

MOONLESS WITHOUT YOU

By Kilroy AM

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Part 28: sleepyhead

I woke up late the next day. After a productive hour of staring at the ceiling, I got dressed while the events of last evening played over and over in my head. Things had been going so well yesterday, why did I have to make things so...

Confusing?

Downstairs, there were still loose ends and counter crumbs to sweep up. The kitchen bin overflowed with napkins and general debris, while the recycling bin had a teetering mound of cans.

"Sorry about not taking the trash out last night," I apologized to Sam, who sat eating a salad at one of the island counters. Guess it was brunch time.

"Trash trucks don't come by until Monday," she told me between crouton crunches. "Don't worry about it. The fact you and your friends cleaned up in the first place was icing for me. They're good kids. Especially Cheryl."

I nodded sluggishly. "Yeah."

"And your Simon friend—I recognized his car, is he the classmate you went to Marlowe's with?"

I yawned before answering. "Yeah. What about him?"

"He's very..." She thought for a moment. "I'm glad you're helping him out of his shell. Especially since you struggled so hard getting out of yours."

I blushed. "It's nothing like that. He just has his own, y'know, stuff going on." To my spite, she slyly smiled back. I busied myself with pouring a bowl of Kix at the kitchen table.

"I meant it when I said I like your friends," she reiterated. "I was worried maybe you'd be lonely going to school so far from home, or maybe you'd end up in the wrong crowd, and we'd have to have an early drug talk, or birds and the bees, or, well. I worry about you a lot, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

"Do you want some orange juice?"

"No, I'm alright."

After I finished my cereal, I got up to wash my bowl when I noticed something shining by the kitchen sink—Simon's ring. He must have left it there after he cut himself doing the dishes.

"Scuse me, Sam, Simon left something behind, so I'm gonna go call him." I grabbed the ring and headed upstairs. Half-way up the steps, I was already dialing, hoping he'd still pickup after what happened yesterday. No luck. He must've still been asleep, or busy, or hopefully, anything that wasn't avoiding me.

"Yo, Simon, this is Co," I told his voicemail just as I shut the door to my room. "You left your ring thing behind. I'll bring it to class with me tomorrow. Right. Good seeing you yesterday. Sorry about, well... bye."

I hung up and then examined the metal band in my hand. I'd seen the ring on his finger before, but never close enough to see all the little scratches and dents, smoothed out over time by human touch. The metal was so white and pale it made the skin of my palm seem dark and red in

comparison—

No, my skin was *turning* dark red. The pads of my fingertips down to my palms had begun breaking out in a hot, swelling rash, causing me to drop the ring after a resounding *Ach!*

It bounced a few times, before rolling around in a wide circle and clattering to a stop. My hand looked like I seared it with a hot pan. The fuck?

Sam told me an old ER nurse story about getting a ring off of a girl's hand because they were allergic to copper or nickel or something, but I didn't think I was personally allergic to either. The metal seemed too silver-colored to be either, anyways.

Wait, silver-colored, or actually silver? No way Simon would have *actual* silver on him. Wasn't silver super toxic, like arsenic and lead and stuff? That's why you weren't supposed to touch like, certain batteries or fragments of old, broken mirrors without gloves. Other than the fact that they had leaking acid and sharp edges and stuff.

My first instinct was to run to Sam, but then I'd have her all over me, poking and prodigy my hand while asking questions about why one of my friends had a silver ring. If, y'know, Simon's ring *really* was silver. Anyways, I was seventeen, not seven.

I picked the ring up with a handkerchief and stuffed it into the side pocket of my backpack, out of sight. As for my hand, I ran it under cold water, packed it with ice, dug up some Benedrill, and left the house before Sam or Amy noticed.



Even after smothering it with ice, the skin of my hand stayed itchy and inflamed for nearly half an hour. I took my new bike out around town to take my mind off scratching it all day, sticking to the sidewalks whenever the bike lanes disappeared. Exactly where I was going, I was undecided; Cheryl was out with her family in the afternoon then doing pack stuff in the evening, while Ash said he was hung up with something 'lame,' so I just biked where impulse took me.

By chance, I ended up in front of Marlowe's. I double-checked my wallet and found Cheryl's gift card still there, so I locked up my bike and walked in. What I was gonna get, I wasn't sure—I hadn't even started the last book I bought.

I idly paced up and down the rows of books, my inflamed hand in my jacket pocket. I spent some time by the comics, ignoring the sign that said *Buy, Don't Just Read*, then took a quick ten in the crafts section. There were *How To* books on knitting, origami, building log cabins, and starting up an at-home baking business. I passed on the last one; think I had enough trauma from Home Ec to last a lifetime. While I was paging through a heavily discounted, kitten-themed wall calendar, a familiar, meek voice greeted me.

"*H-Hi, Collin.*" It was Ivy, dressed in a peasant shirt and long skirt that gave off strong cottage core vibes. She completed the look with green high socks that had mushrooms on them.

"Oh, hey there, Ives," I answered back. Ivy gave me her shy smile, brushing some of her hair back. "I like your socks."

"Thanks. I got them from a hole-in-the-wall in Seattle. I didn't expect to see you here."

"Yeah, most people get surprised when they see me in a bookshop. What're you up to?"

She didn't seem to get my joke. "Sebs and I were cleaning out the van, and I decided to trade in some of the old books piling up in the back seat. I've been wanting to get some Kurt Vonnegut, take a break from poetry."

"What's he write about?"

"Oh, mostly satire novels on things like race relations, free will, anti-war, and a lot of other

things. He wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five*, if you've seen the movie."

"I haven't yet. Reminds me of Ash, though," I commented. "All of those topics sound like big brain stuff."

Ivy lightly laughed. "I wouldn't say big-brained. Just thoughtful and requiring a little bit of consideration. Ash named his kitten Kurt."

"That doesn't surprise me," I chuckled back. I didn't know Ash had a cat.

"So... what are you shopping for?" she asked, brushing her hair out of her eyes again.

"I'm just browsing," I responded. "Honestly, I think I'm just gonna get a drink or something to wake me up. I got a chai here last time, and I think I want to try another flavor."

"Do you... want to get a drink together then, maybe?" she asked.

"Sure," I nodded. It felt too impolite to say no, and book shopping wasn't going any better. We lined up at the counter, and when it was our turn, I told the barista I'd cover Ivy's drink.

"Y-you don't have to," she said.

"I need to use up this gift card before I forget about it," I insisted. "What do you want?"

"I'll try a chai, too."

Once our drinks were ready, I picked the same table Simon and I sat at last time, off the side by the window facing traffic. While waiting for our drinks to cool, Ivy and I found ourselves in a shared, silent conundrum of not knowing what to talk about. There was quiet murmur of people typing away on laptops and chatting softly to each other, just above library sound levels.

"Are you guys shifting anytime soon?" I said first, making an attempt at small talk. "I can't remember how many weeks it's been since the last full moon, but Ash made it sound like you guys try to shift frequently."

"Sort of," Ivy responded. "We're going to have a party, at Jo's this time next Saturday. Not a formal shift, but some of us shift."

"Nice. I just had a party yesterday."

"Oh?" She looked at me quizzically.

"Not, like, a big one. Just a small birthday party," I hastily added, worried Ivy might be offended I didn't invite her or any of her pack. "Nothing super exciting. Family threw it."

"Oh." Her gaze went down to her cup. "Well, if you want to hang out, you should come to Jo's. I'm sure she'd be fine with it. I can text her."

"That sounds fun. I've never been to a party besides, like, my own birthdays. Not counting adult parties family took me to when I was a kid."

"We can... maybe go together?"

"I don't know where she lives, so I wouldn't mind help finding the place," I answered. "Do you have my number? Here." Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I opened up a new text screen, and held it out for Ivy to type in her number.

"You sure?" she asked. Cautiously, she took hold of it, typing so gently I wasn't even sure the touch screen was picking up her fingertips. Finally, after she finished, she held it back out for me. To seal the deal, I sent her an emoji of party balloons and a wolf, and heard her phone buzz in response.

"There," I said. "Now we can text, too, if we want to work on our poetry project. That's due soon, right?"

"Tuesday," she clarified.

"Oh, shit. We should probably text David. I have his number. Damn, I can't even remember

what we're supposed to do."

"Three-page essay, double spaced, about what we think our poem's about, discussing at least two devices our poet uses."

I nodded. "I'll make a group chat. I should have thought of this before. Fuck, knowing David though, I'm sure he'll save us with an outline or something..."

"Well, if you have faith in him, I have faith, too." She sipped her chai, closing her eyes and sinking to a level of thoughtfulness for a moment. "By the way, if you really like chai, there's a tea bar near Beck Street and Aster Road with a beautiful view."

"Aren't we a little too young for bars?"

"Not that kind of bar," she giggled. "No alcohol. It's cool. The owners travel a lot. They go to individual, small tea farms in India and Vietnam and stuff, then order the farmers' leaves in bulk. Some teas are only around for a short time as a result, but they all have stories of where they're from and biographies of people who grew them. I have a punch card."

"Wow. Bet it's an amazing place to go out on a weekend."

"I do like to read there." She leaned on her hand. I reclined in my seat, relaxed. "You said you were a Virgo, right?"

"Yeah. You? Sorry, I forgot."

"Pisces." She smiled. "We're compatible signs."

"Guess that means we're fated to be good friends," I responded. "Course, I don't know much about star stuff. Think I'm gonna take Astronomy and Astrology next semester. Is it a hard class?"

She shrugged. "Sebs struggled, but I thought it was easy. I think it was the math that got him. There's a section in the bookstore if you maybe wanna look together?"

"Maybe another time," I commented. "Trying to save up a little. I don't get an allowance, I mean, Sam just spots me money when I ask, but I don't want to make a habit out of it."

"You're a really considerate person," she complimented.

"More like anxious about everything."

Another awkward fifteen minutes of stop-start conversations later, we parted, and I headed to the park for a couple of hours of Vitamin D.

I found a good spot for my bike and me on a grassy hill and laid right out in the sunlight. The sun only served to make me sleepier, and I drowsed for a bit, thinking of small stuff like what I was gonna write for my essay and which route to take home. Turns out sunny Sundays are perfect nap days. My daydreams wandered until I wasn't thinking of school or homework anymore, but about Simon again. Especially the way his lips felt.

He didn't pull away the first time we kissed, but he did push me off the second time. I didn't ruin things again last night, did I? I shouldn't have kissed him like that. Something just pulled me like a... like a...

Like a magnet too close to a fridge?

I needed to work on my metaphors before our first personal poem assignment was due.

I called it quits when my stomach rumbled and biked home. A ham sandwich and a box of mac and cheese later, I remembered my trig homework (composed chiefly of all the classwork I didn't finish the prior week). Unfortunately, I didn't get far before getting stuck. I could ask Amy for help, but last time she just got mad at a problem and went off about how they taught math differently now than when she was in school.

If only Cheryl was free to help me, I was 100% positive she'd whip through all of it in a

heartbeat. Or Simon. He'd be just as fast. If not a little more distracting.

Speaking of Cheryl—she rang my phone around 8 o'clock, surprising me out of my stupor. Usually, she sent a text ahead of time before calling.

"Yo, what's happening?" I said. "Everything okay?"

"C-Co," The hairs on my neck lifted—I think Cheryl was... crying? *"I went out today with the pack. We went to the North Slopes but I couldn't... I can't..."*

"Can't what?"

"I can't shift," she bawled. *"It wouldn't come."*

"Are you alone? Do you need a ride?"

"No, Hoff is with me, he's struggling, too."

"Fuck. Well, I'm here. It's not dark for a few more hours. Do you want to come over?"

"I don't know, I don't know."

My shifting thing wasn't getting contagious, was it?