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HERPES OF THE HEART



Three doctors confirmed I suffered from some sort of emotional herpes and they suggested I stop fucking everyone. No more *but I was bored, but he was cute, but she was cute, but they were bored and cute*, just close up that trap of myself. The thought of doing so flings me into the pursed lips of the pastor and I can't help wondering if his lips are as tight as his asshole. And if so, is there nothing to his endless drilling of me but perhaps a chance at undoing the "I've a daughter your age" look he thinks I haven't seen?

When done, he makes slow attempts at conversation and I watch the lights from cars on the highway hit the window of his hotel. Now and now. And now and not for a while again until the new now. It's past 3 a.m. My car is outside, but what's 3 a.m. when there's only waking up a few hours away.

"It's non-smoking," he says, and then something more about the road, the life, the lost. And I just nod and finish my smoke and start making the bed my very own. The thing about sleeping next to strangers is to pretend they aren't there when you're done. Otherwise, there are many night hours spent imagining them brushing their hand on your thigh as an invitation. Is it now? Do they want it now again? The same ways or new? Or perhaps when they want to hold you close, it's

only to wring your neck. I don't know anyone that had a wrung neck, but it's what I think about along with the \$178 from his wallet that I stole before he came out of the bathroom, before any of the naughty got started. I'd never done that before. I don't even know why I'm doing it now other than the fact I might have heart herpes and need some sort of follow-up appointment.

I finally decide that tomorrow I would see the same doctor I saw when I first turned eighteen. The one my mom took me to in order to get my insurance caught up with the just-that-day-turned-adult body. When he asked if I'd ever slept with anyone for money, my mom urged me to answer truthfully. I was a virgin then and it seemed impossible to me that they didn't see that right away. Half-a-dozen years since, though, everyone looks like they are taking it up the ass as much as possible. And loving it, of course.

The other three doctors heard me out and wrote some stuff down and then forgot everything I said while they instructed me into the stirrups and pushed and prodded and warned "A little cold now" and "Sharp pain here" and I immediately agreed that that was indeed the response I was having. But who really knows. Either way they weren't going to take care of my heart herpes. I figured the asshole that asked me—in front of my own mother—if I fuck for money would be the guy to tell me the truth and wouldn't a diagnosis solve it all? Wouldn't it explain why despite the pastor's sizable dick, what remains in my mind is the sag of his tighty whities under his flat ass? As if I never knew underwear could do that—could unshape a person. I fucked him anyway from boredom, because he looked sad, because it was all dead-beat drunks at the bar, and because he ordered me a pizza and pushed water on me after so very many drinks I had tossed back on my own.

That doctor was probably the same age as the pastor—probably suffering from the same sag of things meant to hug, hold, and accentuate. Not things I want to think about when he examines me, but it turns

out the strip mall the doctor's office had been in looks abandoned now. No one bothered to strip off the fading, chipping wood pane exterior so fitting of the '70s. No one bothered to do more than scrape a little off the gold lettering. Someone did bother to put an Olive Garden on the other side of the parking lot and, well, they have free breadsticks.

You can't order a beer in this town before 11 a.m. at a restaurant and you can't have any cocktails made where families and kids can view it, which seems like exactly the reason all rapists should work at Olive Garden. I think about filling out an application myself, but then remember (I'm not a rapist and) I do actually have a job, even though I was on forced vacation since I've been working regularly at the same company since I was nineteen and someone happened to notice that I'm always there. Too much always there.

You'd think because I sleep with a strange preacher or because I stole money from him and because I have heart herpes that I work at a bar or in the only coffee shop in town—because we're in that type of town. But actually, I process reports and type close to 107 words a minute with only a 3% error rate. I never ask for instructions twice and no one notices me there because their work arrives regularly without any fuss or excuses. I'm also not necessarily pretty or hot, nor am I ugly or weird. Someone once told me there was nothing worse than a "weird" girl and I've taken that piece of bullshit with me everywhere. Don't be weird. Weird unfuckable, that is.

So instead, I just fall into the background of everything and yet end up on top of everyone. Wriggling or thrusting my fist or fingers up and up and never letting anyone do any of the work if I can keep it that way.

The second night at the same bar, my preacher—no—pastor friend, comes in and I can tell he's sorta peeking around looking for me and at first, I worry he's looking for his money and what would I say? I'm not really a thief or a criminal and I never was, not because I was scared

or have some inner moral fiber, but it just wasn't on my radar of ways to fuck myself over. But there he is looking soft and it's as pathetic as you'd expect. He might even be trying to look a little more put together and when he walks over, I'm with my girlfriends and I make a little small talk. He shuffles and then gives up looking any certain way and just says something about me hanging with my mates and he'll talk to me later. I remind myself to check in on him in an hour or so in case there's nothing going on tonight.

My friends suspect nothing and never would and never have and I'm just that nice: a friendly friend that random people like to meet and everyone else likes to dump their shit upon because I'm too polite to ask them to shut up. I'm not a pushover though. I'm just . . . without that depth that everyone around me seems to have, the one they throw themselves into and talk about endlessly. The one that makes an echo out of everything they say, eats the shadow of all they see. It's like they take everything . . . personally. Always. And that's a hell of a lot of work.

I was hoping for a band to show up or some sort of spontaneous "let's get fucked" shot-mania to sweep into someone nearby me, but instead people are dwindling. Some are talking about very important things that will be left behind to ensure a good night's sleep ahead, or they are thinking about tomorrow and it's as if tomorrow is already here. The jukebox is playing the same eighteen songs I always play, carefully chosen not to piss off the bartender who has a button to push when he needs to skip a song or because they're all dicks. The thing is, I've only two more days of enforced vacation, and at some point, I need to clean, do laundry, visit my folks, and make my life a work-week life again. But for tonight, there's that god-awful preacher whose eye sockets are so much a vacuum that it's like his eyeballs have fallen too far into his head.

He's just so *old*.

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I wish I could remember why he's no longer a pastor. Or if he was a minister. Or a preacher. I'm almost sure it's pastor. Wish I knew what makes one not that anymore. If you retire or take a leave or divorce it. Of course, asking means making all the signs of the face that say "Oh really?", "Oh fascinating," and "Wow." And I'm pretty sure my heart herpes has reached my face and now I've got emotional cold sores popping up, infecting my lips. That burn of the self all over the body. That tingle of disease. I'm afraid of shingles.

Pastor doesn't seem to care though and soon enough we are back at his could-be-anyplace hotel and I'm idly suggesting some anal, but for some reason am not as into it as usual and he's picked up on it and I think there's a layer of "are you sure you want to be here?" going on with him that makes me tired. The heart herpes has taken over my voice as well and I've nothing to say and I really mean it. Instead, I say something about the lights hitting the window and it sounds poetic and now he's in the layer of "crazy how casual sex can lead to poetry" or "ships in the night" or something. I say something about it being aliens and it is right about then that the fire alarm goes off.

The hotel is in that weird place between two close towns, so neither actually wants to claim it as their own. It's not even on the edge of something, which would be a great way to be. Like there's a cliff nearby, which maybe also means there's something to see. An overlook. But neither of those things happen in this part of the non-cities. Instead, it's like the gas station and hotel that everyone forgot about and the only ones that go there are traveling businesspeople and families living cheap on vacation. The men and women are shuffling out of the hotel and trying not to stare at one another in the hopes that no one else stares back at them. And I start muttering more about aliens and wasn't it odd that I mentioned aliens and now we are all standing around in this parking lot waiting for something to happen. But the sky is clear.

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Pastor has reached the “seeing you in a new light” stage and maybe I am a weird girl and maybe that’s the last thing anyone wants. Maybe I’m not young and carefree and fuck-shit-up girl, but instead I’m telling stories to myself and if he isn’t careful he’ll catch that too. Either way, I’m not ready to half-drunk drive back to my other-life apartment and I hope he’s not done fucking this piece of meat and so I stop thinking about the aliens and instead ask him for real this time why he left his church.

There’s no way others aren’t listening in. The hotel manager and the hotel desk person, who both have new name tags, bustle about looking worried as shit, but a couple of staff in well-worn name tags are smoking near a parking lot lamppost and one is checking me out. I can tell he can hear me and the old pastor because he hasn’t joined into their conversation and because he chuckled when I accepted the cigarette he offered but declined to stand and talk to him because I said I only smoke in non-smoking rooms, which wasn’t what I meant to say and also sounds more interesting than it is. There’s also a couple and then another single man standing out there and the couple has said all they are going to say for the rest of their marriage (or affair) and the single man is fake-looking at his phone.

Loud-like I say, “I just figure if you’re going to give up trying to fuck me in the ass, you should tell me a little more about yourself and we can get to the bottom of this,” and to this he says, “Okay, okay,” and his hand is on my shoulder in that “quiet it up, missy” sorta way and I’m not weird anymore.

It’s a long story, the pastor’s. But the gist is he didn’t give up his faith or lose it as much as he just got bored of it. And I guess this is a lot worse than anything else that could have happened to a pastor. He isn’t saying as much, but when he’s talking about other people of faith that have lost their way, I can see a longing in his eyes, like that feeling I get when I want to be in someone else’s song. Losing faith probably

means it's right where one left it. And the pastor agrees when I tell him this with another look of "strangers . . . night . . . poetic." At least someone who lost their faith can take those steps back to it. They can see where and why they put it down and maybe why it was obscured for so long.

But it seemed to me that this pastor has carried his with him still. And it's just that it's like an ID card or a penny lost in a fold. It's just there and he has had no use to pull it out again, which makes me think of his dick and whether or not he'd kept that hidden until last night too. I can't remember what he sells on the road, so it must not be that great. Or maybe he just checks up on certain businesses. I don't know if people sell things on the road anymore actually and I'm about ready to ask him this, but he's staring off at the mountains and the alarm has ended and people are shuffling back in.

And though no one is asking, I suddenly feel like I want to explain to my co-middle-of-nothing-sleepers it's not that I actually feel diseased. It's just that something attached to me during a sexual bout a couple weeks ago and it hasn't lifted. It keeps spreading everywhere I go. And it's not curable, so it's become a part of me now and I'm fearful of outbreaks. There's a spell of spreading and what it means to spread oneself open and to leave parts of oneself with another and it's taken up space in my cells.

I'd been chained to a bed for over twenty minutes, which probably doesn't seem long unless you are the one chained there. When I say chained, I mean chained. Not fuzzy or even regular handcuffs. Not silky, soft rope. I mean, this dude liked it rough. And I was into that. Like *into* it so that I couldn't even feel me anymore. And I won't say we were animals, but we certainly weren't human and when I pulled my arm during a particularly loud howl and he simultaneously yanked at me and then something wonky happened where the bed frame broke, my wrist gave like the crush of melting snow. You know when it still

looks crunchy on top, but underneath it's all turning into a slush and you step on it and are surprised by how quickly it just gives way? It was totally like that. Not a break, but a collapse of the thought of bone.

And then there was a lot of madness as the dude worried about me and cops and lawyers and doctors and back to me. And other such nonsense as if I couldn't just drive myself to the ER if I really needed to. I eventually told him my girlfriend would be mad if I didn't call her if I was taken to the hospital and that she would meet me there and he should not talk to me again unless we are going to finish what we started. He never asked what my girlfriend would say about my cheating on her because like most men if you mention girlfriend, they can only think we are two lipstick lesbians super soft and easy with one another and that the only fights we have are ones with pillows. It's a good way to get out of any other questions though. And because sometimes it's true I have a girlfriend, though she never sticks around for long.

Anyway, my wrist had hurt like hell and it was a real bother cleaning up after myself and maybe even though it was days and days or weeks ago and no longer did I need that sling, but just a bit of a bandage when I was home or at work, maybe this is why I was forced to take a vacation. Someone noticed I might be a person that should be in pain instead of stifling my cursing while typing and someone else said something about how hard they worked me and no one wanted to be accused of anything, especially the dude that did this to me who was also my boss's brother. I dunno. Maybe my boss knew, maybe he didn't. The thing is they said I should take a week or two off and go somewhere and see something or just rest. *Just rest*. And it was then that I began to recognize the heart herpes I had.

Because no matter whom I slid into body with after that, I always felt like I was taking something and giving something back beyond the pleasure. Like there was another type of exchange at work and if I

could only figure out what it was, then maybe I'd have a shot at curing it. I'm not saying I don't want to fall in love or have a monogamous relationship, but damn shouldn't we all be able to have the safest of sex in which we don't leave with a single memory of it or can at least carve the memory out of the other before wiping up and shutting the door behind us? Isn't that what prostitution is for? And damn that old gross doctor for making me feel like it could have been a bad profession for me. Money for sex. Straight across. Can you imagine the end of all the small talk and the morning light goodbyes? And the running into the fucker again on the next night in the same bar and the way he sorta loitered around me trying to talk or trying to see me when I was just the background noise of the girls around me? And I only went to his hotel with him again so I wouldn't have to ask myself why I went there in the first place.

The point is, here's a worthless piece of shit who has faith but won't even use it and here I am suffering from the realization that when one ties you up with real chains (and knocks you around a bit as you desire and consent to and in the best ways all the while stimulating your genitals with once-frozen glass dildos and various foodstuffs to be licked off), you are engaging in something called trust—maybe not trust of the mind and certainly not trust of the heart but a body contract that both of you sign with each moan and quick-like-a-needle intake of breath. It's a terrible feeling to not be able to just dissolve one's fuckmeat like angler fish do or to at least release them from their contract without a single moment of the future sinking it. If we could make ourselves forget certain things, our body memory would sing its elation and I could watch *Battlestar Galactica* with the same fascination when I saw it the first time.

But the pastor was leaving in the morning and would most likely never be in this city again and if he would be, I probably wouldn't be because after a week off of work, it's pretty obvious I'm too fucking

smart for that job and for this tiny town. Plus, I've plenty of family and really great friends living all over the country and all of them have invited me out to stay on their couch while I look for a job and a new place and they say "potential" to me a lot. The reality is I'd never see him again and probably forget his face.

But he'd still think of me and remember me and a part of me was in his blood the same way the heart herpes was in mine. The same way I was always feeling maybe maybe maybe I really do like the boss's brother because he has a wide, good smile and puts an open palm on my arm when he asks me questions and he's funny as fuck and we like all the same music and I've told him some things about my family and opened up about real life things. And he never cared to hear what I've done with other men or women, the way so many of the people I meet lean in close and ask to feel the same heat I am describing when I fuck strangers in elevators or in that construction zone that also happened to be in the center of several hotel towers at the heart of this stupid city.

The ex-pastor was leaving in the morning, but also never really leaving either and when we climbed back into bed and he paused a second as if to maybe ask me something or to let me know he sees me—really sees me as a person, I quickly asked him if he ever thought someone could be released from his or her heart. And obviously he thought I was being poetic again and not talking about contracting an incurable, life-long contagion of emotion. And he started in about his church and his family and how easily people can feel redemption if they seek it.

It's then that I confess I could show him redemption if he lets me grab some chains from my car and if he's ready for that pinched asshole of his to make some amends with itself. And has he seen his skin raw with small red beads from a good thirty-five minutes of spanking and whipping and he should start by getting on his knees. And he nods and says God forgive me and when I worry for half a second

that I might end up actually hurting him because what I really want is to wipe his memory away while also undoing whatever lovesick I contracted from my boss's totally doable and nice guy brother, I decide that if this pathetic old pastor and this weird heart-girl are going to exchange anything tonight, it better start with a safeword.



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