

Bare Teeth

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As far as Eric Larsen could remember he'd never had a good night's sleep. It showed. He was twenty-three but looked considerably older: his skin the color and texture of weathered parchment, his teeth cracked and crooked from daydream-gnashing. His body was a structure bent out of shape, the rebar showing through the cracks in the concrete.

Lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, Eric owned up to himself with what he considered a proud and stoic sort of indifference. "Now, come on--go get 'em," he mumbled and turned to face the wall, uncomfortable with such upbeat power phrases. He let the broken nail of his index finger follow a trail in the off-white wallpaper. "There is," he said, this time louder, "poetic promise to existence." Even though this declaration made him feel even more uncomfortable, he held it as truth. It was a small pocket of warmth inside his chest: the notion of an aesthetically pleasing fate.

Tomorrow morning he had a job interview for a position as a junior copy editor for Rock Paper Scissors, an innovative media and advertising bureau, or so it had been claimed in the job advertisement.

Eric knew he wouldn't, couldn't sleep; he got out of bed, dressed in nothing but loose hanging boxer shorts, and walked to the kitchen. He ate an apple and lit a cigarette. The cigarette smoke lazied out the open kitchen window. He leaned on the window sill. The late evening summer breeze carried the neighborhood's manifold smells: the lingering trace of detergent from the cleaning trucks and their sweep of the farmer's market floor earlier this afternoon and the stench of piss from the alley next to the bakery. He flicked the cigarette out the window and poured himself a glass of milk.

While the sun set and the sky's tri-color display faded to a single cobalt blue, Eric sat by the table mentally cataloging answers and witty responses to probable interview questions. When the sun reappeared, he sauntered to the shower. The warm water sent chills along his spine.

The man in the suit behind the mahogany desk looked like a young Sylvester Stallone, Eric thought while fidgeting with the knot of his striped tie. He crossed his legs, a sensible pose if you want to project seriousness, he figured; and he hoped the effort to fix up his appearance had made him easier on the eyes: the combed and waxed hair, the not-too-baggy suit jacket, and the newly acquired and practiced smile that concealed the yellow brick road that was his teeth.

Go get 'em, he thought and tried to keep a straight posture in the uncomfortable chair.

"Why, Eric, should we at Rock Paper Scissors hire you?" asked Stallone, whose name, as indicated by a name plate on the desk, was Christopher, no last name. And Christopher, no last name, leaned back in his leather chair, looked straight at Eric with what Eric hoped was a professional power play, and not unabashed anthropological interest.

Eric cleared his throat. "Mr. Christopher, I'm a hard-working and loyal worker, and you'd be amiss not to hire me." This may have been a bit too formal. He hastened to add, "I think I can be the omni-tool, as it were, for your company. The scissors to your paper, when need be, and the paper to your rock when so required." He felt his cheeks heat and blush.

"You're alluding to the company name," Christopher said, a hint of a smile on his face. "Clever, clever. It says here," he continued, pointing at Eric's cover letter, "that you majored in English Lit.?"

Eric had prepared for this, said, “Yes, and language, one could or maybe even should argue, permeates every corner of our squared world; it feeds the very center, is the very center. Mastery of language grants access to all and everything.” This was not what he’d prepared to say. Shape up, he urged himself, but his head was a beehive, and all the bees were in a crazed honey buzz. He looked at Christopher, trying to figure out what the man’s broad smile meant, those straight white teeth glinting as if refracting the radiance of the sun. He’s got silver spoons down his throat, thought Eric. He shook his head lightly, focused on the now rapid movement of Christopher’s lips.

“Well,” Christopher said, “you know what—I know exactly what to do with you, center and all.” As he reached for the phone and dialed, the fingers of his free hand drummed the desk. “Jenny,” he said, “I have a new guy on the way. Yes. Yes. Not entirely? Ok, that’s fine. Yes, fine.” He placed the phone on the desk and put his hands behind his head. “And there we go,” he said.

And there we go what? Eric thought, still buzzing. “I’m hired?”

“Probationary employment,” said Christopher. “If we’re pleased, consider yourself a creative cog, as it were, in the machinery that is us.” He scribbled something in a notebook, tore off the page and got up. “Right now, Eric, I need you on-site downtown.” He put his hand on Eric’s shoulder and squeezed. “Some old-school marketing diffusion.” He let go of the grip and handed over the piece of paper. “Here’s where you go. Jenny’ll tell you what to do.”

Eric found the word diffusion fancy; he saw it as an invitation, like a secret password. He looked at the note, then at Christopher, and he offered his practiced smile.

Thirty minutes later, Eric parked his bicycle outside Chocolate, Chocolate, Chocolate, an upscale chocolaterie. Below the repeating brass letters hung a vinyl banner advertising a free chocolate tasting menu inside. A roll-up placed to the side of the entrance door urged: Explore the luxury of Belgian chocolate.

Eric locked his bicycle and opened the door. On entering, a small bell signaled his presence. He was greeted by a tall woman with long, lush copper hair. She was dressed in a fitted orange blouse and a gray plaid skirt, her pale freckled skin catapulting the green of her eyes to dizzying heights.

Eric followed the green up, up, his inner eye looping back and making him feel lightheaded.

“I’m Jenny,” the tall woman said, “and you’re Eric, right?” She presented a slender hand.

Eric received the hand like a rare and precious gift, silencing a sudden impulse to kiss it and bow. His palm was moist, and his handshake was lax. “Yes,” he said. He fronted his practiced smile—hide those teeth—hoping to charm, knowing he probably didn’t. “Mr. Christopher sent me.”

“You know why you’re here?”

“Not really. Something about diffusion?”

“Come with me,” Jenny said and turned away from Eric. She walked to the back of the store. A young man in a tight-fitted tee shirt accentuating his muscular torso stood behind the cash counter. He was putting pieces of chocolate on expensive looking silver dishes.

“Wait here,” Jenny said. She slipped past the counter and disappeared through an arched doorway.

The young man said nothing; he didn’t even bother to look up, handling the pieces of chocolate as if they were newly hatched baby birds.

“Looks good,” said Eric. “Tasty.”

The young man nodded, still focused on the chocolate.

Jenny returned. In her arms was a bolstered, off-white, rectangular costume. It had a circular hole at the top and two small slits at the bottom and at each side. In the middle of what was the front, written in cursive were the words: White Chocolate Bonanza!

Jenny handed Eric the costume. “Put this on,” she said and turned toward the counter, picking up a pile of glossy flyers, “and hand these out.”

Eric looked at the costume, then at the glossy flyers. “Hand them out?”

“Yes,” Jenny said. “Hand them out on the shopping street one block up. There’s a steady stream of people there.” She smiled.

Eric held the costume in front of himself. It was, he guessed, supposed to look like a white chocolate bar. It didn’t; it looked like a worn out mattress, and it reeked of sweat.

I can’t be expected to get inside this thing.

“If you want, you can change out of your clothes in the back before getting in,” Jenny said. “It can get warm in there.”

Eric wondered if Jenny had ever been inside the costume. “For how long?” he asked.

“Today and tomorrow,” she said. “From nine to three, with breaks.”

“But,” Eric said, “I applied for a junior position—”

“Yes, I know, I do, but we,” Jenny said and nodded in the direction of the young man, “need you to do this. You’ll be back at the office getting the hang of copy editing before too long. Right now, though, I need you in costume.”

Eric couldn’t make heads or tails of it all. Is she serious? Her green eyes distracted him.

The young man looked up, grimaced for a fraction of a second before planting a welcoming smile on his face.

“Good luck,” he said, “and thanks.”

After two hours inside the costume, the sun a pounding hammer, Eric’s entire body was covered in sweat. His face, sticking out of the circular hole at the top, had turned crimson. He’d realized from the get-go that it was nearly impossible to walk in the

costume without appearing comical. He'd walked the short stretch from the store to the main fare with a waddling gait, his shoes sticking out from the slits at the bottom, and his arms sticking out from the slits on the sides like surfaced row-boat oars.

He'd parked himself on the suggested shopping street, opting to stay parked, slouched at the spot. So far he'd managed to hand out five flyers, exclusively to older men and to women shuffling by with strollers. They'd been friendly enough, treating him with mild-mannered curiosity: "Young man, aren't you warm? Oh, so you're supposed to be a chocolate. Well, I say, there's chocolate to be had." Other passersby either detoured to avoid him or passed by dressed in silent derisiveness, thinking him, he felt with the force of acid jabs to his core, a sorry fool.

He stared at the reflection of himself in the display window across from where he stood, trying to come to terms with the near and far-reaching implications of the costume, when someone tapped him on the back.

"You a soggy cracker or what?"

Eric turned around. He strained to look composed, but he knew he looked like a person in a costume resembling a worn out mattress.

Two teenagers in caps, oversized hoodies, and fashionably trashy jeans giggled at him.

"Seriously, dude. What are you?" said the boy in the red hoodie.

"Yeah," said the boy in the green hoodie.

Eric stared at them through the silent waterfall of sweat from his forehead, blinked. They were eerily alike, save the different colors of their hoodies, and it freaked him out. Like clones, he thought. Their caps were the same, with curved visors at the same angle; their jeans were the same, with rips in the same places; their height and features were approximately the same, as were their voices: shrill shrieking little clone assholes!

"And what the fuck are you," said Eric, surprising himself, and surprising himself further when loudly declaring, "Get the fuck out of here!"

Green Hoodie backed off.

Red Hoodie poked the middle of Eric's costume. "Cool it, whitebread," he said. "Just asking."

Eric, lost to the sudden surge, the throb and the buzz inside his head, swiped at Red Hoodie, but the sheer chunkiness of the costume cut the motion in half. He missed and swiped air.

"Hey, fugly," Green Hoodie said and advanced toward Eric. "How about this?" He spat in Eric's face: a yellow glob like a wad of glue to Eric's cheek.

Red Hoodie laughed.

Eric swiped once more, now with the other hand, missing once more and losing his grip on the pile of flyers. They scattered on the sidewalk, resulting in another bout of shrill laughter from the same-same throats of Red Hoodie and Green Hoodie.

They ran away, shouting in tandem, "Peace out, whitebread!"

Eric tried to take chase but tripped and, unable to counter the fall, landed face down on the concrete. In an instant, everything turned black, and in that black space the warmth inside his chest gradually expanded and took the shape of a big, bright bird. The bird flapped its wings and sped off. Eric had no idea where to--its disappearance was a momentary flash, like lightning bursting from the ground and up.

When he came to, he felt as though his chest were an empty cage, the space between the ribs of his rib cage widened. He didn't know where he was, and he didn't know how much time had passed.

Jenny was crouched next to him. "You ok?" she said. She held a tooth in between her thumb and index finger. "What happened?"

The tooth, Eric thought, looked like a drop of stale honey, or some hard-shelled prehistoric critter. He strained to sit up. A group of people had gathered. They were all staring at him. They were all mashed together, a single mass of flesh: one mouth, one broad grin, and they could all, he concluded, go to wherever--the--fuck the big, bright bird had gone.

“I had a dream,” he said. He stared at Jenny, his eyes’ dormant fires now sparked, and he exposed his real smile, malign--the black space of his absent tooth a proud declaration. Then he spat in her face.