

VII: Cream Sodas

Another cold night fell as Chris Sullivan drove through the streets in his rag-tag truck, a beat-up fossil from the '90s, already an antique...just like him. And he was still in his late twenties! He grumbled, thinking out loud. He had succeeded in being sober for a few days now, and the withdrawals were already taking their ruthless toll on his ruined mind and body. His little girl's drawing was still on the refrigerator door, his only motivation...and a sheet of notebook paper with tally marks hanging just below it. If he was going to be addicted to something, it might as well be that. But if he wanted the method to work, he alone would have to take the initiative.

And it was as hard as hell!

Especially with the frequent nightmares he had been having for several months now, horrific visions of blood, gore. The court case. The sentencing. Dead bodies in California, Seattle. L. A. Florida. Mississippi. Russia. Germany. Everywhere. All cobbled together in phantasmagoric tumult in his mind almost every night. Dreams of flames. Burning wings reaching up to an evening star. A giant ghostly bird crackling with tendrils of lightning over a desert of tombstones, its talons coaxing the dead from their graves, bringing the end of the world, with the sun and moon crumbling. Many of the atrocious dreams were as if he were watching through someone else's eyes, with his bare hands smeared with blood, a traumatic montage of someone else marauding police officers, including the ones who had arrested and tormented him throughout the years. And the nightmares were growing all too constant, plaguing him more and more each day. All too often, he was sleep-deprived. He felt less and less like himself. He couldn't rest.

Neither booze nor sobriety could blot it out.

Maybe it was just a symptom of the alcohol withdrawals...or eating too late.

He couldn't let Naomi know. Or anyone else, for that matter.

His bared his teeth as a flurry of snow blew down on La Sombra, having been a freezing rain earlier, making the rugged asphalt extra slick with ice...and the heater had gone out in his pickup. Lucky him. He had at least another fifteen minutes before he got to yet another useless AA meeting, with the chance of seeing Naomi, the only thing to look forward to tonight. He didn't need another relationship right now, though, if ever again.

Then again, he couldn't help it.

He was a man. And he didn't need anyone's permission or approval to be one—and being masculine did not make him toxic! He didn't hate women. Women hated him. And there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it. So many grown men were still immature and afraid of "cooties," and so many grown women had yet to grow up and graduate from their petulant "girls rule, boys drool" mentality. Even his five-year-old daughter, Melanie, knew better than to behave like that, that is...if Evelyn hadn't already

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warped her into another ruthless Jezebel spawn. Still, he drowned in their androphobia, their misandry, the wretched gender war ripping everyone to pieces...and he hadn't done one single thing to them.

So he claimed.

He hoped Naomi would see that as well, at least try to see it.

But he wasn't going to hold his breath. She, too, had been through some shit.

She had already proved to be quite different, though. She was so cool, so outgoing...and she was easy on the eyes. They would talk for at least an hour after each AA meeting. She wasn't some neurotic chickenshit man-hater like so many other people...and a lot of douchebags had treated Naomi horribly, from what she'd shared about her life thus far. She was so different from other women, so unique. She was tough, authentic. Compassionate. A rare combination in this day and age. He couldn't get her out of his head. Yet he couldn't help but feel like just another moth to a flame, prone to combusting to its deadly undertow all over again. He didn't stand a chance anyway. It would all blow up in his face like a ticking powder keg, just like every other time. Like so many other things in life, romance was just a crock of shit, fraught with restrictive social formalities. Don't be creepy. Tell her she looks nice. Smile. Have a sense of humor. Get the door for her. Don't overshare. Get the check. Don't come on too strong on the first date. No tongue on the second date. Only get intimate on the third date. Don't be too clingy. Buy her flowers. Buy her chocolates. Buy her diamonds. Buy her a ring.

Buy her shit...and she'll put out.

He glared. It was like trying to program a sex robot to simulate affection. How pathetic.

God help them if that's all there ever was to it. Otherwise, such a woman makes for one overpriced prostitute! Might as well make love to the GPS on his phone and orgasm to the electronic, sultry female voice, autonomously telling him when and where to turn. And sadly, it would probably be just about as sane and productive!

Because that's all society was: a program.

A mechanism.

All were guilty of manipulating others to like them. All were just a means to an end. Individuality and genuine self-awareness were alien concepts to the masses. As far as his shit-headed psychiatrist and her goons were concerned years ago when he was a teenager, he didn't have emotions. They were just chemicals swimming around in his skull. Love was a "manic episode." Anger was labeled as a symptom of his "bipolar disorder." Sadness was just an imbalance of "serotonin" and "norepinephrine" and whatever other meaningless molecules the witchdoctor wanted to allege. There were no actual emotions, only sludge inside of the damp meat of his machine-head. She had even joked that he had been her "personal Guinea pig," only...it wasn't much of a joke. He still wore the literal scars over his body where "fluid" was building up beneath his flesh, where the drugs—that

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poison—were steadily destroying his body from the inside out, permanently and blatantly disfiguring him, mutilating his torso, stretching the flesh. Only in his last year of college did his psychiatrist finally come clean.

“In all my years of medical practice,” she had told him, “you were the hardest one of my patients to diagnose, because I never truly knew what was wrong with you.”

And what, exactly, was wrong with him?

He had been nothing more than a hormonal teenager. An early bloomer.

Already six feet tall at age twelve, with people mistaking him for twenty-one.

That’s all.

And the cowards of the paranoid world refused to see that, inflicting him at every turn.

All because he was Chris Sullivan.

Eleven years of his life he could never get back. Ever.

And no, he couldn’t sue the quack and her clique of over twenty therapists, nurse practitioners, and counselors for malpractice. They were just glorified drug dealers, each supposedly having a Ph.D. Had it been a botched job of trying to mend a broken arm, maybe. But when it came to something of the mind, the corrupt fat cats of the healthcare industry were seen as impervious in the eyes of a crooked justice system. None cared about him.

But he wasn’t her “personal Guinea pig” anymore. He wasn’t their Frankenstein monster.

He was a prisoner no more. Neither was he their “inmate.”

A lab rat no longer.

A bolt of lightning snaked through the sky, its tendrils skirring in the storm...then the thunder snarled down at La Sombra. The snow fell more. Such power. Such force. Austere and immaculate. When he was younger, he used to be terrified of bad weather. But now, he appreciated it, for it mirrored the way he felt deep down, the foreboding tempest raging within.

With his brown eyes, he examined his gaunt visage in the rear-view mirror in fleeting glances.

He looked like shit. He always did.

But so did everybody else, whether they believed it or not.

He was no photogenic mannequin; he was no android. He was the real deal, such as it was. His teeth weren’t the best in the world due to his alcoholism and his consumption of soft drink back during his “Guinea pig” days, back when he was a three-hundred-pound fat ass. He had shaved, at least. If he was going to start giving a damn, he might as well look the part. But he was doing it for him, though, no one else. Not even for Naomi. Fuck what other people thought! People were shit. All the wasted time, money, and effort trying to appease people for years, apologizing for things he didn’t even do, all the insecure sociopathic people who could care less whether he lived or died, who secretly delighted in his torment—and the trial with him and Evelyn only painfully reinforced it all the more. People would eventually die,

or betray him, or simply just lose touch with him for whatever reason, so what was the point of getting too close?

Society was doomed. And the planet wasn't worth saving.

If only he had figured that out way sooner.

He could only hope that Naomi was an exception. But he couldn't let her know that he was *the* Chris Sullivan, the one they had scorned, the one they had falsely accused. The one they had sullied. He hated this feeling. The rotten butterflies in his stomach had come back from the dead.

It was like high school all over again.

He ran his hand through his dark hair, his crown balding, owing it all to Evelyn's spoiled, schizophrenic personality stressing him out, who then blamed *him* for his thinning scalp. The light-tan flesh of his face showed in the grungy streetlights he passed; he almost looked white. At first glance, nobody would ever have guessed that his mother—may she rest in peace—was originally from Puerto Rico, even though he didn't speak much Spanish. But that was the story of his life.

He was either too much of this...or not enough of that.

A weird middle child in society.

Either his suffering wasn't bad enough or exotic enough for people to care about, or he wasn't "high-ranking" enough to enjoy any sort of privilege. He got so sick of telling people about his problems; if anything, they were glad he was dying inside.

Fuck people.

He pulled into the parking lot of a small convention center, the auditorium where they would meet, then he turned the truck off and got out, embracing the wind's unforgiving chill. Another roll of thunder pealed through the clouds, as if heralding his arrival.

If only.

He walked up, took a breath, then burst through, entering the hall of metal folding chairs. Some turned, then looked back up at a middle-aged guy on the stage at a lone microphone, Hank, "testifying" about how he had been sober for two weeks now after running over a bicyclist while driving drunk. To the right of the speaker, a bronze crucifix hung on the wall, with Patty, the corpulent, boisterous female counselor and self-professed "Christian" sitting in a wooden chair beneath it, running this shit show before them.

"Chris!" a woman whispered.

"Hey, boy!" a round black man in baggy jeans rasped, nodding up at him.

"Sup, Ray?" Chris nodded back. "Naomi."

They waved him over, saving a seat for him in between them. Chris managed a smirk as he fist-bumped Naomi and Ray. She smiled at him, looking him up and down with her dark-green eyes. Like him, she too was interracial, her father being African-American. She was petite and thin as a rail with a coppery skin complexion. Her long, curly black hair curled down to her small breasts, still damp from showering. She donned skintight navy-blue jeans, old tennis shoes, and a snug hooded sweater with azure and gray stripes,

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contouring to her every curve. She had to be freezing. Was she not able to dress for this kind of weather?

Or was she waiting to see if Chris would offer his coat for her?

He pursed his lips. Women and their churlish, creepy love games, always “testing” men.

Ray was a heavyset man, married with kids, sporting a thick jacket and brown steel-toe boots with a gray beanie on his head. He had been arrested for public intoxication and possession of marijuana. And weed was supposed to be legal in Colorado. About as legal as booze. Only the manufacturing and distribution of pot was legal, and many people did not realize that. He claimed that it was medicinal, but the cops didn’t buy the story...because of racial profiling. Chris didn’t really have a problem with weed, so long as they didn’t exhale the smoke in his face...or mix it with PCP or LSD.

One thing about it, though...it *did* smell like a dead skunk’s asshole on fire. Which Ray facetiously denied. He was a cool guy; the pot made him mellow.

Self-medicating.

“Who’s up next?” Chris asked.

“You are, man,” Ray said.

“Nope,” Chris rebuffed quietly, waving his hand. “Pass, pass. I pass.”

“C’mon, man!” Ray said. “Not this time. Look, it’s not good to bottle it up—we all gotta get up there and spill it!”

“We’re not gonna judge you,” Naomi said in her dainty voice. She put her delicate hand on Chris’s back. “We’ve all screwed up. I know this is all bullshit, but...you don’t need to be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” Chris lied.

She rolled her eyes as Hank finished and sat down.

“Thank you, Hank,” Patty said, marking something on a clipboard. She looked up. “Oh, good. You made it, Chris.”

“Yep,” Chris groaned.

“So...I don’t think I’m going to give you a choice tonight,” Patty said. “I’ve been lenient with you and everybody, but...you *have* to testify. You have to participate. Otherwise, I’m gonna have to report it to your parole officer.”

“Now you’re just gettin’ nasty,” Chris muttered.

“I don’t think he’s got the balls for it,” another man behind him mocked. “He thinks he’s better than us...don’tcha Chrissy?”

“Mitch, that’s enough,” Patty scolded.

Mitch outstretched his arms. “I’m just strong enough to shoot straight, Ms. Patty...unlike a certain self-centered dickhead in this room.”

A few people murmured behind him.

Chris glared at the crowd, then at Patty.

So much for the “judgment-free” zone.

“What’s it gonna be, Chris?” Patty chirped impatiently.

Naomi and Ray only looked at him, anticipating his reaction. He shook his head. He knew this was coming, like a relentless vise slowly crushing his

soul with each passing day. He couldn't even win for losing. Even his secrets were not safe. No one had any privacy anymore. Nothing seemed to be sacred or wholesome. All because people wanted to be people.

"Alright," Chris said, rising up from his seat. "Alright. You want me to 'testify?'" He maneuvered around the crowd, making his way up the stage to the microphone stand. "I'll 'testify' for you. But you ain't gonna like it, though."

"Ooh, somebody actually grew a pair tonight," Mitch taunted.

"Bitch, shut up," Ray snapped at the heckler.

"You're the one who needs to grow some balls back there!" Naomi growled.

"That's enough, all of you!" Patty rebuked. "Don't make me call the police again."

They all reluctantly hushed and faced forward. Chris ignored them, unfastening the microphone from its stand, feeling his inner volcano about to erupt once again, this time with an audience: one scrappy motley crew.

They had backed him into a corner.

Nothing left to do but to uncork the shit.

"I...am Chris," he sighed through the microphone, "and I'm...an alcoholic."

"Hi, Chris," the crowd collectively groaned.

"And I gotta say...that this shit's not working out," Chris derided through the amplifiers, "this whole charade we're doing tonight, this...Alcoholics Anonymous thing. It ain't working. At all. Because...this ain't the whole crowd tonight...is it, folks?"

All of them perked up; even Mitch raised an eyebrow.

"We're not all present, Patty," he said to the counselor. "Where are all...the 'social drinkers,' the 'high-profile' people, the celebrities who host all the fancy soirées at their mansions, getting shit-faced, all the politicians who get stoned? Where's Trump? Where's Obama? Bush? Pence? Hillary? Romney? Biden? Sarah Palin? Pelosi? Al Gore? Stanley Pfeiffer? Bianca Sterling? All the other fuckers—I mean, they all gotta be gettin' fucked up on *something* for 'em to be pullin' our strings the way they do, right?"

The crowd grumbled at him. Naomi and Ray silently nodded at him.

"They drink. They 'self-medicate,' right?" Chris paced back and forth. "But they're not here. *We* are. This ain't all of us tonight. You know why? Do you really want to know why?"

"Well, Chris," Patty interrupted. "First of all—"

"Shut the fuck up over there!" Chris seethed. "You wanted me to give testimony, so I'm givin' it to you—tonight. I'll tell you when I'm finished—you asked for every bit of this, so you listen, and you listen good!"

Patty grew quiet, eyes wide.

"We're all here tonight...because we're not part of the 'high society.'" Chris uttered a crazed chuckle. "We don't have enough money to bypass the system—we're not rich enough to be above the law like those corrupt rich

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asshole people in Washington D. C. and I don't know who the fuck else. All the corporate bigwigs running the show, corralling us all like livestock, slowly leading us to the slaughter. They're CRAPs: Corrupt Rich Asshole People. It ain't no secret society; stupid, overprivileged rich people ain't no secret. They don't care about us...and *every* election is rigged, I don't care who you think you're 'voting' for—left-wing, right-wing, it's all the same theatrical shit. Democracy is a myth. America is a myth. All America is...is a glorified sociological experiment, a political laboratory...and we're the lab rats, the test subjects. 'Oh, let's fuck this up over here and orchestrate this crisis over there, and let's see how citizens react and respond so our thinktanks can collect data. Then we can manipulate them more effectively.' I mean...that's why they call it 'political science,' right? All at our expense. But it ain't just about money, is it, boys and girls? Oh, no! Because...because they're as shrewd as car salesmen; they could take a pile of shit...and manipulate people to buy it...and they would make millions, so long as the lie is elaborate and convincing enough—in fact, isn't there...isn't there already some 'emoji' that looks like a grinning pile of shit, and people buy it? Don't they do that, already?"

"For real," Naomi whispered.

"But us," Chris went on, growing more heated, roaming the stage, "as far as the CRAPs are concerned, we're just bugs in the system. We do something, we get arrested by the pigs, we get the horns, and we wind up at this clusterfuck called AA. The CRAPs do the exact same thing and worse...and all they do is get a slap on the wrist." He glared up and pointed at the crucifix. "And *He* wants to tell us that 'all things are working for good.' All things? All things. All the rape. All the murder. All the disease. All the medical malpractice. All the war. All the violence. All the disasters. All the false arrests. All the poverty. All the child abuse! All the racist and sexist bullshit! What the fuck's so good about all that, Jesus? You're just gonna continue to allow this shit, or did You just give Satan the reins altogether? What sort of God does all that? You just gonna hang out nailed on that log, sleeping, doing absolutely nothing over there? My little girl is gone because of You! My life is gone because of You! Because of the system! Because of people! Because of society! And You let it all fucking happen! Are You not amused?"

He flung the microphone like a tomahawk at the crucifix, striking the white wall just below it, barely missing it. Patty flinched, narrowly dodging the ricocheting device as the amplifiers pinged and rang with shrill feedback.

"If I was even *half* the monster people make me out to be," Chris rioted at Patty, "your fat head would be rolling down that street right now—'cause I would've taken it clean off, along with Evelyn's! But seeing that I haven't, what's *that* say about your biased ass? I'm a sweetheart, motherfucker!"

Patty gasped and ducked behind a chair.

"Are You enjoying all this, Jesus?" Chris railed. "Is my suffering entertaining You tonight? Are You enjoying the show? Is *our* anguish delighting You on this dark eve? Pray, tell us!"

Thunder blared outside!

Everyone else jumped a mile—even Mitch—looking at the ceiling, alarmed all the more by the lightning’s uncanny timing. Then with mouths agape, they all gazed up at Chris, who was still fuming through gritted teeth, scowling up in the direction of the heavens.

“It’s almost like I struck a nerve up there,” Chris blasphemed.

“Whoo!” Naomi yelped.

“My man!” Ray cheered.

Everyone applauded him, except Patty. As Chris made it back to his seat, nausea burbled inside him. The fiery fallout of his heartfelt fulmination had not granted him the soothing catharsis he had hoped for. The virus of society only sank its fangs deeper into his soul. He stared at the crucifix again, feeling the biting shame wash over him like scalding acid, then he listened again as the storm rumbled again above, like a woken titan, perturbed and vengeful.

But that’s all it was anyway, just a storm.

So they all liked to think.

After the meeting, Chris had at last successfully secured a lunch date with Naomi the following afternoon at a local bistro, though she wanted to go “just as friends” and do “separates checks.” She had politely declined to wear his jacket when he offered it, even out in the snow. Damned love games. But maybe she just wasn’t looking for anything. He would have little choice but to honor that, much to his chagrin, if he could keep it all together and still maintain his newfound sobriety.

And it as hard and hell.

The two arrived in downtown La Sombra in separate vehicles and sat at a booth next to the window looking out to the street. Both of them ordered sandwiches, with Naomi having a side of fruit and Chris a side of broccoli. There was a stiffness in the air though, an unwarranted tension between them, more from Chris than anything.

“So,” Naomi said, dabbing her mouth, careful not to smear her lipstick, “I thought that was pretty cool what you said at the meeting last night. You were like...Spartacus up there.”

“I took it way too far screaming at that crucifix,” Chris groaned.

Naomi raised an eyebrow. “Why? I mean...I’m not exactly the religious type, but...they’re ain’t nothin’ wrong with callin’ a spade a spade. I mean...if God was there, why would there be so much—”

“I blame people and society for that more than anything,” Chris interjected. “I just don’t know why...God would do this. It doesn’t feel right yelling at Him like that, no matter how shitty everything’s gotten, I don’t know. It’s weird.” He sighed. “And it wasn’t because of the well-timed thunder last night either. That just made it...weirder.”

“You go to church?”

“I haven’t been in a long time,” Chris confessed. “Not since....”

“The trial?”

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Chris jerked back at her.

Naomi smiled warmly at him. "It's okay. Relax. I know. I know you're Chris Sullivan."

"How?"

"Uh, because it was all over the news, and I recognized you from TV?"

"Then why did you agree to come and—?"

"'Cause I'm not a coward, okay?" Naomi gently retorted. "And it wouldn't be the first time the cops screwed something up, especially *this* bad. Probably won't be the last time either. Friggin' pigs. And Evelyn *did* seem like she was acting in the courtroom, fake crying and all. Not all women were on her side."

Chris furrowed his forehead at her.

"Contrary to popular belief," Naomi went on, "women *don't* stick together. We throw each other under the bus more often than what you think—and *this* chica has seen her fair share of it and been through it herself. There's what the media wants us to think...and then there's getting it straight from the horse's mouth, you know?" She took a sip of her tea. "And I definitely know fake crying when I see it...your ex-wife."

Chris sighed. He didn't like his soft underbelly being exposed.

She averted her eyes. "And you're not the only one who lost their little girl to bullshit."

"You too?"

Naomi exhaled a quavering breath. "Ariel is her name. I guess she's about...seven now. I got caught with possession of crack years ago—my asshole baby daddy must've slipped it in my car without me knowing. Then I got pulled over one night, all because I'm half-black. They searched the car, and pinned it on me. I tried to tell 'em it wasn't mine, and they wouldn't believe me—they didn't care. Damned pigs. I got arrested for something I didn't do, and I was found guilty anyway...and I watched my life fall apart right before my very eyes. My parents got custody of my daughter...and they still won't let me see her." A tear rolled down her cheek. "She doesn't even know who her momma is; she was a baby when they took her away from me. Now I got a criminal record for that shit...and I cope...by drinking way too damned much, having a blackout here and there. Got a DUI—I'll take responsibility for that...but the possession thing? No. Uh-uh. Like the jury cares; they're just twelve random dipshits selected to decide another human being's fate, their stupid asses fallin' asleep, not listening to the case at all, and all they want to do is go home. Like they know anything! They don't care about us. They only see what they want to see and hear what they want to hear. That wasn't me who did that. That's bullshit. So, no, you ain't the only one who got screwed by the system." She squinted at him. "I just wonder if they did the same thing to you."

"Naomi," Chris said, holding her hand. Her fingers were so cold.

She sniffled and wiped her face. "I'm okay. I'm a big girl."

"You're still human, though."

"Well, so are you."

"Am I?"

Naomi scoffed. "Yes. Why you gotta bottle yours up? It's not healthy."

"Because I'm a man," Chris grumbled. "We're supposed to swallow it all, just eat it. We're not allowed to be weak or pathetic. We're not allowed to cry. We're not allowed to feel pain. We're not allowed to have emotions."

"That's a bunch of bull!"

"Tell that to society," Chris said. "No, I gotta be like the Terminator, over-the-top, be indestructible, unfeeling, show no signs of humanity whatsoever. Because that's what being 'macho' is all about." He huffed. "All people ever do is look at me like I'm some Frankenstein monster, like I'm some creep. I've even had women who would deliberately walk out in front of me and would pretend that I'm following them, just to flatter themselves."

"Ooh, I got a friend who does that shit!" Naomi growled. "I hate that, because then, all these guys...they think I'm like that. No, I try to be fair, give everybody the benefit of a doubt. I try to be level-headed. She's paranoid, thinks everybody in the world's stalking her—and she'll brag about it! It's like a damned fetish to her or something. She fantasizes about that shit, thinks her life is one big soap opera. Watches way too many of those damned cop shows." She glared, shaking her head at the window. "I could slap her teeth right outta her mouth."

"Well," Chris said, "that's all those cop shows are: just soap operas with cops and serial killers. Crime novels, too. A cast of unrelatable characters built like mannequins, with a crappy plot twist here and there for cheap shock value. Weave some gimmicky political commentary, propaganda, and other popular sweet nothings in there, pepper it with steamy romance, murky suspense, a few action scenes, and corny melodrama and *voilà!* Instant best-seller. It's all formulaic crap. It's potato-chip fiction. Empty-calorie storylines that all look and taste the same, with maybe a few flavor variations here and there. And none of them are good for you. But they sell like the motherfuckers, though. Might as well be trying to sell Doritos to everybody."

Naomi giggled, then took another sip of her drink. "Well, aren't you an author?"

"I *had*...a zombie apocalypse series going," Chris told her. "Like we need any more of those, either, after talking shit about crime novels and cop shows. Yeah, I...I never finished the last one of the series, but it doesn't matter. I was forced to self-publish because people in the industry wanted to be bigoted and prejudiced towards me, push me around. And I couldn't prove it, and these were people who *claimed* to represent those who are 'marginalized,' when really they're just a bunch of fake shit-headed profiteers trying to exploit people when it suits them."

"Ooh, I feel that. I do."

"They pulled my books after the trial." Chris smirked. "But I *did* try to make my novels a little different, though."

"How?"

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Chris sighed. "It doesn't have...a global virus that turns people into zombies. There's an...evil necromancer who resurrects them and kills and converts people into zombie slaves. And I have a cast of characters who each are born with special magic abilities—they're not like superheroes or anything. But they...try to stop this evil necromancer who basically becomes a dictator who's trying to summon the devil with these mass hecatomb sacrifices in this post-apocalyptic world, and he even enslaves living soldiers, threatening to turn them into zombies if they don't comply." He shook his head. "It's like symbolic of what we're going through. The necromancer represents, like, the politicians and rich people of the world trying to manipulate the masses and censor and discredit people who disagree with them, whether they be those Trump fetishists or—"

Naomi busted out laughing.

Chris chuckled. "What?"

"Trump fetishists—I love it! I'm gonna use that now!"

"You should," Chris said. "Either that or it's whiny hipster fanatics who clog up the streets, complaining and shit, firebombing everything."

Naomi's cheer instantly evaporated at that comment. That was the last nerve Chris wanted to strike. Here he went again, his mouth getting him into trouble, if not his writing. Maybe this *wasn't* going to work out.

"It's just...I'm sick of totalitarian government is all," Chris groaned.

"Yeah. Everybody is," Naomi said, then snorted with a smirk. "Trump fetishists. I like that."

"I'm an Independent—I don't vote," Chris admitted.

"Yeah, I'm the same way," Naomi agreed.

"What bugged the crap outta me, though," Chris said, "is that the few people who actually bothered to read my zombie books...is that they'd say it'd make a 'great cartoon,' when I didn't intend anything like that. One chick even said it would make a 'badass anime,' even though I guess she meant well. I'll tell you what would make a great cartoon: real life. It's stranger than fiction. You can't make any of this shit up, what we're goin' through in this day and age." He huffed. "Even my mom kept tellin' people that my books were 'kids' stuff.'"

Naomi scrunched her forehead. "Zombies are kids' stuff?"

Chris sighed. "Apparently so."

"How is your mom?"

"She passed away a few years back. Cancer got her."

Naomi's face twisted with sorrow. "I am so sorry."

Chris shrugged. "It's just life." He sighed again. "We're just...getting to that age now." He scoffed. "Unemployment's gonna run out soon, and I'm so behind on rent payments, I've already gotten an eviction notice."

"You can't find work?"

"I've been looking for something. Something with a salary, but...Evelyn fucked me over pretty good." Chris scoffed again. "Nobody wants to hire a 'wife-beater.'"

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Naomi shook her head. "I don't think you're a wife-beater."

"Why not? Everybody else thinks that."

Naomi leaned in and peered into his eyes. "I'm not everybody else. And neither are you. I don't think your little girl would've reacted so strongly at that trial the way she did on TV, screaming at the cops not to take her daddy away, if you truly were the monster they make you out to be."

Chris just stared at her, silently stupefied by her words.

She was growing sexier by the minute.

Yet, he still didn't really know what her angle was about the relationship.

"And concerning Evelyn," Naomi said, "all they were doing was pampering and elevating one female on a pedestal all at the expense of other people. At the expense of Melanie."

"Well," Chris moped. "Evelyn always gets what she wants. Everything's always handed to her on a silver platter. Always."

"And that bimbo bitch is gonna get hers one day," Naomi replied. "I truly believe that, Chris. Evelyn Whitaker is *not* the queen of women. Neither is Bianca Sterling. They don't represent me. We're individuals, you and I. We shouldn't be stereotyped because of what other individuals do. It's gonna come back on them something fierce. It's gonna be ugly. And they're not gonna recover from it. Ever. The payback's coming, baby, don't you—oh, crap!"

"What?"

Naomi smirked. "I just called you 'baby.'"

"So?"

As Naomi opened her mouth, their tattooed hipster waitress came back up to the table. "Is there anything else I can get you two? Any dessert?"

"Anything on the special?" Naomi said.

"We have chocolate lava cake, apple pie. Even got some crème brûlée." The waitress smiled. "Our root beer floats are pretty good, too—they're my favorite. Homemade vanilla ice cream."

"Mmm," Naomi hummed. "That sounds good."

"Is it Barq's?" Chris asked.

"Always," the waitress chirped, grinning. "Comes in a big glass goblet."

Chris looked at Naomi. "Wanna do that?"

"Uh...yeah," Naomi nodded. "Two root beer floats, please."

"Coming right up," the waitress said, sauntering back to the kitchen.

"You ever had a root beer float?" Chris questioned.

"Oh, yeah," Naomi said. "You?"

"I'm from Mississippi," Chris said. "That's where Barq's was invented, in Biloxi."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Chris told her. "The first bottling of Coca-Cola took place in Vicksburg, actually. See, they boiled sassafras roots to make root beer back in the day, hence the name. I think Hires was the first root beer, though." He glanced out at the window. "I don't think they make it like that anymore."

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"No, everything's just...shortcuts and artificial bullcrap."

"First heart transplant was performed in Mississippi," Chris explained. "Elvis Presley grew up there, Brett Favre. John Grisham went to Mississippi State. I think Jim Henson, the guy who came up with the Muppets, grew up in Leland, Mississippi, too. His friend was named Kermit Scott, apparently, which is where the frog puppet came from. There's a historical marker for it and everything."

"You makin' this up," Naomi teased.

"Google it," Chris flashed his teeth. "I dare ya."

"Nah, I'll take your word for it." Naomi rested her chin on her palm, her elbow on the table. "So...why did you leave Mississippi if it's associated with such fame?"

Chris's smile vanished. "You even seen that movie, *Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou?*"

"Mm-hmm."

Chris sighed. "People still think we look and act like that. They look at us like we're a bunch of archaic, inbred savages runnin' around barefooted in overalls—and there *are* still some people who still do that shit, unfortunately." He sighed again. "But they don't see me, the self-aware individual. They're too spoiled and...nescient to see who I am. Back when I was in Orlando, there was a guy, some four-hundred-pound walrus fuckface I was interning for, and the news brought up the Confederate emblem being on the state flag. It was on the TV at a meeting in the restaurant one day. He pointed and said, 'Uh-oh! Look, Chris, your flag's in danger.' I thought to myself, 'That ain't my flag, you bigot.' When I was in college over there in Florida, people would ask me, 'What's Mississippi like? Do you make moonshine over there?' People are so presumptuous! Just a bunch of sheltered, narrow-minded motherfuckers who never bothered to leave the city, being spoon-fed lies daily by the media. If people want to know what Mississippi is like, they need to go see it for themselves—all of it, not just one little place over there. It makes me sick! I ain't no damned Neo-Nazi. I don't lick asshole. I hate country music. I don't do that redneck hillbilly shit. I don't worship Trump—people don't even remember who the hell Trump even is: just another Hollywood shitbag pretending to be a Republican...not that the other dipshits in D. C. are any better." He shook his head. "But that's all they want to see, the damned stereotype. I got shit on by racists for having a Hispanic mother—and people couldn't even get her name right! Her name was—"

"Here ya go." The waitress sang, setting the two root beer floats on the table before them, the pale vanilla ice cream scoops bobbing in the fizzing goblets of the dark soft drink.

"Thank you," Naomi said.

"My pleasure," the waitress replied, then walked away.

Chris and Naomi each took a napkin and wiped some of the thick froth escaping the rim of their goblets.

"Anyway...you were saying?" Naomi asked.

"Yeah," Chris went on. "Her name was Martina. You would not believe how many people screwed that up over the years, calling her Marketta, Margarete, Margherita—like, yeah, sure. My mother's an alcoholic beverage."

Naomi snickered. "Are you serious? What the hell is wrong with people?"

"I don't know—they can't read, apparently," Chris scoffed. "Nobody wants to read anymore. They just want to waste away on the Internet, be on their phones, and binge-watch their brains out on Netflix. Slobs. They couldn't even get her name right in the obituary, called her, 'Marguetta.' Damned putzes." He sighed. "That's been my life, though. I'm either too much of this...."

"Or not enough of that," Naomi said solemnly. "I know exactly the feeling you're talking about. As far as others were concerned, I wasn't white enough for the system...and then I had people in my neighborhood, these gangster wannabes who thought they were blacker than the other black people, ostracizing me because my mom's white, calling me 'Milky' and all that. I'd be like, 'What's wrong with you? You lactose-intolerant? Milk make you shit blood?' I know precisely what you're talking about, Chris. We're neither good enough or bad enough to fit in anywhere. Society still wants to be ignorant and look at us like we're 'halfbreeds' or something."

"People are shitty," Chris said. "Race is just an illusion."

"It is," Naomi muttered. "It's the twenty-first century, and still these immature douchebags want to cling to that stupid prehistoric mindset, that someone's skin color somehow makes them a different species or something. Dumbasses."

"Or they turn to dust at the sound of the 'F' word," Chris scoffed. "You're just speaking Dutch is all. I don't why people gotta bleep it out. It's no different than saying 'fornicators' or 'fornicate that' or something."

"Well," Naomi said, looking away. "I don't like cussing. I mean, I know I do it, so I guess I'm a hypocrite like that. I shouldn't cuss. But I do get what you're saying. It's just language. Words can hurt, but only if you let it. People gotta grow up. People gotta have a tough skin, even though we don't enjoy it. Callin' somebody a shithead ain't any different from callin' 'em a moron. Same principle." She huffed and shrugged. "I don't know. Society's weird like that." She eyed her goblets. "Oh, no."

"What?" Chris asked.

"My ice cream melted," Naomi said, then she giggled at the remaining chunk of vanilla steadily integrating into the root beer like a shrinking iceberg, shifting into a caramel color. "It's not a float anymore."

"Mine, either," Chris said, picking up his goblet. "That was quick."

She examined hers closer. "It's more like a..."

"Cream soda."

Naomi peered up at him and smirked again. "Yeah. Kinda like...you and me, a new mixture." She picked hers up. "What should we toast to?"

Chris smiled. "To...survival, I guess."

"And...to being just the right mixture."

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Chris nodded. "Yeah."

Naomi grinned as they clinked glasses, then each of them took a sip of their new beverage. She made yummy sounds, then took a gulp, then licked the foam from her upper lip.

"Tastes better than Oreos," Chris joked.

"Mm-hmm," Naomi concurred.

The waitress returned to the table. "Is it going to be together or separate?"

Chris looked at Naomi. "You sure you don't want me to get it? I don't mind, now."

Naomi hesitated, then looked up at their server. "Separate."

Chris shrugged at the waitress. "I tried."

The waitress laughed. "I'll come back with the checks."

Naomi looked at him. "I said we'd do separate checks."

"I know, I know," Chris said. "I just...."

"You're a very sweet man, Chris," Naomi complimented with a smirk, getting her wallet out of her purse. "And you may need to look for something smaller than just a gig with a salary, maybe...stock shelves at a grocery store. You don't have to do it for the rest of your life. I mean...if they're threatening to evict you...I don't want you to wind up homeless." She looked at him. "Do you have any family you can ask for help?"

Chris shook his head. He peered with gloomy eyes at his cream soda, the beverage no longer seeming appetizing. He just wanted to get the hell out of there, just vanish in the wilderness. Alone. This whole thing was a mistake. Now, he was fully emasculated in front of the very one he had feelings for. And she didn't love him back. Nobody could, apparently. He was the scum of the earth, after all. Though Naomi meant well, each of her words were daggers puncturing his heart. She didn't realize how much damage she had done. Grocery store? Really? He, with a bachelor's degree in English, after all that college and tuition money, all that experience on his resume, the once-ambitious published author with so much promise, with such a bright future.

All reduced to ashes. Just for the amusement of a sociopathic world.

And he couldn't wait for the Apocalypse any longer.

"Chris?" Naomi said.

"I'll...think of something," Chris grumbled, getting his wallet out. "Don't worry about me. They haven't killed me yet."

"Speaking of killing," Naomi said, "I didn't wanna mention this earlier, but...have you heard about the Vulture, that serial killer."

"Yeah," Chris said. "The guy who was killing in Seattle, Portland, all over California." He cleared his throat. "And now he's over here?"

"He killed Stanley Pfeiffer, I heard."

"The judge?"

"Yeah. He's dead."

"Well," Chris scoffed. "Whatever. He targets pigs of the government most of the time, from what it sounds like, so I'm not all that worried. Neither should you."

S. Whittington

Naomi stared at him like a deer in the headlights, unnerved by his callous response.

Chris raised an eyebrow at her.

The waitress returned, giving them each their respective bills.

"Uh, can I get a to-go cup for my float, please?" Naomi requested.

"Certainly," the waitress replied, then turned to Chris. "Would you like one as well, sir?"

"No, ma'am."

"I'll get that for you," the server said, strutting back to the kitchen. "Be right back."

Naomi pursed her lips. "So, how long have you been sober now?"

"Just a few days."

"Well, keep up the good work."

"What are you doing now? You still a receptionist at the hospital?"

"Part-time," Naomi said. "I actually got another gig lined up. I start tomorrow."

"Doing what?"

She smiled. "I'm gonna be a nanny. Pays much better, too. I'm only at the hospital until twelve, then I go and take care of this little girl while the mom goes to work, then I'm gonna stay there until six in the evening. Got the weekends off. She's homeschooled, which is weird for someone so young, but whatever."

"Alright, good. Awesome!" Chris congratulated.

"I just hope I can do it," Naomi said. "You know...be like a mommy."

"You gonna do great, Naomi." Chris sighed. "You gonna do great."

"Remember what I told you," Naomi scolded. "Okay? Don't you wind up on the streets—I mean it! Hey, you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you, Mom."

"Boy, I'm being serious! Do you understand me?"

"Yeah, I do! Loud and clear." Chris got his debit card out. "Guess we'll half the tip too, huh?"

"Yeah," Naomi agreed. "Sounds good." She looked up at the woman at the register. "Hey, do we go up there to pay, or...?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm ready for you," the cashier said, waving them forward.

Both of them rose up as the waitress returned with a tall Styrofoam cup. Naomi thanked her and poured the rest of her cream soda into the container and sealed it with its plastic lid, piercing it with a straw. Chris went ahead up to the register, with Naomi following behind.

Naomi noted his posture: like a zombie. He might have been trying to get better, but he wasn't trying hard enough. At this rate, he wasn't going to be okay.

At all.

And it bothered the shit out of her.

But there was nothing she could do about it. She could not offer him what he sought. The last thing they both needed right then was a relationship. Even

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more so, she couldn't dare let him know who it was she was going to be a nanny to.

A certain five-year-old little girl. With Chris Sullivan's brown eyes.
The fruit of his loins.