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from Blue Lusitania

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Andrew Sean Greer

excerpt from the novel *Blue Lusitania*

A drug had just come onto the market, the illegal drug market. It had been used briefly at Harvard in psychiatric testing, but had been shown to be completely useless and full of unpredictable side effects. Even the less scrupulous psychiatrists could find no use for it, since they could see no reason why anyone would want a drug that did nothing. That, however, was the beauty of it. It had no effect at all, only side effects, and the drug was so sensitive that slightly different chemical combinations caused radical differences in those side effects. You never knew what would happen. It could cause a person to lie all the time, throw them into sexual ecstasies, convince them they were Marlene Dietrich, cause them to lose 50 pounds, anything. It was called "dice." It was the biggest drug to hit America since crack cocaine.

People took dice for one of two reasons: to play dangerous Russian Roulette with their brains, or to give themselves a new personality entirely. Surprisingly, most people took it for the second reason. They were sad people, mostly. They had heard about dice from friends, neighbors, talk shows. Mostly they were in periods of their lives where they were discovering life does not give you what you want, that you have to accept the serendipitous pleasures and forgive life for being so deaf and dumb. They mostly felt only the first part, and saw this pain and suffering as a reflection of their own trapped and inadequate personalities. They were lonely. They were so

damned tired of being with themselves. Some would even tell you they hated themselves. So they diced up.

Unless you knew a person, you couldn't tell if they were diced up or not. They just seemed like any regular Joe, unless their personal side effect was particularly bizarre, such as constantly urinating or painting everything red. Mostly, however, the joy of dice came from realizing the side effects simply made you into a different person. It was a loving drug, also, so personalized that only identical twins would share the same dice experience. It was your own drug. And it would react the same way every time, so you had only to try it once to see what being diced up all the time would be like. You might be just wonderful; why not try it on? That was the philosophy behind the drug.

Therefore, Owen and Monica did not know that Raoul Marvel was diced up when they met him for the second time. The first had been when Monica bought a hot dog from him. She had not known then his sad history: Raoul had been unfortunate enough to be born not only a sissy, but a straight man. It had made his life very complicated. Women did not believe him, for instance, when he said he loved them. He had put up with this oppression for years until, finally, Raoul founded a movement to protect the rights of effeminate men. This was, of course, the American Effeminate Movement. It had been quite powerful in the eighties, but political differences within the group destroyed it. Raoul had started using dice when the last Effeminate encounter group was canceled due to political differences. His self-esteem plummeted. He desperately needed a new take on life. This was Raoul on dice: butch, daydreamy, and prone to speak-singing Cat Stevens songs.

“Oo-wa-ee-wa-aaaa this is the Peace Train...”

Raoul was mumbling as he walked towards them in the Sushi Diner. Monica and Owen awaited a grant to fund another of their ludicrous schemes, this time a deep sea dive to find an ancient pre-Roman settlement. Bored with waiting, they were having a wasabi eating contest, piling the spicy horseradish onto sticks of celery and battling to see who could keep a smile on their face the longest while carrying on a conversation.

“I was wondering if you could come over tonight to my Mom’s house,” Monica was saying, red seeping into her face.

“Sure,” Owen replied, stuttering, “why do you want?”

“I want to neuter my cat. There’s this do-it-yourself-kit.”

“You bought a kit?” He breathed heavily through his mouth .

“Yeah. At CVS. It’s totally sanitary.”

“You’re lying. You don’t even have a cat.”

“Then let’s find one, I can’t wait to use this thing.”

Owen gagged and grabbed a glass of water. Monica laughed in a repetitive way, like a tape loop. She pushed the rice towards him. She knew how to cheat at this game, too.

“*Trouble oooh trouble please be kind...*” Raoul continued. “Hey, you,” he bellowed at Owen. Raoul on dice had dressed in a lumberjack plaid and brown boots. He felt manly and powerful. One of the boots kicked the chair.

Owen turned around. “What’s up, man?”

“Move aside. I’m talkin’ to her.”

“Get outta here, creep,” Monica chimed in. More celery went in her mouth.

Owen tried a different tack. “Hey, calm down

man. It's okay."

"It ain't okay. Move aside, asshole. *It's not time to make a change...*"

Owen was confused. Raoul was so intimidating, but one look at his body told he could never deliver the blows he promised. All of those years hiding from gym class. Owen decided he must be insane. He was, in a way. Raoul would never have approached Monica directly if he had not dived in a fit of depression earlier that evening. He had been taking voice lessons to deepen and masculinize his voice, tightening his "s" by pronouncing it further back in his mouth on his gum ridge, like real men do. With his coach he lowered his register and smoothed out the looping personality in his effeminacy. But he could not go through with it. If Nightline ever found out, he would be a laughingstock. So instead he took "dice" like a preacher might sip bourbon.

He also had a knife.

He brought it out quickly and shoved it under Owen's throat. The cold of it forced the boy off the chair and onto the floor. Wet coils of radish followed him. Raoul flicked the knife back up and let it glint in front of Monica.

"If you get that money for the fucking dive I swear I'll kill you."

"That's a butter knife, weirdo."

It was a butter knife. Raoul had not paid attention to which knives he was taking, not being versed in their authoritative value, and also responding to another of the dice's personalized side effects: a dreamy absent mindedness.

Which now overtook him. He began to stare at the knife and smile, for it reminded him of a favorite restaurant of his, from which he had stolen it. He had

taken a girl there, a long time ago, impressed her with his knowledge of red snapper and coulis and his love of cold, sweet butter. She was a fragile woman, intelligent and distantly frightened, but as they sipped the Merlot, Raoul began to glimpse her longing and she unfolded before him petal by petal.

Owen, humiliated by a butter knife, took the opportunity to trip him. Raoul fell to the floor, clutching the knife, unfocused.

“Let’s scram,” whispered Monica and they ducked out without paying the bill, back home to prepare their departure.

But Raoul held the woman as carefully as a glass ornament. He was once again grateful for such trust, years ago.