

REALMATTER



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#8

The Beast



REAL**MATTER**

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1. The Interview

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Even after she sat down, her knees would not stop shaking. She hoped that it was not too noticeable. In all her years as a journalist, Lexie had never gotten an appointment for such an important interview so easily. And yet now, sitting in a smooth white leather chair at his large, perfectly polished mahogany desk, she suddenly felt a surge of anxiety. She almost feared for her safety; had this been a terrible idea? She sipped at her ice water and carefully replaced the crystal glass on its expensive-looking washi paper coaster, steadying her breath.

“Thank you for seeing me today. I must confess I was surprised at how quickly you responded to my request for an audience.”

A chuckle made thin wrinkles appear behind his titanium framed eyeglasses; his pinstripe suit shimmered in the bright light that flooded the office from the floor-to-ceiling windows.

“You are an excellent investigative journalist, Ms Williams; I have long been an admirer of your work. But to be honest with you, none of us has ever tried to hide from the press. It is the media that do not reach out to us. All they want are some names to drop, and so we are shrouded by our fame, by our almost mythical status; we are

practically invisible. After all, our last name is a very common one.”

Lexie tapped her mechanical pencil on her yellow ruled legal pad. He had expressly forbidden the use of a voice recorder, but he had agreed to note-taking; she had felt grateful for the classes in shorthand writing that her friend Marcie had insisted they take together. She looked again nervously at the list of questions she had carefully prepared, but on a whim decided to improvise.

“I hear you say ‘we,’ ‘our last name...’ I hope this does not come across as too forward, but may I just ask, who are ‘you,’ exactly?”

He smirked, without looking at her: “Are you sure you will understand the answer? Look, put simply, we are a family. A very powerful family. But you already know that, don’t you?”

Emboldened by his relaxed attitude, Lexie pressed further: “I do, of course; I am not after details or gossip. What I am really interested in is your human side.”

He chuckled again: “Our human side? What do you think we are, reptilian aliens?”

Lexie swallowed hard and looked down at her questions to collect her thoughts. She could feel a film of sweat forming under her armpits; thank god she had chosen a light linen shirt, not too tight-fitting. As she opened her mouth to move on to

her first question, he started talking again.

“You see, our power comes from our unique ability to control an era. We are different from other families because we do not fall for bilateral tensions. Although we do react strongly to direct attacks or to any show of disrespect.”

As she tried to ask the first question on her list, Lexie heard herself saying: “How strongly do you ‘react’? Do you resort to murder?”

Startled by her own words, Lexie looked up, and met his sneering gaze. He leaned back in his leather chair, running a hand over his neatly trimmed receding hairline.

“When it has proven necessary, we have indeed resorted to murder. But you know that already.”

Lexie hastily took note, then, the eraser on the back of her pencil poised in the air, she gathered the courage to ask:

“Can I write that down? You realise that you are admitting that you possess knowledge of criminal acts committed by your family?”

The man’s smirk quivered just slightly: “Your grandparents and great-grandparents probably killed many more people in the battlefield. Having violent ancestors is pretty common nowadays, wouldn’t you agree?”

Striving not to fall for the provocation, Lexie quickly returned to the safety of her list.

“Journalist have often drawn comparisons between you and the Sicilian Mafia. Would you agree with them?”

“Absolutely not.” He uncrossed and recrossed his legs, quietly staring at her with his poker face.

“Could you elaborate? Do you find the comparison offensive?”

“Of course I do. For one thing, we are much more powerful than any mafia.”

“You mean financially?”

“I mean in every sense. If this makes you feel better, I can tell you that for at least a couple of centuries we have stopped keeping track of our wealth and economic leverage. True, we still run several activities in the real world, but we deal with them like you would with domestic appliances in your house: we turn them on and off without thinking too much about them.”

“In what sense, then, would you say that are you superior to crime syndicates?”

“We operate on a different level. Criminal organizations function by controlling territories and populations, sometimes in opposition to governments, sometimes in concert with them. We

control all of them, from a much higher place, so high that they don't even notice us."

"So you control governments as well?"

"Of course we do, Ms. Williams."

Lexie was speechless. The man was admitting to much more than she had dared to hope; would this interview even be publishable? Wouldn't readers just take this for yet another conspiracy theory, the account of a mythomaniac? And yet, she was sitting right in front of him; she was interviewing him. This was the chance of a lifetime; even if her editor found the material unpublishable, at least this was her personal opportunity to get clarity on something everybody dreamed to understand.

"Let me tell you a childhood anecdote," the man went on. "When I was little, my siblings and I used to play with a hair dryer and spiders. And I don't mean little daddy longlegs, but real big, fat spiders, black and hairy and as big as our hands. Our mother bought them for us, expensive pets, tarantulas, black widows; we always had a large number of them."

Lexie's pencil resumed its quick movements on the yellow legal pad.

"We would take a spider from its terrarium and place it on a board that we had drawn ourselves. It looked a bit like a Monopoly board, but each box contained a life event: going to kindergarten, high

school, university, starting a business, having a baby, getting in a car crash, and so forth. Using the hot air from the hair dryer, we directed the spider onto the boxes, and forced her to follow our chosen path through life. At the end of each game, our mother made us kill the spider.”

Lexie looked at him, horrified. Was this a metaphor or an actual memory? Either way, it was pretty disconcerting.

“Why did you have to kill them?”

“I guess it is because she did not want us to get attached to any individual spider. We could have as many as we wanted, but once we had played with one, it had to be disposed of. Tidying up is a very important value in our family.”

Lexie tried to make sense of the story; why was he telling her this anecdote? Was he trying to intimidate her or was he trying to explain something? Why had he agreed to this interview? She had a reputation for asking pointed questions from her interviewees, pushing them to admit uncomfortable truths, never letting them present their own curated version of events, and yet he had agreed to talk to her. The situation baffled her. Spiders and hair dryers? The man was on a roll, and Lexie decided that the best course of action was to go with the flow, leaving her questions on hold. She might be able to tease out further meaning from her notes later, in the quiet of her office; for the moment it may be best to let him prattle,

gently nudging him with unobtrusive questions.

“So are you saying that ordinary people are like spiders to your family? Something for you to play with and dispose of?”

“No, don’t get me wrong. Ordinary people for us are like ants. The spiders are the institutions, be they legitimate or unlawful. If we need a multinational company or a government or a criminal organization to do something, we nudge it in the right direction with a breath of hot air. Sometimes they do good things, sometimes they do bad things. There are countless spiders in the world; when we lose one, it is easily replaced by another.”

This was something she could work with; Lexie tried to see if she could get something more out of the man: “Are you saying that there are people in governments and crime syndicates that are on your payroll?”

“Of course not. You are letting your imagination run too far, Ms. Williams. I just told you, we nudge from afar, we don’t intervene directly. We don’t need to have people on the inside; we just let things follow their natural course, with a little help. You could call us facilitators.

“But how is that manageable? We have evidence that your family is involved in all sorts of questionable operations, from Ghana to Timor Leste, from North Korea to the Cayman Islands,

and of course all over the Western world, from Japan and China to the U.S. and the U.K.”

“I will neither confirm nor deny that, but I can tell you something: we have been global long before it was a fashionable term. We do not focus on details; if you look at the big picture, the ways of manipulating humanity have not changed much over the centuries.”

Lexie could no longer wait, she had to ask: “Why did you agree to this interview? I am flattered that you did, of course, and to be honest until the last minute I was afraid that you would cancel. But I don’t understand why you accepted. You know I work for a prominent independent newspaper, you know that I will likely publish this information, and you are admitting to things that could potentially incriminate you. Why?”

“I told you: we let things follow their natural course, with a little help. We don’t see our actions as incriminating. Quidquid recipitur...”

“... ad modum recipientis recipitur.” Lexie was grateful for her high school Latin. So many old-fashioned skills were coming in handy on this fateful day.

“That’s right. You see, if you ask for an interview with the Devil, then you have to talk with the Devil. Are you ready to talk to him? Do you understand his language? Will your readers understand it?”

First the spiders, now the Devil. This interview might indeed be a hard sell with her editor. But her curiosity spurred Lexie to enquire further: “Would you say that your family has a Satanic side, then? Are you... evil?”

“Satan is a good example, isn’t it? The fallen angel! But that is a pointless question, Ms. Williams. You are not such an angel either, are you? I know a thing or two about you too, you know. You are a self-described environmentalist, but you drive a Volvo, and you eat meat. You had seven fines for running a red light in the past two years, all in the same spot. Shall I continue? But I am not here to attack you. My point is, we just do what is necessary for our goals. For example, I’m sure you will love this one, we rely on a network of hit men, whose services we employ judiciously. I always wonder how these people do it, how can they kill in cold blood for a handful of dollars.”

Lexie’s pencil kept moving at a steady pace. This was pure gold. “And how do you think they do it?”

“I think they must have serious mental health issues.”

“Doesn’t that concern you?”

“Not really, no. We have the collective sanction of a large and compact family that has worked towards our goal for a very, very long time.”

“Do you mean that being an old and powerful family gives you license to kill?”

“Of course it does. By the way, I saw the database where you traced our family history back to the seventeenth century, when two strategic marriages made us pretty much invincible. What you don’t realise, Ms. Williams, is that our family has been operating for much longer than that. We trace our ancestry back to more than three thousand years ago.”

“Really? How can you trace it that far?”

“You would be surprised if you saw the archaeological treasures that we hold in our repositories. What is more, we trace our lineage a few centuries into the future as well.”

“What do you mean, into the future?”

“I mean that we already know how our family will continue in the decades to come; we know our children and their unborn children, and so forth for several generations.”

Ok, maybe the man was a mythomaniac. Or was this another metaphor, like that of the spiders? The interview was definitely not what Lexie had expected; yet the strangeness eased her anxiety somewhat. This material was so impossible to use in a newspaper article that she might get out of this meeting without being ‘disposed of’ after all.

“But how is that possible?”

“Planning! We are a forward-looking, future-oriented collective entity. You commented earlier on my use of ‘we.’ Do you know that in our family, we all talk in the first-person plural, even among ourselves? The use of the first-person pronoun is effectively forbidden.”

“Why is that?”

“Because an ‘I’ is like a point in Euclidean geometry. It has no dimension, no value. To have something tangible you need more than one. I am no exception: I exist as a microscopic, temporary node in a tightly conceived project that began before time and will continue until the end of days. I have no will of my own; I merely act on behalf of my ancestors and of my successors. And you want to know something else?”

“What is it?”

“There has been more tidying up inside the family than outside of it.”

“Do you mean assassinations?”

“That’s exactly right, Ms. Williams. Our genealogical tree is a colossal bonsai. Its branches are carefully and artfully trimmed. This is how we know what our family will look like in two hundred years. And this is the reason why we have carefully weakened and destroyed any other family that

seemed liable to do the same.”

This was precious material. Would he confess to specific crimes towards powerful rival families? Would she be able to get names, facts? As Lexie glimpsed the opportunity to acquire valuable information, the fear that this would make her a witness that needs to be eliminated returned. And yet she had to ask. Having no fear at all is just recklessness, she reflected; a good journalist is one that feels fear but is capable of handling it.

“Were there any particular families that tried to compete with you over time?”

“I wouldn’t say so, no. Ordinary families present no threat. In fact, if a family becomes very rich, that is a resource for us, not a threat. An unexpected wave can easily overturn their little boat, and that can be useful to us in many ways. But hypothetically there is always a chance that a family would generate the spark that could turn it into a powerful entity, with deep roots in the past and in the future. Whenever we have seen a family breed that spark, we have promptly assimilated them, made them part of us. Meanwhile, we have worked slowly and subtly towards eroding the importance of family in societies all over the world, to minimize the risk of further sparks occurring.”

The water in Lexie’s glass had grown warm, but she took a sip from it anyway. It didn’t seem likely that someone would replace it. Come think of it, no-one had entered the room since the beginning of

the interview. The office was extremely quiet; all she could hear was their voices and the low hum of the air conditioner.

“And how did you manage that? Are you seriously saying that you are behind every change in every society in the world? How is that even possible?”

“Look, let me give you an example that may be more familiar to you. You are an animal rights advocate, aren't you? Think of a bull-riding rodeo. I'm sure you can picture the show. It is a hot day; the audience is waiting with bated breath for the rider to come on stage; the animal is snorting and tapping its foot impatiently, covered in sweat. The bullfighters wait around the ring, ready to distract the beast whenever the rider is in real danger. As the show begins, it is pandemonium: shouting, wild stomping, sweat, blood, fear, anger. At some point the audience shifts from excitement to discomfort: they want an end to the chaos. They root for the rider; they want him to tame the beast. They fear the wild animal, they want it to be tamed. But if you look carefully, you will notice someone else, down in a corner, out of the limelight: the organizer of the competition. He is the one who runs the show, yet he takes no part in it. He stands there, smoking his cigar. What we do is something similar. We don't try to control the beast. We let things follow their natural course.”

“But how does that work in practice?”

“In the past, we typically supported wars. But more

recently, we have been relying increasingly on media of mass communication. They are just so convenient. Consumerism, racism, religious intolerance, religious tolerance, environmentalism, feminism, chauvinism; you name it, we've used it. The political colour is irrelevant, if it helps us achieve our goals. I could show you a list of all the research projects that we fund. Except that of course the spiders don't know that they are working for us; they believe they have safeguarded their intellectual freedom. Just like investigative journalists from independent newspapers."

A chill ran down Lexie's spine. She kept diligently taking note in shorthand; she clicked on her mechanical pencil, hoping she would not run out of lead just then. He went on talking; she kept recording.

"See, today no-one else is able to act as a puppet in the hands of their ancestors and their successors like we do. Our family has no rivals in this respect. We are the only ones who can truly do that."

"What about royal families? There are, after all, still several monarchies in the world."

"Oh, those! They are but a poor imitation of us. They lost all contact with their ancestors, and they are increasingly driving away their descendants. And the same goes for ordinary citizens. In the early days of search engines on the world wide web, everyone became obsessed with tracing their

ancestry. Do you remember that? But yours are just spindly little family trees, sprouting a few brittle branches. No-one today has the deep roots and mighty lymph of our family, our perfect arboreal design.”

Looking at her wristwatch, Lexie checked again her list of questions. A glaring one was left: “How large is your financial empire?”

“You would be disappointed by the answer. I can tell you that we were the richest family on earth until 1901, but after that we donated most of our wealth to charities, making influence our currency. What is the point of accumulating money when the entire planet is yours?”

Lexie sensed that once again he was playing with her; she had evidence of their immense fortune, after all. On more familiar ground with this kind of denial, she pressed on: “How much is ‘most of our fortune’? Can you put a number to that?”

He grimaced: “Ah, numbers. Facts. You journalists are always looking for the Truth, with a capital T... but it is in your nature, after all, and we never stand in the way of nature. I told you, we are facilitators; and we are big supporters of investigative journalism. I’m sure your readers will be thrilled to read our interview; I look forward to reading it myself. I told you, our goal is not to tame the beast; we spur it on.”

Lexie looked down at her remaining questions,

about the man's involvement in money laundering and arms trade, and could not get herself to ask them. She took a deep breath; "Thank you for your support, then, and thank you for taking the time to talk to me."

As she rode the glass and steel elevator, clutching her yellow notepad and taking deep breaths, Lexie felt grateful for the meditation course that her friend Marcie had convinced her to take with her. Another skill that came in handy on this fateful day.

2. Bus

Reading Time 17'

Reina wakes up feeling a weight on her chest. Eyes still closed, she tries to locate the source of the sensation. She struggles to breathe, but her throat and nose feel fine; so does everything else. She mentally scans her body for any ache, wiggles her fingers and toes and takes a few deep breaths. Nothing unusual anywhere, except this heavy weight on her torso. She finally opens her eyes and peers at the screen of the digital alarm clock on the bedside table: 5:59. She has slept seven hours straight; she feels relaxed and refreshed, better than she has in a long time.

And yet the feeling persists; as if a medium-sized cat were sitting on top of the blankets, just over her breast. When she tries to sit up, the pressure gets stronger; she falls back down on the pillow, suddenly panicky. With difficulty, she pulls her left arm out from under the covers; the morning air on her bare skin gives her goose bumps. She pats the covers on top of her body, then all around; did something drop on the bed during the night? Did I sleep through an earthquake and wake up covered in debris? But her hand encounters just the smooth texture of the blanket; a few specks of lint, none of which could be as heavy as what she feels squashing her ribs down into the mattress.

What the hell? Am I still dreaming? Reina closes her eyes and tries that breathing exercise she recently learned at yoga. Breathe in to the count of four, hold your breath to the count of seven, breathe out to the count of eight, repeat. After a few cycles she feels much calmer; and yet the physical feeling of oppression remains.

Shifting under this invisible weight, she slowly extricates her right arm from the blankets and tries to move it across to the wall, feeling her way toward the light switch. This proves harder than expected; the wall is just a few centimetres out of reach, yet the distance seems enormous. Her arm is heavy, numb; it doesn't quite respond to her mind's commands. She can feel beads of sweat forming on her upper lip; she licks their saltiness and pulls a little harder.

After what feels like an eternity, her pointer finger touches the little plastic knob and flicks it upward. A dim orange glow fills the room. Stupid energy saving light bulbs!, she chuckles, and cranes her neck to take a better look at her blanket-clad body. And there he is, crouching on her chest. A half-choked sound comes out of Reina's throat; it is more reminiscent of a steam train whistle than of a human voice.

In the dim light she cannot fully make out its

features, but for some reason she immediately thinks of the creature as a he. A crown of tight dark curls grows from the head down to the cheeks and chin, with no solution of continuity; yet the forehead and nose are hairless and human-like, and so are his full lips, curled into a hint of a smile.

Arms crossed over his bent knees, head bowed slightly, the creature's overall shape is vaguely egg-like, as if he were trying to minimise the body surface exposed to the air. He seems to be naked, if rather furry.

His eyes are brown and shiny and strangely expressionless; they remind Reina of an early twentieth century Russian experiment she learned about in film studies class, where a completely neutral face was juxtaposed with images of food, of wild beasts, of naked women, and the man in the picture appeared hungry, scared, horny, his blank eyes and mouth a canvas for the viewer's imagination to paint emotions on.

As the light slowly grows brighter the creature's brown eyes become more unfathomable and his body less substantial; the harder Reina stares, the hazier the image becomes, until all she can see is her own body covered in a familiar beige blanket. Looking at the warm yellow light flooding the space, Reina feels lighter; her lungs fill with clean, fresh air, almost as though she was breathing in

the golden glow around her. As if on cue, the alarm clock starts beeping; it is 6:20.

On her commuter train, gazing emptily out of the scratched and dirty window, Reina thinks back about the morning events, and cannot make sense of them. Was that a hallucination? She has been sleeping poorly lately, and her levels of stress are definitely much higher than she would like them to be. They are literally driving me crazy! If these are actual hallucinations, I will sue the shit out of the company for damaging my mental health, she jokes bitterly to herself.

A guffaw makes her scarf quiver, fogging up her glasses. Of course she wouldn't go ahead with a lawsuit, even if it were true that her employer's unreasonable demands are harming her mental health, yet the thought is darkly comforting. Lost in a fantasy of court proceedings and cross-interrogations of psychiatric experts, Reina almost misses her stop. Squeezing past a cluster of schoolkids crowding the area around the exit of the carriage, she barely manages to get off as the automatic doors swoosh shut.

The elevator doors in her office building are about to close; a man in a gaudy Ralph Lauren shirt and a baseball cap squeezes past them and stands next to Reina, panting slightly.

“Hey Reina.”

“Hey Tom.”

“All good? You look a bit pale.”

“I’m fine, thanks. See you at the meeting in a few?”

Without responding, Tom walks off, making a show of being in a hurry. Reina is sure that Tom hates her, although she cannot figure out why. She has racked her brain for a reason, for a disagreement they might have had, something she could have said or done. Could he have resented her comment on his daughter’s ballet performance video on Facebook two years ago? Or maybe it was that time he proudly informed everyone that he had spent the weekend mowing the lawn and playing with his kids, taking a much-needed break from work, and she joked about spending her own weekend watching anime in bed on her laptop, like she does every Sunday?

The answer is probably much less convoluted: he dislikes her because she is his senior, despite being younger than him. Simple as that. And yet somehow not simple at all; why does success invariably elicit jealousy and resentment, snarky remarks and petty behaviour? Perhaps not always, but way too often for my taste. No wonder I hallucinate demons in the morning.

Reina sighs and turns on her computer. Another big day ahead: the company has launched a full rebranding project last month, and Reina's team has been hard at work ever since, adapting all their marketing platforms and communications strategies to reflect the new corporate colour, peacock blue, and the new corporate values of "cross-cultural innovativeness" and "trans-creative effectiveness."

At eight o' clock, everyone is already sitting in the meeting room; Reina must take the last remaining seat, at the far end, near the switchboard. A faint smell of burnt plastic comes off of the ten-year-old projector, that is already overheated a few minutes after turning it on. If only the company invested in equipment one tenth, hell, one-hundredth of what they invest in upper management salaries.

Another bitter guffaw escapes Reina's lips, drawing puzzled looks from her colleagues. She quickly looks down and pretends to concentrate on her tablet, flipping the keyboard open. Keep your head down, Reina; metaphorically and physically. Don't ask questions, don't point out problems, don't propose solutions, she repeats like a mantra. It goes well for several minutes; then, to her own horror, Reina finds herself raising her hand.

“Yes, Reina?” asks Mi-Kyoung, her division chief.

“Did management provide us with a definition of ‘cross-cultural innovativeness’?”

Mi-Kyoung swipes her index finger up and down on her tablet:

“Mmh, I don’t see one in the document—can anyone find it? Jonathan, you were at the executive committee meeting yesterday, weren’t you? Did management give a definition of cross-cultural innovativeness?”

“Actually, someone asked that same question, now that you mention it” Jonathan hesitates, put on the spot. “Oh, yes, sorry, now I remember; they have put together a working group last week to draft a definition of all the new corporate values. I think Kyle from HR is on it? You know Kyle, right?”

“You mean they have created a working group now to come up with a definition of the values? After they launched the rebranding project.” Reina’s pitch is much higher than she intended it to be; she tries to tone it down halfway through the sentence, with the result that what she meant as a question somehow sounds like a statement.

“That seems to be the case, yes.” Jonathan, on the other hand, sounds completely unfazed.

Reina looks around the room, scanning her colleagues' faces for a sign of perplexity if not bafflement, to no avail. Forgetting her mantra and against her better judgment, she persists:

"I mean, wouldn't it be more logical to have a definition first, and a slogan after? How are we supposed to design our communication strategies around a concept that has not been properly defined yet? What if we get it wrong because our interpretation of the concept is different from theirs?"

"Thank you, Reina, that's a very good point." Mi-Kyoung speaks in a flat tone, without looking up from her tablet. "I'm afraid we are running out of time, so I will have to stop you there, but thank you very much for raising the issue. Moving on to point 5B..."

Breathing in to the count of four, holding to the count of seven, Reina breathes out to the count of eight. A very good point. Thank you, boss. Why can't I keep my mouth shut?

After a long day of meetings with no time for lunch, Reina is starving by the time she gets off the evening train. Her face lights up when she sees

that the takeaway sushi shop is still open. From across the road she can make out the yellow stickers on the discounted sushi trays; she counts several and slows her pace. There will be at least a couple left even if she doesn't run. She chooses the deluxe set, with one piece each of salmon roe and sea urchin; she lays the plastic tray carefully in her bag, mindful not to tip it, and heads to the bottle shop. An obscure local microbrew IPA is on special offer; a six pack it is. Hopefully she will not finish them all in one evening, although she does feel like she could drink a case tonight.

Back at the apartment, she puts on the kettle for some instant miso soup to go with the sushi, opens the jazz playlist on her iPod, and notices that the money plant on the kitchen counter is looking terribly wilted. Has she watered it too much or not enough? Why is it so complicated to look after plants? The guy that sold her this one said it was very low maintenance, "always happy indoors." She doesn't look very happy right now.

"You wouldn't be very happy either if you had to spend the whole day alone in here. This little apartment is pretty dreary, you know?"

What was that? Is the plant talking back? More hallucinations? Reina shivers and looks around the small kitchen, then across the counter to the marginally larger dining/living area. She turns on

the main light in there too. Nothing out of the ordinary. Ok, I am definitely stressed and tired. Let's not panic. It was just a thought in my head and for a moment it seemed like a real voice; maybe I even spoke the words and did not realise it. Yes, I was thinking out loud, that's all.

She pops a beer open, settles on the couch with her discount sushi and instant miso, and turns on the TV. As the hunger subsides and the beer warms her, she begins to relax. She opens a second can, then a third. Peacock blue! She laughs, this time out loud, with gusto. That company is such a joke. I can and should see the funny side of this.

At two AM Reina wakes up on the couch, a puddle of drool under her cheek, her neck and shoulder sore. Shit, shit, shit. I had planned to wash my hair, do some meditation maybe, have an early night, and here we are again. She pulls herself up clumsily, shoves the empty sushi tray in the recycle bin for plastic and the beer cans in the one for aluminium, and drags herself to bed. In a few minutes she falls back into a deep, dreamless sleep.

As her consciousness returns in the dark, cold morning air, a familiar feeling hits Reina. Something is crushing her chest, something heavy and warm. A breathing other than her own resounds in the

small bedroom; a shiver runs down Reina's spine. She flicks the light on, and in the dim orange of the light-saving bulb, there he is. Crouching egg-like and staring at her with his brown expressionless eyes.

"Hello, Reina."

His lips are not moving, yet the voice is clearly coming from the creature. And just like she knows that it is a he, Reina suddenly and inexplicably also knows who he is.

"Hello, Incubus."

Her voice sounds more hesitant than she intended it to be, yet it has no trace of that high pitch that she often gets at meetings and that she has been trying to control, unsuccessfully, for years. No, her voice sounds a little perplexed but even, low, calm. Not afraid, not hysterical. She is almost more surprised at the sound of her voice than she is at the fact that a demon is crouching on her chest and talking to her without moving his lips.

"It's because of the weight." Incubus' voice is as neutral as his eyes; neither happy nor sad, neither angry nor kind, a blank slate. Her mind tries to project interpretations, but its smooth, slick surface

lets her imagination slide off, without anything to latch on.

“What is because of the weight?”

“Your voice. It sounds this way because of the weight on your chest. My weight.”

“You mean this is some sort of possession? I am talking in your voice?”

“Nothing like that, no, don’t be silly. It’s just the pressure on your diaphragm: it makes you breathe from your lower belly. Nothing magic about it.”

Nothing magic about it? Well, that’s rich! Reina wants to laugh, but no sound comes out of her mouth. Incubus is right: the weight on her chest is forcing her to breathe more deeply, preventing some movements and compelling others. She can neither laugh nor cry; the sounds would simply not form. What is this madness? Is she still dreaming? Is Incubus hypnotizing her? The whole situation feels impossibly strange, yet not entirely unpleasant. Reina had read about incubi in her medieval art history class; she vaguely remembers they were described as demons who preyed on women in their beds and raped them in their sleep. Is this some sort of sexual fantasy in a half-asleep state?

“It is a gross misrepresentation, that myth about

rape. The history written by men is full of lies. I never understood why they paint us in such a negative light. And why they have to sexualise everything. We are not rapists; we have never been. There have been some romantic and sexual relationships between incubi and humans over the centuries, but they have always been consensual, I can assure you. And most of the time sex plays no part at all. Sorry if that disappoints you.”

“What do you want from me, then?”

“I don’t want anything, Reina. You are the one who wants and fears; you are the one with worries and desires. I have none of those feelings. I am just here.”

He is indeed just there; his expressionless face shows no intention, no will, no desire. As Reina peers more closely, she also notices that he is also, somehow, less there. The light is getting brighter, and Incubus is starting to fade. Just as he becomes almost transparent, the alarm clock begins to beep. It is 6:20.

All day Reina keeps thinking about what happened in the morning. Should she see a psychiatrist? At least tell her GP? But what if this goes on her work record; what if it ends up raising her insurance premium? Her dark fantasy of suing the company for driving her crazy sounds much less enticing when she considers it as a practical option.

But it is not just concern about the concrete consequences of opening the worm can of mental health care that makes Reina reluctant to tell a doctor, or even a friend, about her morning visions. Even more important is the realisation that, when she thinks of Incubus, she feels more curious than scared. The appearance of the demon is unsettling, but also intriguing. Those expressionless eyes, that resist interpretation; she cannot stop thinking about them; she cannot stop thinking about him.

The hours at work go by in a breeze; at each of the long and useless meetings scheduled for the day, keeping quiet proves startlingly easy. Distracted by the thought of her morning nightmares, Reina asks no questions, points out no problems, proposes no solutions. When two of the girls from marketing invite her to join them for after work drinks, she surprises herself by accepting with a genuine smile.

The cocktails are watery and overpriced and the conversation rather boring; Stephanie keeps complaining about her new boyfriend and Melanie keeps telling her she should just dump him. Reina doesn't care one way or the other, but nods pleasantly and looks around. It feels nice to just sit there, sipping her gin and tonic, listening distractedly. The evening passes pleasantly; at midnight they call cabs—too late for public transport, and what the hell, it won't bankrupt

them to take a taxi once in a while—and promise to do this again. Leaning her head against the cool fake leather of the backseat, Reina looks at the city lights almost with affection; yes, we should do this again, I should do this more often.

As she opens her eyes in the dark room, Reina turns towards the digital alarm clock. 5:30 AM. Typical: when she goes to sleep later than usual, she wakes up earlier. Yet for once she is not annoyed, even if she knows that she will be tired all day. She does not try to go back to sleep, feeling more awake and restless the harder she tries, as she normally would. Instead, she lies quietly in the dark, looking for a familiar feeling. Initially it is very faint: is she imagining it? But no, gradually the weight becomes more substantial, the warmth more perceptible.

“Good morning, Reina.”

“Good morning, Bus.”

“No need for lamplight today?”

“It’s early; let’s stay like this for a bit. Unless you want me to turn it on?”

“I don’t want anything, I told you. I am just here.”

And here he is indeed; his presence is, she realises, soothing. Where months of attempts at yoga, meditation, and breathing exercises failed, Incubus effortlessly succeeds. The simplicity of his weight on Reina’s chest is formidable. She doesn’t need to picture quiet landscapes in gentle colours or listen to recordings of gentle waves. She does not need to repeat calming words in her head. The anger, frustration, sadness that seem to constantly accompany Reina are squashed out of her chest by this constant, even pressure.

All day yesterday Reina had thought of Bus. She had so many questions for him, and so many things that she wanted to tell him about herself. She had imagined sharing secrets in bed with him, like she used to do with her cousins when they were little. She might have thanked him for the positive effect he seemed to have had on her mood; told him how she had been out with the girls and even enjoyed it, something she had not done in years. She had pictured herself telling him all sorts of things, scrutinizing his expressionless face for a reaction. But now, in the semi-darkness of the early morning, none of that seems to be necessary or desirable.

He is just there, sitting on her chest. Reina keeps still, arms by her side, eyes open. She gives in to

the weight. It feels a bit like being in a grave, she thinks, with earth covering her body. The feeling is not frightening but pleasant, in a quiet way. Bus is right: this is not sexual at all, the pleasure she feels is not exciting but neutral, serene. There is nothing she can do; there is nothing she needs to do. She is just there, lying on her back.

She enjoys the minutes in silence. Bus is equally quiet. A faint light begins to filter from the closed blinds; soon the alarm will go off, she will have to turn on the light, she will see his soft brown eyes, first vivid, then fading. The day will go on as usual, among the pettiness of colleagues, the stupidity of management, the laziness of shop clerks, the rudeness of fellow commuters on the train. But everything seems more bearable with the prospect of waking up tomorrow with Bus crouching on her chest. She hopes that he is there to stay; that there will be many more mornings like this.

“I’m not going anywhere, Reina.”

“That’s good to know, Bus.”

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