

The Woman

By: Vanessa Flores

The woman had some questions about meeting the bad guy for dinner. It was a date. He'd made that clear by speaking as they do in movies: *I'll pick you up at eight*. Only, he told her he'd pick her up at sunset. She'd gone home to the internet to find out what time that would be exactly. A search for: *What time does the sun set?* A result: *7:38 PM*. Another search for: *Weather tomorrow*. Another result: *sixty-four degrees high, fifty-nine degrees low. Chance of showers*. Clinton would still be President, her mother would still be dying, the moon would be a waxing gibbous. Now that was unbelievable. An *almost* full moon. Not quite full circle yet. But almost complete, yes. An end on its way. Maybe a big finish. She tossed and turned in her bed and thought of the best things she could say when she called the bad guy to cancel.

She and the man used to play together as kids, in the streets of their neighborhood, and in the vacant dry fields of scrap and debris that neatly stamped each end of their street. The woman always played the victim—the one tied to the train tracks, the one with a finger-pistol to the side of her head—and the man was always the bad guy, the one who'd held the gun and tied her up. There was another boy too, (where was he now?) now probably a man as well, who used to come out of nowhere and save her by wrestling the bad guy to the ground or untying her just in time, just as the bad guy (who also played the train) was about to crush her face with his shoe-wheel. The good guy would rise, dust the dirt off himself first, the sticks, the pieces of crushed tumbleweed and then offer her his hand. The bad guy already thinking of his next spree, scheming.

She and the bad guy had gone to the same high school too. He was a track runner, and the woman had been in theater. She remembers seeing all the man's girlfriends. Each one Asian with long black hair, each one would hook herself to his arm and they'd walk together like that, side by side in the halls of the school, even when the halls were crowded. The bad guy seemed to be scheming then too, as they walked, his eyes squinted, in deep thought, so that the others in the hall got out of the way quickly, knowing that he was not thinking of them, so they ought to think of him. As a teenager, the woman wondered if these girls were really his girlfriends at all or if the man, as a teenager, was really a magnet Asian girls with long black hair just hooked themselves to and even he wasn't sure why. Maybe that's what he was thinking about. Why? Why did this happen to me? Is this fortunate?

She'd had no boyfriends in high school. Her first was the one in college. She'd gone to a community college, but only one guy from the community introduced himself and she found out, after they'd had sex and he stopped coming to class, that he didn't even belong to the community, he had never been enrolled. She counted him as a boyfriend still. Even though to her, their relationship was like a giant shrug. Even now, when the woman mentioned this guy, this college boyfriend, she shrugged, as if it were his last name. Robert Shrug. Michael Shrug. Shrug Shrug. He didn't matter. Sometimes you have to shrug before you nod. That may have been something her mother would have said. You have to shrug a few times, get those shrugs out of the way. Those are just shrugs when you know you know, you know?

She had nodded quickly when she saw the bad guy again, after all these years. He walked in and she nodded, before he had even said anything to her. Something was understood. Like here we are, we've almost come full circle, the same way people turn into a baby when they

grow old. The way some poems end using the same line they started with, when she saw the bad guy the woman sensed the universe was trying to wrap things up nicely for her, that her time here was almost done and the world was pushing her on and out, rushing her forward: *move along now, please, move along.*

When she saw the bad guy again he was using a real pistol, not his finger one, and when he came up to her to ask for the money and she looked at his face and saw that yes, he really was the boy she used to play with, the bad guy, now a man, and she nodded again. She swore she heard trumpets blaring.

A search for: What happens to the brain upon recognition?

A: Neurons in the frontal lobe....

But no, there were no trumpets, the sound was just the neurons in her frontal lobe blaring upon recognition. She thought maybe her first thought was that the universe was running out of faces and scenarios. Maybe, at any moment, the good guy was about to come out of nowhere and kick the man in the back and they'd have a good wrestle on the floor while she waited.

She was working at a small credit union as a teller and when the man passed her the note she looked over at Abdul, her fellow teller, who was busy helping a lady who wanted money or wanted to give money, from, or to, her own account. She looked over at Abdul not because she knew this was a stick-up, but because she'd only glanced at the note and thought it read something like:

WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO ON A DATE? I THINK YOU'RE PRETTY. NO OFFENSE.

And not:

WOULD YOU LIKE TO DIE? BETTER GIVE ME MONEY. NO ALARMS.

And she wanted to make sure Abdul was too busy talking to the lady to hear the woman say yes to the man, that a date would be great.

The man pushed the note forward and pounded his finger down on it hard.

Dun, dun.

LOOK HERE, his finger said. OH KAY?

She read the note, took a step back and thought: *Unbelievable.*

“Don’t you remember me?” she asked the man. The man stared hard.

Again: *dun, dun.* LOOK HERE. OH KAY? He wiggled his right arm a bit, trying to get her to see the gun, its barrel aimed at her heart, in the pocket of his leather jacket. His move looked, at first, like a little dance.

“No really,” the woman said, “look at me!” Abdul looked over. She smiled at him and nodded, business as usual, and then leaned in towards the man with a whisper, “Don’t you remember my face?”

The man’s tight mouth loosened a little and a small cough escaped from his throat. Then, DUN, DUN, DUN! LOOK HERE—

“Yeah, I get it. But--”

“Look lady,” the man said quietly, angrily, hissing, “I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but you don’t know me, I don’t know you.”

“But you do,” she said loudly and then brought her voice back down to a whisper, “I’m telling you, you do know me. And right about now’s when that other man, the good one, is going to come and take you down, and then there’s going to be fight scene. You’ll lose. He’ll win.”

The man's mouth had unscrewed itself. His lips were soft and full. She leaned in closer and whispered with focus, "Aren't you scared he's on his way?"

Q: What do you do after a stick-up?

A: After rubbing the balloon on your hair, you'll find your hair...

After the stick-up the woman went to the bowling alley to watch TV. TV helped her clear her head on her rougher days, and even though she didn't own one herself, she lived in a part of town where there were many sets in public places. The bowling alley was one of her favorites. She'd could sit there, unbothered, with a beer, without having the itch to think about what else might be on, what channel she should change it to because it didn't matter. Charles, the guy behind the counter who passed out shoes and sprayed them down with Lysol afterward, kept the remote in his back pocket. Charles was a tall man, more than six-feet, and he looked healthy everywhere but his stomach which was big and round in a way that made the woman sure something was growing in there. His pants, too big for his legs, because they had to go around his belly, looked as if they were an open, empty sack waiting to catch whatever might drop down from out of there.

Charles looked mean. His face was trapped in an expression that looked like he was angry about smelling something awful.

Once, while the woman was watching TV there, she saw a group of kids walk up to the counter and ask Charles if he could change the channel on the TV to *The Simpsons*. He stared at them, breathing in and out audibly from his flared nostrils. A moment passed before he said: *Hell no, I can't change it to The Simpsons. Get out of here!* And the kids walked away, cussing him out loud enough so he could hear. He looked at the woman, shook his head and said: *the goddamn nerve*. The woman nodded and repeated: *the goddamn nerve*. And he poured her a free beer and poured himself one too, and leaned against the counter just next to her, both of them watching the TV, waiting for the *X-Files* to return from commercial break because, in the scene just before, Scully and Mulder had finally kissed.

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