

*Filling the Void*

It was her hair he noticed first. With practiced nonchalance she flipped her honey-blonde locks, her apparent ease belying the no doubt calculated decision-making process she employed to choose that precise moment as the correct time to unleash her finest asset. Simon was a leg man himself, but the specimen before him illustrated clearly why some men might develop a hair fetish. Carefully tousled, hers fell almost to her waist. The way it sensually cascaded about her shoulders would have been obscene in earlier, more puritanical times.

From his vantage point across the room Simon could see that her well-timed flip was having the desired effect on her chatting partner, a handsome but rather dull-looking man, obviously not worthy of the goddess currently sitting opposite him. The man put down his glass of domestic swill, leaned in closer and continued telling his (Simon assumed) dreadfully unamusing anecdote about God-knows what asinine topic. Simon's attention turned again to the blonde. She smiled widely and laughed ingratiatingly at the appropriate moments, but her arms remained lightly crossed in her lap, her body turned slightly away from the man. Her eyes wandered the room, advertising an availability to advances from other potential suitors. Good.

“Simon? I asked what you thought about the hypocrisy of an administration which continues to spend billions on international aid while domestically, homeless people freeze to death in the streets.”

One problem. Though his attention was in fact firmly on the blonde across the room, Simon seemed—for all outward appearances—to be engaged in lively, witty banter with the girl sitting next to him, Sarah, whom he had been cultivating for several evenings now. Pretty, wholesome, and bright, Sarah was appealing but often overlooked by less patient, more...predatory men than Simon. A girl like Sarah could not be pushed. She instead needed subtle persuasion, which happened to be Simon's forte – seeing as he didn't have the dashing good looks required to sweep any and every woman immediately into bed.

Sarah wanted nothing more desperately than to feel special, so that was Simon's goal each night, though making her out to be special proved challenging at times given her terrible ordinariness. Nevertheless, he enjoyed her slightly embarrassed and bewildered response to any sexual innuendo, her ingenuousness, her girl-next-door sweetness. And the conversation—he must admit—could be quite stimulating. Tonight, however, the lively, witty banter was getting somewhat tiring, and the blonde beckoned.

Concurrently, Simon did not want to undo his hours of work on Sarah with one abrupt brush off, so he redoubled his efforts to appear intensely interested in Sarah's naïve—but endearing—thoughts as he calculated his exit.

“True,” he responded, “but homeless people are in a much less, um, favorable position to return the favor than, say, the government of a resource-rich but backwards middle-eastern country, hmmm?”

“Oh Simon, such cynicism!”

She playfully rolled her eyes, gave a mock sigh and lightly cuffed his arm. He appreciated her display, but was distracted by the blonde who was now running a finger over her lip in a most beguiling way. To Sarah, Simon flashed what he hoped was a winning smile. Suitably encouraged, Sarah began further elaborating her views on the current administration.

Patience had never come easily to Simon. In his younger days, however, Simon's harried hunt for instant gratification often led, in fact, to no gratification at all, so he remained firmly affixed to the bar stool.

“Mmm, uh-huh, uh-huh” he murmured encouragingly, as he placed his hand on his chin and nodded. Sarah was happy to continue and Simon unobtrusively let his attention turn again to the blonde. Hmmm. She shifted slightly in her seat as her eyes glanced first at the clock on the wall and then at the door. She had done so subtly enough—the dull-looking man seemed not to have noticed—but Simon knew he would have to move quickly or soon she would be gone.

Simon liked Sarah, he really did. She was no mere pleasant diversion, and he looked forward to getting to know her better (and not just in a sexual way). She was also, however, a given. Clearly infatuated with Simon, he knew she would appear in the bar again tomorrow night, seeking another evening of surrogate love. The blonde, though, might never again present herself. Choices must be made, and Simon chose.

“Oh, would you look at that? It’s midnight already? I gotta go.”

Simon had waited for a pause before interjecting. He was always sure to plant hints of a legitimate excuse in order to leave himself an out. Tonight, for example, he had sprinkled the conversation with references to “an early morning meeting.” He might not need the excuse, or he may simply choose not to use one, but he always planted them, precisely for nights like tonight.

“Oh. Well, I guess...” she trailed off.

Disappointment showed plainly on Sarah’s face. He hated to do this to her. Simultaneously, Simon couldn’t help but feel a twinge of disgust. *Come on, he thought, it’s pathetic, really, how plainly she wants me and how badly she reacts to any HINT of rejection. Suck it up. Have a little guile, play the game.* Oh well. He would make it up to her tomorrow.

“I’ve had a great time, though,” he said, as he clasped her hand between his and lightly tapped her wrist as emphasis, as though each tap would somehow infuse his meager statement with the sincerity it lacked. “Hey, tell you what—tomorrow after I get off work why don’t I give you a call?”

At this Sarah brightened somewhat, but still looked rejected. Simon wanted her to leave—now—but on a positive note, something which was not going to happen without some ego-stroking, apparently.

“And when we meet next time, why don’t you wear that sweater your mom got you? It really brings out your figure.” Simon felt pleased. He had managed to compliment her looks, bring up a fond memory (Mom) and remember a personal detail. Satisfied?

“Thanks, Simon! Maybe I will.”

*Apparently.* She stood and held her coat in one hand and swung her purse over her shoulder. Simon touched her arm lightly, kissed her cheek, said goodnight, and hastily headed towards the stairs. He shot her a wink, a smile, and a small wave before disappearing through the doorway.

This was the risky part. He would proceed upstairs to his apartment above the bar as appropriate to his pretense. He assumed Sarah would leave rather quickly. Simon gambled ten minutes upstairs would be long enough to safely assume Sarah had left, but not so long that the blonde would have left also. *Nothing gambled, nothing gained...*

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Sarah sat back down, glumly, feeling quite literally deflated as the effervescent glow she had felt talking with Simon evaporated along with his rapidly retreating form. *Things had been going so well.* Alone, Sarah now pondered whether to admit defeat and shuffle home, or to make some half-hearted attempt to extend the evening, thereby postponing—if only temporarily—the sleepless night she would no doubt spend carefully analyzing the evening’s conversation, vainly attempting to pinpoint where exactly it had all fallen apart. As she vacillated she noticed a waving form in the corner of the bar. Vicky! In the darkness Sarah hadn’t noticed the presence of one of her long-time girlfriends.

“Hiya! I would have said hello earlier, but didn’t want to interrupt you and mister short, dark and brooding,” said Vicky.

“He’s not short,” Sarah responded. “Five-nine is a perfectly fine height.”

“Yeah, for a woman,” replied Vicky with a laugh.

Sarah appreciated her friend’s attempt at light-hearted goofiness, but both women knew Sarah had been abandoned by her beau. Vicky broke the awkward silence.

“What happened?”

“For whatever reason, he was done with me and made some excuse to leave.” She paused. “Though it wasn’t an excuse, really. He does have an early morning meeting, and he had complained of being tired...” Sarah trailed off again, feeling slightly better. *Yes, he’s just tired and he did say he’d call.* Vicky, however, remained unconvinced.

“Sarah, you really seem to like this one.” At this Sarah smiled, to Vicky’s chagrin, “...but how many times have you met him here in the bar?”

“Oh, I’d say six times now,” said Sarah. *Six wonderful times.*

“And has he asked you on a proper date yet?”

“No...”

Vicky simply raised her eyebrows.

“Well, it’s convenient for him because he lives in the apartments upstairs,” Sarah replied, rather unconvincingly.

“Exactly, he sees you at his convenience. Sure he’s cute enough and he makes you laugh, but if he can’t even invite you upstairs I wouldn’t put much stock in a future with this guy.”

“He makes me feel special,” Sarah protested.

“Apparently not too special,” Vicky replied and pointed across the room.

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Simon paced in the hall outside his apartment. *Patience*. He nervously picked at his cuticles, an unconscious habit that resulted in blood if Simon became too stressed or anxious. He looked up at the sound of soft foot fall. Janine. Simon sighed inwardly, put on a friendly, but not-too-intimate smile and said,

“Hey. How ya been?” He pronounced ‘hey’ as two syllables.

Janine, who had been previously burned by Simon’s intense but fleeting interest responded merely, “Fine, and you?” She knew full well he didn’t really care. That’s what she hated most about her ex-lover: he was totally transparent, but imagined himself convincing. Well, it worked on some girls, apparently. Living across the hall she had been witness to the parade of girls Simon courted in succession, none of whom lasted terribly long.

“Good, good...” Simon was relieved when Janine let it end at that and watched as she walked away, her round behind reminding him of why he had found her interesting in the first place. Hmmm. *She looks good tonight. Why doesn’t she wear heels and stockings more often?* His imagination wandered over her pneumatic body. *Focus!* Simon checked his watch. *Almost ten minutes. Good enough.* He headed down the stairs.

A quick survey revealed the blonde had yet to leave. Simon waffled as he realized he had no good approach, as her chatting partner also remained. If the pair was ensconced in a group Simon would feel more confident sidling up to her and eventually maneuvering her away. But to blatantly cut in on the dull-looking man’s territory like this was a move Simon rarely executed. Luckily, Simon didn’t need to waffle for long.

Strains of *Unchained Melody* floated from under the table. The dull-looking man extracted a cell phone, excused himself, and stepped outside to answer, leaving the blonde free to drop her flirty, interested mien. Immediately

the smile evaporated. She rolled her eyes, sighed audibly and produced a pack of cigarettes. Slumping forward, she began to puff idly. Simon approached.

"Can I get a light?" he asked. Simon exuded charm and warmth (or so he thought), so when she waved a lighter at him without so much as a glance, he hesitated.

"Um, er..." At this she looked up to see Simon, cigarette-less (fitting, since he's never smoked), looking uncomfortable.

"Hello," she said, in an appealing British accent, after a moment. "Men have found many excuses to approach me, but asking for a lighter to light a non-existent cigarette is a new one." She found his inelegance endearing and smiled kindly. Relieved, Simon regained his composure and took the chair she offered.

"Well, I used to smoke. Gave it up." he said.

"Really?" She seemed impressed.

"No, actually. Terrible stuff, cigarettes."

She regarded him with silent bemusement.

"Sorry, I get flustered around beautiful women." Simon said, while jauntily lifting one brow. The tension broke as they both laughed.

"Ah, such a charmer,..." she queried.

"Simon." he responded, offering a hand. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"I'm Gwen."

*Gwen. Nice—sexy, but in a cute way,* he thought. He spotted her date coming back through the door, the now-silent cell phone clasped in a meaty hand. Gwen looked mildly panicked.

"Quick. Pretend you know me!"

"What?" said Simon, confused but intrigued.

"I'll say we're old college mates. Just play along." she said.

*O-kay.* The dull-looking man approached the table, spotted Simon, and said quizzically, "Gwen?"

She responded, "Richard, this is Simon. We were quite the item back at U of O."

"Oh?" Richard said, uncomprehendingly.

“Yes. Simon was just reminding me of the time we attended a mud-wrestling tournament at Delta Kappa Pi,” she laughed heartily.

“Err...” said Richard. *How could she resist such a mono-syllabic intellectual titan?* thought Simon with sarcasm.

“Oh yeah, it was great...” Simon extemporized an appropriate tale, with Gwen interjecting occasionally. The dull-looking man, ahem, *Richard*, looked increasingly uncomfortable as he was excluded from the conversation.

As Simon and Gwen began excitedly *reminiscing* about the *old gang*, Richard politely cleared his throat and said, “Well, I see you two have a lot to catch up on, and I’ve got to be heading home. Gwen, shall I call you sometime?”

She replied brusquely, “Oh, certainly love. I had a brilliant time.”

Her attention quickly returned to Simon. Richard stammered off, looking defeated. After he was safely out the door, Simon regarded Gwen with amused astonishment.

She laughed and said, “Simon. Thank God you needed a light. I had been trapped with that knob for ages. Since you played along with my...improvisation, I was able to dispatch him rather painlessly. Cheers.”

*Cheers? Was that British for “congrats?” “Thanks,” maybe?* he thought. Aloud, he said, “Oh, my pleasure. Now what is a lovely lady like yourself doing with a, um, knob like Dickie, there?”

She bit her lip and rolled her eyes while swishing her hair over one shoulder. “Richard? A girlfriend of mine at work arranged an eat-and-meet. A girlfriend who will be receiving a thorough tongue-lashing, I must say, for setting me up in such a patently cruel manner.”

They settled into comfortable conversation. Simon was very curious how a Brit came to live in Tacoma, Washington. Apparently she had come as an exchange student in college and became enamored with the Pacific Northwest charm, a charm which Simon considered himself immune. But the trees, mountains, casual attitude and hot coffee did prove alluring to some.

“Come now, Simon. The area must hold *some* appeal for you. People who don’t like their hometown, well...move,” she chided.

It was true that Simon had lived, been schooled and now worked in the same town for all of his 34 years. He was comfortable, dammit—that doesn’t

imply an undying love for the place. People did find it odd that a man who had never left Western Washington spoke fluent German. Gwen agreed.

“Oh, German? It’s a dreadful language. Almost as bad as the people who speak it,” she laughed. Simon blushed. Usually knowledge of a foreign language, even German, was a turn-on for American women. Not, apparently, for British women. Gwen, noticing his blush, giggled,

“Easily embarrassed, are we?”

“No,” he said coyly. “I just normally associate with women who are more, shall we say, *appreciative* of intelligentsia.” He smiled good-naturedly.

“Now, don’t be cheeky.” She leaned in close and lightly slapped his chest, letting her fingers linger a moment too long. *Now we’re getting somewhere.*

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Sarah followed her friend’s gaze across the room, and spotted Simon getting cozy with a cheap-looking blonde. Crushed, she left, sniffing. Simon, being absorbed in Gwen, had not noticed, of course. Vicky observed the pair for a moment. She had fortunately never fallen victim to a man like Simon, but she knew plenty of other women who turned blind eyes to the glaring faults of a cad because he managed, for a few precious moments, to make them feel loved and cherished. Thoughtful, she collected her belongings and went to console Sarah.

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From there the night quickly escalated. Simon found himself rolling across the floor of his apartment with Gwen, much to his surprise. He would never admit it, of course, but rare was the night when Simon got sex with so little effort. Normally it took days or weeks of flattery, attentive listening, thoughtful gifts and meaningful phone calls. Simon nearly popped when Gwen suggested they retreat to his place for more *privacy*.

Simon also decided to forgo the elaborate foreplay he usually employed. He only bothered with such matters less to excite the woman than to reassure her. An unsure woman, after all, could decide half-way through the act that she did not want to have sex with Simon, and he didn’t want to set himself up for



rape charges. Gwen, with her enthusiasm and forwardness, required no such reassurance. He took her quickly and roughly and after some post-coital cooing, they fell asleep.

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The next morning Simon awoke to find himself alone. *How cliché*, he thought. *Of course, normally it's the woman who finds herself alone, but we do live in progressive times.* Being a man, Simon was supposed to feel relief. Nothing worse than a lingering lay, after all. Instead Simon felt enveloped by a dark cloud of rejection and insecurity. He rubbed his eyes and stumbled to the mirror. *Am I getting fat?* He squeezed a roll around his midsection. His eating habits *had* been on the decline. A grande mocha and chocolate muffin do not constitute a healthy breakfast. Simon resolved to eat better as he gathered his work clothes.