together in those years, though neither used that as an opportunity to build their friendship. He appreciated her from afar, enjoying her consistent effort and intelligence, while never really letting her surpass him. He was always the brightest in the class,

and she, a close second—this hierarchy a constant source of unvoiced conflict between them. In November when they were twelve, Violet beat him on a geography exam. Though it was a subject at which he was admittedly ‘inadequate,’ he couldn’t help but boil in frustration as Violet steeped him in a scalding pot of gloat.

“Henry, what did *you* get on the test? Because I think I beat you!” Violet chirped as she flapped her exam in his face, taunting him. She was finally victorious over her rival, and she relished the opportunity to break her silence towards him to let him know it.

“Mrs. Porter wrote ‘Excellent work!’ on the top of my paper. What did she write on *yours*? I bet she didn’t even write anything!”

Cheeks burning with shame, Henry looked down to the twisted lump of paper in his fist. The bright red ‘93%’ that stood alone on an otherwise unmarked first page peeked out from the crumpled mess, snickering in his face. *A-. You weren’t good enough, Henry. She was the best. You failed.* No matter how harshly his parents had scolded him in the past for any grade less than an A, he was always his own harshest critic. Violet buzzed around him like a pesky mosquito feeding on his humiliation; he couldn’t take it anymore. Seizing the test from her lofted hand, Henry threw it to the floor.

“It’s just one test, Violet! It doesn’t matter,” he spat. “You’ll never be as smart as me! You just got lucky this time. You’re just a dumb girl!” Henry shook with rage, startled yet excited by his outburst.

“You are NOT! I am just as smart as you!” Violet cried. “You don’t even have any friends. You’re just an ugly loser. I’m glad I never talk to you! I will never be your friend!” said Violet, eyes brimming with tears.

Still shaking from the encounter, Henry unclenched his fist that had turned his exam into a bleeding pulp of the fifty states, letting it fall to the floor. By the time it hit the ground, he was already to his locker grabbing his books for his next class. He had a mathematics quiz the following day, and a 93% would be unacceptable.

After that, things were different. Violet no longer allowed any communication between them, even though Henry was desperate to apologize, to prove to her that he was sorry, that he *needed* her attention. But this was to no avail. She remained aloof for the next four years, and Henry let his mind fill the silence that had become commonplace between them. He could recall countless conversations they had, though they were only just fabrications of his vivid imagination. On an unusually warm December day during junior year in their small private high school, Henry collided with Violet in the secondary students hallway as he exited his Advanced Placement Biology class. His textbooks scattered and her pastels, charcoal, and pad flew across the tiled floor, washing it in variegated streaks. He had noticed her sitting on the sports fields many times earlier in fall during free period sketching away on her manila tablet. He had watched

her through the window of the library—moments that he filed and stored for safe-keeping in his mind—transfixed by the angularity of her perfect jaw, mesmerized by the way the light splayed effortlessly across her collarbone.

“I am so sorry, I wasn’t paying attention,” Henry blurted as he dropped to his knees attempting to collect Violet’s things. Knees covered with chalk, he stood to hand back to her, in one mangled pile, the tools of the craft she had become so fond of.

“It’s alright. Thank you, though,” she said, as she smiled politely, carefully placing the pastels back into the respective places in their case. Fingers covered with reds and blues and greens, Violet hiked her bag further onto her shoulder, smearing the colors across her alabaster chest.

“Yeah, uhh, sure,” Henry managed to reply, far too distracted by the chalky bruise that was splayed across Violet’s sternum. He longed to reach out and touch her, to press and ply the color from her skin, to create lines of his own on her pallid dermis. He looked up at her, his heart beating so loud it resounded in his ears. The disgusted look on her face jarred him from his daydream, slamming him back into the brown leather loafers that stood before Violet.

“Pig,” she spat, before Henry had a chance to apologize for his apparent indiscretion.

“I’m so sorry! I wasn’t... I didn’t...” Henry called out, but it was too late. Violet had already departed down the hallway. Crushed, he receded to the wall of lockers to his right, barely able to contain his distress. But as she stormed away, he noticed the way her figure swayed with her steps, and he pictured her vertebral column wavering with the swing of her hips, each link moving in perfect rhythm with the one above and below it. And suddenly, he wasn’t so upset anymore.

When he was seventeen, he dreamt of her in the most delicate and lovely dreams. Once, he was sitting on a cool metal table, his fingers creeping up her knobby, perfect spine. And in this dream, he let his fingers press into her skin ever so firmly, the padded tips of his digits creating puddles of creamy flesh that he wished he could burrow into. His rough hands, calloused from the whittling he took up—a hobby to keep company with his thoughts—marauded over her ribs, passing each of them with a dull *thwump* he just *knew* she could feel. He found euphoria in the gooseflesh he raised with his touch. Then, he became hungry for her, the smooth of her lower back twisting his desire, his fists gnarled in an attempt to resist the yearning to lay her flat and do what he needed to. And then he woke.

When she walked passed him in the tapioca hallway of their school the next day, it was not her scent that enticed him, though it winged to his nostrils a hint of honeysuckle and vanilla; no, it was her pulse that seemed to croon to him from her chest, from her neck. He had desperately longed for her beauty before, but now, something more menacing called to him from the smallest part of his

brain that he never knew existed. Bursting from the veins that pounded just under her skin, he could hear her crying to him, “You want *me*, you want *me*, you want *me*,” louder and louder until it became the mantra for his every footfall.

On his way home that day, a tabby cat darted out in front of him. Violet’s cries and accusations had finally crawled into his brain, and it was all he could do to keep walking. Inadvertently, he crushed the cat’s paw as it tried to weave between his feet across the sidewalk. Startled, but more excited than he should have been, Henry took the cat back to the basement of the four-story brownstone home that he and his family lived in during the school year. Curious, he began to poke and prod, until he could bear his yearnings no longer. The gentle click and heavy slam of the front door upstairs hours later dragged him from his reverie, his laundered clothes blushing red. Hurriedly, he hid the corpse in a storage chest in the far corner of the basement, emptying his clothes in as well before shutting it. Henry was sure no one would ever find them. Maureen, the maid, was the only other person beside himself who had gone down to the basement in years, as the washer and drier were housed there. It didn’t seem to him as though his parents would suddenly begin doing their own laundry any time soon.

When he walked upstairs, shirtless and exhausted, his mother had already begun her nightly ritual of chasing glasses of gin with episodes of her favorite soap opera, oblivious to the patter of another set of feet on the hardwood floor. His father was still at work. Henry walked slowly into the living room where his mother resided, reclined on the handsome yet stiff chaise lounge, still in her work clothes. She stared up at him, eyes glazed with the thick syrup of intoxication, and smiled gently.

“Hello, dear,” she said as she put her hands on his cheeks which had lost most of their fat. She kissed his forehead.

“You are so handsome, you know that? Thinning out, just like the doctors said you would,” she cooed as she brought her fingers down to pinch and wiggle his chin.

“But why on earth are you walking around the house without a shirt on? It’s the middle of winter and Maureen is still here. Go make yourself decent,” she said, attention waning as her show returned from a commercial break.

“Yes, Mother,” Henry replied, and walked upstairs to his room. She hadn’t even noticed the blood on his hands. He sat down at his desk in the dark and switched the lamp on. From the top drawer he took out his utility knife and continued to carve the large column of wood that lay on the desk before him. Carefully whittling each curve and knot, he carved the configuration of Violet’s vertebrae, biding his time until the day that he would be able to see them for himself.

When they were eighteen, they graduated. He knew every curve of her thin frame like he had drawn them himself; she could recall only his name and the

slight memory of a petulant argument that seemed to have happened in another lifetime. Henry had heard she wasn't heading to college as he was—her passion for art outweighing her academic prowess. While he packed the car his parents had given him full of only the necessities, he thought of her. And while he drove from his home in Boston, Massachusetts to his new one on the Johns Hopkins University campus in Maryland, he wondered when he would be able to see her again, even if it was just to watch her breathe.

When he was twenty-one and finished with his undergraduate degree a year early, he returned to his hometown to an empty house; his parents had decided to go to the summerhouse three weeks earlier than expected, and they had taken Maureen with them. After unpacking his things, he walked back outside onto the sidewalk, preparing to take a stroll in the strangely brisk May weather. Before reaching the end of the block, though, a familiar face caught his eye—a flyer, bearing his hand-drawn likeness, was taped to the street light three houses down. Violet, the girl who had not left his obsessive attention for three years, was having an art showing in the gallery on Fifth Street in two days, and he appeared to be the subject of her focus. He had fantasized about her everyday without fail, carved her figure into wood and desks, sketched her onto the margins of his textbooks—the preserved pink skin of pigs during dissection even reminded him of the way Violet's skin had glistened when she walked by a sunlit window in school. He had to go. That night he dreamt of her again.

The day of the event arrived, and Henry woke up refreshed in his childhood bed. He looked in the mirror, shuffling his 'business-chic' dirt brown hair out of his piercing grass-green eyes, and parting it ever so precisely to the right, framing his handsome face impeccably. A strong jaw and childhood dental work had left him with an enchanting smile that even the most independent of women fell captive to. Chubby in his youth, Henry had grown into a perfect male specimen—just shy of six feet tall with an athletic build and a voice that echoed refinement. The weight that had clung to his body awkwardly in his teenage years was all but disappeared. He had been the subject of much affection throughout college, though he never reciprocated it.

That morning, he could barely feel the frozen cold of the marble on his bathroom floor as he brushed his teeth twice and dressed, and when he forgot his tailored jacket in his room on that blustery morning, he didn't even notice the remnants of wintry air biting at his skin through his button-up shirt. He made his way down the streets that stacked like a ladder to his destination. Finally, he stood outside the starkly decorated gallery, peering in through the clear glass. Before him, just through the window, walked a girl with clay-black hair and a faultless figure. Though she had grown slightly taller and had filled out in places that made Henry twinge in ways he tried to ignore, she was the still same Violet to him that she had been at eighteen. She made her way to each of her four guests, welcoming them and thanking them for attending. His frame

silhouetted by the leaching sun behind him, Henry stared at her unabashedly.

"*Violet*," he breathed. Cautiously, he walked into the gallery—her promise to him in childhood still seared into his brain. But his likeness, reflected on the walls around him, gave him confidence. She *remembered* him. She had recreated him with her hands, had formed him so close to her. Her breath on his face, his neck, as she leaned in to draw his eyes, his lips, his...

"Hey, I'm Violet. How are you liking things?" said a voice behind him before he had a chance to get lost in his musings. Henry turned around to face her, unsure whether or not to smile or cower. She sucked in a deep and quick breath.

"*Oh, shit*. Oh my god! Henry, right?" Her eyes wide enough Henry could have sworn he'd seen the back of her skull, Violet stared at him, mouth agape, awestruck.

"Yeah, that's right. I saw the flier of, well, my face, and that it was you who had drawn it, so I thought that warranted a visit. I'm sorry if I alarmed you."

"Oh, no, no! I was just surprised, that's all. It's funny, I don't remember ever really talking to you when we were in school together, but your face, well... Look around. I guess you could say I do," Violet said, almost as a laugh, as she let her hand guide his gaze around the gallery to different representations of him. Henry, still unsure of how to respond, let her continue.

"I'm sorry if this is weird for you. I can imagine this is weird. You showed up in a random dream of mine about a year ago, and there was this really cool bluish light around your head... you had a horse body, but that's beside the point," she said, suddenly preoccupied, as she traversed the gallery floor in a few short steps.

"Uhhhh, here! This one! This was the first." She pointed to a picture of Henry swaddled in a blanket of blueberry hues. "And then after that, I just kind of started doing a series. You have a good face for drawing. Lots of lines and all that. It's a little different now that I see you in person; you've changed a lot since I last saw you. So... yeah. Whaddya think?"

"Is it vain to say that they're beautiful?" Henry said, looking to each of the drawings in turn.

"I don't know," Violet said, laughing. "That's a good point. Thank you, though. I was going to contact you after I found out I was going to have a showing, just in case something like this happened, but I couldn't remember your last name."

"It's not a problem at all," Henry replied. After a short pause "Listen, I know this is a bit forward, but could I take you out tonight, for dinner?"

Henry was there to meet Violet at seven p.m. exactly, right as the gallery closed. They made their way to the center of the city, the best bars and restaurants all clustered in and around Quincy Market. The open square greeted them with the powder-grey haze of dusk. Out of breath from the uncharacteristic May cold that seemed to steal each gasp from their lungs, they stood staring at

one another, the rubber soles of their shoes glued together with the thickness of the air between them. They found themselves with nothing to say—as if the minute distance between them could do all of the talking for them. Henry fidgeted with his collar, making sure the furthest tips were buttoned to the rest of the shirt. He hated it when they'd come undone. He met Violet's gaze once again.

"I've spent a little too much time alone to know what words to say in a moment that seems to require none," he said, finally. She blushed, exhaling a breath that seemed to have been holding her lungs hostage for some time now. She beamed at her feet, pressing the knuckles of her toes forcefully to the bottom of her shoes, attempting to contain the excitement that seemed fit to bust right from her chest.

"You know, you might have been the last person in *world* I expected to make me smile like this. I'm sorry we were never friends when we were kids," she said pensively.

"I wasn't ready for you yet," Henry said, examining her with his voracious gaze. He leaned in closer, his face just a breath away from hers.

"Hmmm," he sighed thoughtfully, "vanilla and honeysuckle."

She smiled again, this time directly at him. He smiled too, glad that his trite compliment had distracted her long enough for him to hear the melody he had so sorely missed. His heart beating out of control, threatening to break from its hold in his chest, Henry almost couldn't keep up with it. He reached his hand out and let it glide from her jaw to her collarbone. Violet's eyes closed, enjoying the touch. She was finally *ready*. He had waited so long for her, dreaming of the moment when he could finally get his hands on her—the moment when she would trust him enough to let him put them there.

"May I kiss you?" Henry asked. With no hesitation, Violet leaned closer, reaching on her tiptoes to place her lips against his cheek.

"What do you say we skip dinner?" Violet whispered into his ear. As she rested back on flat feet, she eyed him lustfully. Though she was beautiful, she hadn't dated since the work for the gallery showing began; she was going to take advantage of this Zeus of a man whether he liked it or not.

Violet took Henry's hand, but let him lead the way. Barely aware of his feet moving along the ground, Henry was exuberant in the knowledge that she, at last, was *his*. He led her to the farthest west corner of the square, his house only a fifteen-minute walk. She spoke to him as they ambled across the cobbled stone, but he was completely lost. She could not hear the call of temptation that sounded with each throb and ebb of her organs, unaware that Henry was not entranced by the soft and graceful lines that formed her face, but instead, by the thought that he could explore below them, able to understand the source of her beauty in an appreciation of her *true* form. He *knew* no one else could ever give her that justice. When they reached the brownstone, Henry opened the door and ushered her inside. Though she had surprised herself in being so

forward with him, Violet trusted in his good intentions. She had known him her entire life, practically, hadn't she? She decided he seemed like a good man. And besides, he was far too attractive to pass up. Once inside, Henry pushed the door shut and slid the lock-chain into place as Violet turned her back to him to take in the opulent décor.

"Nice place," she said, as she slid her coat from her shoulders, revealing a black strapless dress that displayed her scapula beautifully.

"Thank you," he said, and he reached out his hand to take Violet's, leading her toward the basement. He looked back to her as they made their way to the door, Violet taking his baleful gaze as an act of seduction. In a moment he could not have imaged more perfectly, Violet caught up to him, ready to give this charming almost-stranger who had an honest face what she knew he wanted, right as they reached the basement door. In one swift gesture, Henry opened the door, just as Violet moved to lean back against it. Pressing his lips to hers violently, Henry used the force of their embrace to thrust her down the wooden staircase. Opening her eyes frantically, she was shocked to find no firm grasp of Henry's arms around her, but instead, the weightless grip of the air that dropped her carelessly to the stone floor, her limbs crashing into the stairs as she tumbled downward.

Henry stood at the top of the stairs, triumphant and aroused by the helpless display he had just witnessed. Violet's lifeless body, mangled in a heap on the cold cement made every hair on his body rise with excitement.

"I'm what's best for you, Violet. You have to understand that. I promise I'll treat you right," he said, as he made his way down to her.



The *plunk* of the large stationary clock on the otherwise barren wall drew Dr. Marlon Hersh from his trance. He blinked, letting his eyes refocus on the body before him. He felt no pity, though, a thoughtful grin creeping onto his face. She was something special. Now more than ever, he could appreciate the contours of her flawless form, reveling in the fact that he would be the last one to see her whole. As soon as he was finished examining her, the body would be taken away, and her file sent to the police, but eventually to a warehouse full of a thousand other Jane Doe cases, just like hers.

"One man's trash..." he chuckled, repeating his favorite adage to himself as he prepared.

Marlon had tirelessly completed his medical training after finishing his undergraduate degree, besting the most competent peers in his field, all for moments like this. Tenderly, he flicked on the lamp that hung just above her body, the stark white and silver of the sterile room blushing spectrally. He could pay justice to the forms at his disposal, disassembling them to marvel at their every organ, without ever having to be the one that put them on his table. He had

known from a very young age that no one understood his desires, his needs—a medical examiner was the perfect solution. He would cheerfully stand for hours, toiling away at the unfortunate once-were's that were brought to him. He would daydream of the cadavers before him, of their lives, of taking them, placing himself in the center of their plot. The battered girl before him was no different, though he found his ponderings on her extraordinarily amusing—Henry was the best character he created yet. He rolled his cart full of glittering baubles towards himself, selecting the scalpel, which he favored for its precision. As he prepared to make the first cut into her supple flesh, Marlon could feel his pulse in every part of his body, as if he had not only his own blood pumping through him, but hers as well.

Tracing his fingers around the eggplant bruises freshly settled across her body, he smiled.

“Violet is such a pleasant color,” he said, and began his work.