

“She won’t suspect anything. I’ve been dating her for months, you won’t have anything to worry about.” A blender chewed up ice while a cash register drawer crashed shut behind them.

“What if I accidentally let it slip?” He pushed the straw lifted from carbonation back to the bottom of his drink as his concerned eyes inspected the basket of fries.

“That won’t happen. There’s really, *really* nothing that would get in our way.”

“What if she doesn’t go for me? What if she doesn’t want to go out with me? What happens then? A lot could go wrong, Dale.” Agony washed over Jake.

“What if, what if, what if, knock that shit off. It’s *our* experiment. She’s just our guinea pig. We can do this. It’ll be fine, Jake. Suck it up.”

“Now let me wrap my head around this, I ask your girlfriend out, we date, and we try to see how long until she tells one of us she already has a boyfriend? How does that even work? Why did I agree to this...?”

“You agreed because you know professors and scholars alike will bow down to us. This kind of social experiment has never been done before. We’ll start something big. Our names will finally be read in textbooks.” Dale realized the weight of what he just said.

“It’s not right.” Weary baby blues scanned their environment, avoiding all contact with their consorts across the table.

“It is if you want to be paid. Let’s go.” 15% of the bill was left on the table as the two trekked out the door. Separate chariots awaited the two soon-to-be kings.

On the drive home, Dale thought about the bitterness that had been growing inside of him for the last three years. The acidity that stung the tip of his tongue was named Roxanne. He fell for thick thighs and tightly curled black hair. Hazel eyes and diastema never looked so extraordinary. Dale showed interest in her immediately following their first contact. Sordid in essence, Roxanne reciprocated emotions.

Roxanne would constantly hide the small gap in her front teeth when she laughed. Dale thought that she should embrace it. He encouraged every fiber of her being to be gregarious. She blossomed into an outgoing people person soon after they began seeing each other. Time spent together was all Dale thought about when he was away from her. She was his goddess. Passion fortified Dale’s reassurance in her, and he was madly in love. Months passed by in bliss. Dale had no reason to question the validity of their vehemence. “Casual but sophisticated” is the phrase he used to describe his relationship to his mother who never met Roxanne.

Jake’s days carried on with anticipation after the meeting with Dale. As if he were building an entire universe from scratch, it took Jake seven days to become numb to the malicious deed. He thinks of it with scientific intent. If he can claim this victory, then he would be as famous as the protagonist from the prophecy whose cuneiform was inscribed by Dale.

Blonde hair sits alone at a table for two in the study commons at a local library. A red headed 20 something year old creeps from his stationed seat behind a bookshelf across the room. He walks passed her table and his hand purposely brushes her papers onto the ground.

“Oh! Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

Two unopened books sit strewn about the table. Jake reads the titles and remembers the ink printed on bound pages he read years ago. Two stories similar in plot but divergent in theme. He wrote papers about them in high school and fondly recollects their influence on the phases he went through then.

“Those books are really interesting. I remember reading them in high school. Are you reading them for a class?”

“Oh, these? Yeah. Well, no. I have to choose one and write about it for a bullshit course I’m taking.” She flips back the hard cover of one book and studies its publication page as if actually reading it.

“They’re both pretty cool. One book is about a man’s slow decent into madness told from the eyes of his heartbroken daughter and the other is about the emotional abuse a woman experiences when her husband loses his job.”

“Wow, really? They sound.. Romantic. I haven’t looked at their descriptions yet. This pile of work has had me busy all day.” A laugh escapes her lips that is only laughed when you hide your sorrow to a stranger.

“I know that feeling all too well.”

He flashes a smile. Brown and blue eyes lock.