

Everything That Fits in a Tote

Near a construction site for a new high-rise building at the edge of a desert town, a man leaves a dingy bar drunk in the middle of the afternoon. He steps out onto the sidewalk, blinking as the heat of the cactus-loving sun bakes his head and shoulders, the crisp of his black hair sagging to sweat.

There is a woman he can see sitting in the shade of the bar on the street corner. He avoided her on the way into the bar an hour ago as she'd approached him, eyes blackened like a void that might vacuum the street of its signs, and him of his clothes, wallet, and watch. He'd thought she was homeless, there begging. She had nothing with her but a small change purse, several oranges, and a book with a cracked spine.

But now that he's leaving, the world is blurry and he thinks that maybe the woman just spends her time this way: sitting on the corner and staring at passersby. She peels an orange, the same color of her shirt, and the empty of her eyes is now full. He thinks maybe she is just a trickster and that isn't so bad. Maybe he can outrun her even if she calls to him as he passes with his stumbling drunken steps. Either way, she is now unavoidable because she sits beside his bus stop.

She says nothing as he walks over and leans against the bus sign, the burning metal biting into his black t-shirt and the meat of his shoulder. She does not look at him as he waits, his blurred gaze flickering between her and the empty street. It is quiet in this downtown when the lunch hour ends.

Minutes pass and she is content with her orange, and the man finds that he is angry. The pallor of his skin after drinking shouldn't put a beggar off—if that's what she is—and he still has a wallet, he still has his watch. He may have lost almost everything today, but this homely woman, with her gray-and-brown hair and skin lined like rope, shouldn't ignore him.

"I'm cursed," he says loudly.

She lifts her eyes to him and spits an orange seed into her palm.

"I lost my girlfriend last week. I lost my job today and soon I'll lose my apartment."

"That's not a curse. That's life," she says and laughs, the sound harsh and cutting in the quiet of the street.

He wraps his hand around the metal pole and the heat is more than pain, it's weight. He jumps back, scalded. "That's not all. My money always transforms into other things," he says, bitterness ripe on his tongue.

Her smirk doesn't disappear. "You must be drunk. That's just what money does."

The man bends toward the woman. "Not like that. Literally. It happens to the things that I touch. I work at construction sites and every time I lift a tool it turns into something else." He would think he'd gone crazy if the other workers had not seen these transformations too.

It had started last week. He picked up a hammer and suddenly he found he was holding a dead cichlid. He flung the fish away from him, barely feeling the slime on his fingers, he had been so shocked. It only happened once that morning, but by the following day, many things he touched transformed.

The final straw for his boss had occurred early this morning. The man picked up his hardhat and it turned into a plate. Unable to enter the site without a hardhat, he picked up another. The second became a loaf of bread. His boss told him to stop, to take a break. But the man was furious. He sifted through his co-workers belongings and picked up each of their hardhats in hopes that one would stay that way.

Soon, he had a collection of objects: a button, cat litter, an Agatha Christie novel, a lighter, a robe, and a cheap, plastic, decorative treasure chest for a fish tank. There were no hats left.

In a fit of rage, the man threw these things to the ground and jumped up and down upon them. His boss then said he had to let the man go.

As he told the woman about his affliction, she was silent.

"Don't you see? I must be cursed," he says, repeating himself.

She looks down at her orange-stained fingers, pulling white rind from her thumb. "That's normal."

He sways on his feet, his fury lost to surprise. "How could that possibly be normal?"

"When a rock falls on your toe, doesn't your foot transform?" Her thumb bites into the skin of another orange.

Squinting at her, he realizes that she is making fun of him. "Don't laugh at me."

"What happened the last time you touched a man?"

"Nothing." He scoffs and turns back to the bus stop sign, but out of the corner of his eye he watches her.

The woman's eyes blacken again, a void with a gravitational pull and he can't look away. "What happened the last time you

touched a woman?”

A heat raises up along the man’s chest. He blames the sun. “That’s irrelevant.”

“As are the objects, eh?” She smiles and sets her orange on the ground, the midday light casting little shadow, so that the fruit appears to float on the cement. She rises from the ground and takes a step towards the man.

“Of course,” he says and leans back into the pole, eyeing her suspiciously. He won’t get caught up in the ramblings of a crazy woman.

“So, when I touch something, it won’t transform?” she asks.

“You just touched an orange, didn’t you?”

She steps up to him and smiles. He can smell the hot air on her skin, the orange peel growing sickly sweet against her sweat. “Couldn’t it have been something else before?”

He swallows and glances down the street at the sound of old breaks screeching. His bus approaches slowly from around a corner, sending heat waves rolling across the asphalt in its wake. He only has to bear the woman’s company for a moment more.

Her eyes weigh upon him as heavy as stones, but he decides to say nothing. He will go home to his apartment and from there a solution to his problems will occur to him. Surely his affliction won’t last forever.

“If you touch me, what will happen?” the woman asks from beside him. She’s closer than before, standing mere centimeters from him, his elbow aligned with her shoulder. He hadn’t heard her approach and the thought of this old woman, so stealthy, so quick, unnerves him.

“Nothing, lady. Forget about it.”

The bus pulls up in front of them, stopping with a lurch. The man can see the bus driver through the door window. Relief expands his lungs.

As the door opens, the woman reaches for his face. “Let’s find out.”

She places her palm lightly on the man’s cheek. Her hand is cool, but rough, the stick of orange wet against his stubble. And then suddenly, there is no man at all—he disappears and, in his place, where his feet just were, is a thick, beige tote bag. She bends down to pick it up, examining it and flicking the dust from its rough canvas. It’s sturdy, stiff, but it’ll curve to the shape of her back over time.

“Are you getting on?” the bus driver asks.

She shakes her head and returns to her things on the corner. Gathering her oranges, her small purse, and her book, she places

them all gingerly into the tote bag. Then she tests the weight of it all on her shoulder, smoothing the straps and tucking the bag against her hip.

“This will do nicely,” she says, and follows the building-shaded path down the sidewalk and away from the bar.

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