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Chasing Euphoria

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CHASING EUPHORIA

My life is about to change. Or so I think. I'm sitting on a bench in the shopping mall, staring into the Hallmark Greeting Cards store. A Muzak version of Barry Manilow's "I Write the Songs" wafts from the mall's speakers, its woeful melody grinding a hole in my gut. I barely have the courage to do what I'm about to do. The song isn't helping, but then the melody shifts and climbs, reaching its dizzying, euphoric crescendo, and this somehow convinces me that what I'm about to do is not so much daring as it is epic. If I can muster the courage to enter Hallmark, my life will be transformed in miraculous ways.

So I stand up.

Folded neatly in my hand is a letter for one of the sales ladies. Before, I only had a name. Now I have a face, because I went in there yesterday, pretending to be a customer so I could scope out nametags. Linda is the middle-aged brunette with ample hips. She is beginning to gray and I find this beautiful. I'm captivated by women of a certain age; women with fine lines fanning out from eyes that are no longer wide and naive, but quick. Perceptive. Magnificently fierce. It implies a wisdom I do not yet possess, but crave. I've never met Linda, but her graying hair has me convinced of her insight. Maybe this is why I don't understand the horrid consequences of my impending actions.

I glance at the letter one final time. It's handwritten. Notebook paper. Not a single mistake. Crisp edges. Folded neatly. Her name is lavishly inscribed. A gentle swoosh beneath. The letter goes something like this: *Dear Linda, There is no easy way to say this. For the past eight months, I've been having an affair with your husband...*

I believe it's the right thing to do. With all my heart I believe this. In my fantasies, this sage brunette forgives me. Not only does she forgive me, but she invites me out for coffee where we talk for hours. In the end, she hugs me. Thanks me. We become friends.

I have no idea that my letter will completely destroy her; that when I show up the next day for my imaginary coffee date, Linda will see me and panic. Her lovely blue eyes will narrow to sharp points. She will call

me a liar. *Liar! How dare you!* The other Hallmark lady will march forward, positioning herself between Linda and me like a sentinel. She will point to the door. Demand that I leave. *Leave now! Do not ever come back here again!*

I will be cast out of Hallmark. How completely rotten do you have to be to be thrown out of a Hallmark Greeting Cards store? But I will leave, shocked, shaking, trembling and sprinting out the nearest exit to the parking lot.

At this moment, with the letter in my hand and Barry Manilow's rhapsodic serenade, I don't know that it will all go so horribly wrong. The only thing I know is that I have to tell her. Something more powerful than me drives me to do it. *Tell her.* Only then can the healing begin.

So I take a deep breath. Cross the faux cobblestone. The second I enter the store, I'm engulfed in potpourri and scented candles. The aromas seem to leap from the shelves, choking out any disagreeable stench that might drift in from the mall. Stale air and deep-fried treats are immediately replaced with country rose and vanilla musk. Doey-eyed cherubs beam at me from shiny glass shelves, miniature harps in their hands and golden halos floating above their flaxen flocks. The environment deludes me further, trying to make me believe in a perfect, flawless world. And in this moment I want to believe. I really, really do.

Linda is at the cash register, unpacking porcelain figurines. She looks up. Smiles.

"Hello. Can I help you find anything?" Her voice is melodic. Unbearably cheery.

I move closer. "Linda?"

"Yes?" She is still smiling, her blue eyes glistening, and I think, *Jim does not deserve her.*

"This is for you." I hand her the letter.

"Oh." She takes it, smiling, then looks back at me, confused. "What's this...?"

"Please," I say softly. "Just read it."

I walk out the door. Breathe a sigh of relief. I feel exceptionally good.

Little do I know: I have just unlocked the gates of hell.

Dating a married man seems perfectly natural to me. As natural as a dose of electric shock seems to a rat who is trapped in a maze. Disorienting, yes. At times, horrifying. Like the time Jim said, "I don't know what to

do about you *or* my wife.” A few minutes later, he shrugged and added, “Maybe I should just kill you both.”

That one rolled over me like lightning, sending jolts of raw panic down my spine. It was a sensation I ignored, however, because fifteen minutes after he said it we were having sex in his car. Looking back now, I see that I was out of my mind. And quite possibly very lucky that Jim never made good on his threat. Was that my reward in this twisted mess? Not the thrill of infidelity, but the thrill of cheating death? The spine-tingling exhilaration of escaping my demise, only then to seek it out again. I’m twenty-two when I start fucking Jim, but it feels like I’ve been doing this most of my life. I want it to stop, but I don’t know how to make this happen.

The letter to Linda is my attempt, however strange and insane, to end this savage cycle. I’ve convinced myself that telling her about the affair will set us both free. If I had any kind of self-awareness, I would know better. I would feel the violent hammering in my chest, recognize the familiar knot forming inside. I am unconsciously trying to resolve the past by repeating it.

It makes me sick that I did it this way, that I did not see the beating heart inside this woman. It’s not that I viewed her as the enemy. On the contrary, I now know that I saw Linda as one might see a movie star. A pop icon. The Virgin Mary. I attached qualities to her that no human being could possibly possess, even under the best of circumstances.

Which is why I’m in for a very painful reckoning.

I show up at Hallmark the next day, smiling, still believing in our imaginary coffee date, when Linda sees me and comes wildly undone. Her coworker charges, yells. In an instant, the store’s atmosphere changes from heavenly peace into something closer to hell. Even the porcelain cherubs seem to lose their hospitality. They glare down at me from sharp ledges, furious that I’ve tracked in filth. A trickle of sweat slides down my back. Whatever scent it holds is quickly purged by Lush Gardenia. “And do not ever come back here again!” the other Hallmark lady screams. I back up, tripping over a display case. My face goes red. My hands lose feeling. I can barely maintain my balance, but I turn and run.

I race through the shopping mall liked a crazed rat looking for a way out. *They will arrest me*, I think, fully expecting security guards to rush out of nowhere with handcuffs. Because this is part of the cycle: the firm belief that I deserved to be punished, the dread of knowing said

punishment is coming, the thrill of escape. By the time I get to the parking lot, my trembling is out of control. I can't hold on to my car keys, can't stop my knees from trying to buckle. It's surreal, this emotion surging through me, like someone has punched a hole in a massive dam. First comes a trickle. Then an explosion. I'm exploding now, waves of memories rushing over me. Fear. The fear I will drown if I don't run. So that's what I do. I jam the keys into the ignition and peel out of the parking lot, waiting for the high that follows whenever I run from moments like this. But the high doesn't come. My panic sends me in an unfamiliar direction. I have a sinking feeling that the worst is still in hot pursuit, that it's all going to come crashing down.

And I'm right.

Hours after I've been banished from Hallmark, after I have driven around aimlessly, weeping and hating myself for it all, I come home to find a phone message from Linda. The woman who called me a liar, who never wanted to see my lying face again, now wants me to come to the house. Her voice is frazzled. Splintered. Livid.

"You must come over here," she wails. "*Tonight!*"

It does not occur to me that I can say, "No." It honestly doesn't enter my brain that I can refuse whatever is waiting. The reason it doesn't occur to me is because I have nothing to base it on. As a child, I wasn't allowed to refuse conflict, no matter how dire or frightening. Saying *No* is not an option, even at the age of twenty-two. I can't do it. I simply don't know how.

So, I get into my car again. The trembling has stopped because I've gone completely numb. The numbness disturbs me, so I plunge into the fantasy that Linda's had a change of heart. This is part of the cycle too: perilous fantasies which I expertly build and climb, ignoring the insurmountable height. The shaky ground beneath. The imminent fall.

The drive is long, but I know exactly where I'm going because I've been to their house before. Jim and I had sex on the living room sofa. It was during the middle of the day. Everyone was gone. Linda was at Hallmark, the kids at school. He gave me a tour afterwards. Or maybe it was before. There were flowers on the kitchen table. I remember thinking how tidy everything was. So pretty. So nice. There was a pang of jealousy, a quiet wish that I could somehow belong to such an unsoiled family.

This time, when I arrive at the house I don't get further than the front lawn. It's dark. I stand, car keys in hand, my heart suddenly and inexplicably pounding like a jackhammer. Jim is standing there in his button

down Oxford, arms folded across his chest, his silver-gray hair sparkling beneath the stars. He is looking surprisingly...calm. He is astonishingly unfettered by all of this. Linda, on the other hand, is looking victorious. She sneers at me under the porch light. I can tell she's been crying, but her sadness has already turned to rage. Her rage is all over me, hostile and crushing.

"You're a little liar!" she spits. "Jim told me the truth! How you keep coming on to him at work and he keeps rebuffing you!"

It takes a moment for the words to sink in. When my mouth finally falls open, nothing comes out. I am literally stunned into silence. How is this happening?

I look at Jim. He is serene. Collected. He casually adjusts his bifocals. Clears his throat and adds this: "You're a nice girl. But like I told you before, I'm married."

His voice is kind. Excessively kind. It is sticky sweet saccharine, dripping from his lips. Even his eyes are benevolent orbs, shining in the dark. His kindness toward me infuriates Linda.

"You see that!" she yells, arms flailing. "He's MARRIED. You need to leave him ALONE!"

"But... I... I'm not..." It's the first time I've tried to speak, but I mumble.

So Linda cuts me off.

"What's the matter with you?" she chides. "Can't you handle REJECTION?"

Tears surface. I blink them away. I try once again to find my voice.

"But I'm not lying," I tell her. "I promise, I'm not..." My words are small, tiny things that float into the darkness. Disappear.

Jim shakes his head, as if he is witnessing a tragedy. A car accident, perhaps. Or a brutal slaying on *Channel 9 News*. He shakes his head back and forth. Lets out a long, deep sigh.

Linda continues to yell. She yells that I am delusional. That I need psychiatric help. That I need to get the hell off her lawn and never come back.

I stand there for a minute, not quite believing, until Linda repeats her order with unbearable fury.

I wince and turn. Shrink down the lawn. Climb into my car. Too stunned to cry, or vomit, or scream. Something about this is all too familiar for me. Is it the betrayal? Lies? Maybe it's the undone nature

of a wife and mother. The cruel serenity of her husband. The twisted craziness of me. How did I ever come to learn this vicious game?

I drive home on auto-pilot. Shut off. Shut down. Quietly collapse.

Jim calls the next morning.

"You got me in a lot of trouble," he says. His voice is as smooth as glacial ice.

I do not give him my rage: the rage at being betrayed; at being turned into an insane and idiotic woman on his front lawn. I don't give Jim any of my anger because, at the moment, I'm not even aware that it exists. Instead, I do what has been hard-wired into my brain. I apologize. Ask if I can do anything to make it better.

"Yeah," Jim says. "You can."

He instructs me to write another letter to his wife, telling her that I lied about everything. Then meet him after work.

I write two letters. One is a declaration: *I did not lie. I will not lie. It is all true!* The other is a rambling apology. One letter I keep. The other I throw away.

We meet in his Suzuki Samurai.

A crescent moon hangs in the night sky, its light bleeding into the parking lot, washing over my skin, illuminating the gray hairs on Jim's arms. I can't help thinking how he smells like Hallmark; like synthetic peppermint, and rolls of gift wrap, and cards for every occasion.

Jim reads the letter twice. Tosses it on the dashboard. Switches off the interior light.

"Good," he says. "Very nice."

"I did it right?"

Jim nods. "I think she'll believe it. You're a good writer," he says. "I've told you that."

I start to thank him for this compliment, when I see that Jim has other intentions.

He unbuckles his belt. Unzips his pants. Grabs the back of my head with his hand. "Now," he says, reclining in his seat. "Give me a blow job."

And I do.

The emergency brake pokes into my ribs. My head thumps against the steering wheel. I pull his cock in as deeply as I can, sucking and

tickling the tip with my tongue. Jim groans. His body begins to quake. Tremble. Ecstasy. He is in ecstasy.

I'm the only one who's in hell.

If I were to be filleted open with a pitchfork right now, it could not hurt worse than this. This is beyond insane. Beyond humiliation. This is *self-degradation*. It is self-imposed craziness.

It's a pattern I've been repeating, in one way or another, since I was ten years old. I haven't yet realized that my sexuality belongs to me, that it exists without shame. At twenty-two, I'm still having flashbacks that come over my body like waves. As soon as I push one away, another breaks the surface. One memory comes so often, it threatens to split me apart with grief. My mother and I are sitting in front of the Post Office. We're in the El Camino and she's wearing her navy blue windbreaker with the white lining. The clouds are swirling above the mountains, tiny drops of rain splattering across the windshield. I've just told her. Just said the words: *Mom, he touched my breasts*. I have just gotten them, these breasts. I can hardly say the word without blushing. They sprout like unripe nectarines from my chest. My stepfather pawed them in the living room, while she was in the kitchen, squeezing them so hard it hurt. That is what I am telling her in front of the Post Office: *It hurt, Mom. He touched them and it hurt*.

Her deep brown eyes pull away from mine. She searches the dashboard first, then the sky. This is what my mother does when she's waiting for God to give guidance. At last her eyes trail back to mine, but they gaze upon me like I am a stranger and not the daughter she's raised for ten years.

"I don't understand," she says. "You must have done something to lead him on."

We sit quietly for a while and then my mother exits the car to go get the mail. When she returns, we drive home in silence. It's never spoken of again. The touching soon gives way to rape. "Quit crying," he tells me. "Quit yer damn cryin'!" So I do. I learn to quit crying and screaming and pushing and kicking. I learn to lie still. Still as the moon that shines through the window. Still as his breath which clings to my neck. Still as the sweat which pools beneath me.

It goes on for years.

I came to believe that my stepfather would kill me. Not just physically end my life, but splinter my mind. Shred my existence into unfixable

fragments. But I woke up each morning alive and, as far as I could tell, unbroken. And there was this euphoric sensation that rushed through me again and again, as I recalled the terror of the night before and realized I was still here. All the dead parts of me resurrected. Every nerve ending pulsed electric bliss.

I became addicted to this feeling. At ten years old, I was hooked.

Warnings became invitations in my life. The greater the risk, the higher the high. I start with cigarettes in fourth grade, but this becomes too tame. So, I graduate to pocket knives. I carve shapes into my skin. At twelve I'm in the bathroom, purging meals. When I try to run away from home, when I hold a blow-torch over my hand, when I swallow my first fistful of pills, my mother throws her hands in the air and cries, "Why do you do this? God has given you so much! What is **WRONG** with you?"

I say nothing in reply. Nothing. Nothing. I don't have the words anymore. Besides, I am uncontrollably addicted to my own disaster. The pursuit of it lessens the blow of an existence without boundaries. I can't say "no," or "stop," or "help." But the electrifying high that I will get in the aftermath becomes my compensation.

I wish I could say that this moment in the car with Jim is what finally awakens me, that my self-destruction ends that very night. In truth, it's a pivotal moment, but not *the* moment.

Because I will do it again.

In just two short months, I will do almost the same exact thing with another married man. His wife's reaction will be harsher than Linda's. She will demand that I get tested for AIDS. She will not contract any *filthy disease* I may have given her husband. So I will get tested. Of course I will. I will do anything to please, anything to close these cavernous wounds. When the test results come back negative, I will beg the clinic to call this woman on my behalf and *tell her*. Tell her what? That I am not dirty, or filthy, or wrong... But they will refuse. The nurse will scan me with quick, perceptive eyes. She will utter a single, resonating statement: "We will not betray your right to privacy."

Maybe it is something about the word *privacy*. Or the idea of having rights. Something in the nurse's statement will be like a forty-watt bulb flicking on in a very dark house. And somehow, I will see it. My brain will recognize that dull light.

But not in this moment.

In this moment, I am bent over, sucking cock in a parking lot, fighting tears and nausea. The euphoria is absent. For the first time, it's gone. I am hollow. Broken. Inconceivably lonely. And falling. I am careening toward the bottom of my existence. When I finally crash and begin sifting through the ruins, I will find everything I thought was lost. The flashbacks will end. My life will begin. For whatever reason, I just have to get through this moment first. This shameful, crushing moment, when disaster is losing its appeal.