

Bronze Madrona

Norman's gray nose hairs looked like thick icicles. He sat in his white jaguar with the air conditioning on max. He inhaled slowly and swallowed his breath. Daniel walked around the corner from Gideon Street onto Main. Norman watched the young man spit onto the sidewalk and then pull his black hair back into a small pony tail. He was already 15 minutes late, though he walked like he was in no rush. Finally he made eye contact with Norman through the windshield and smiled. Norman held his breath in while Daniel climbed into the passenger seat.

"Norman?"

Norman nodded.

"Hi, I'm Richie."

Norman finally exhaled. "*Richie.*"

"Sorry I'm late. Had to walk from the Brewery." Daniel smiled. "Didn't want to break too much of a sweat."

Norman looked into his own eyes in the rear view mirror and then turned to Daniel and finally spoke. "Richie, I'm gay."

Daniel lifted his eyebrows and agreed with a kind smile. "Yeah. Ok".

"I'm not trying to make this odd I just wanted to let you know."

Daniel laughed through his nose.

"It'd be more odd if you weren't I think?"

The two sat silent and listened to the AC whir through the vents.

"Would you like to go somewhere?" Daniel asked.

"I think I'd just like to sit here, *Richie.*"

"Alright." Daniel looked around. "Never much traffic on this street."

Norman went to speak but didn't. Daniel tried to fill the silence. "Jaguar? I always wonder why a Jaguar instead of a Benz?"

"I made arrangements with Oscar. I know he usually takes the money but as long as you are aware."

"Mhm. You know, I can see why... a Jaguar. Who doesn't have a Benz, you know? Well, who that can afford it, I mean. Maybe you can show me how she feels?"

"I'd like to just sit here."

"Ok. Yeah, I don't know where we'd go anyways." Daniel smiled again and moved his hand to Norman's thigh. Norman looked down and blinked rapidly. Daniel pretended his fingers were legs and began walking them up Norman's pants towards his crotch.

Norman took Daniel's hand and gently moved it away. "I'd just like to talk."

"Sure."

"It's why I do this."

"Do what?"

Norman looked at him in a way that indicated he did not have time to entertain.

"Am I not your type?"

"I wouldn't say I have a type. I do this for other reasons."

Daniel held onto a sweetness in the swing of his delivery. "What would you like to talk about?" He wasn't getting it.

"I'd just like to be open."

Daniel moved his focus from one of Norman's eyes to the other grasping at a way to play things.

"Ok. Ask me anything."

Norman sighed. "Is *Richie* your real name?"

"What makes you..." Daniel pursed his lips. "No."

"You don't have to tell me. It's of no difference really. But see, it feels better doesn't it? Knowing we can be open."

"Whatever you like, Norman."

An older Asian man riding a bicycle with a big basket came into view in the passenger mirror. He and Norman watched in the mirror as the man stopped at a dumpster a few car lengths behind them and started picking through it, emptying the remnants of cans and bottles onto the sidewalk. Daniel ran his fingers over the woodgrain of the dash.

"I always wondered how deep this goes."

"I'm sorry?"

"The wood. It's so shiny it looks like marble or something."

"It's Bronze Madrona."

"I just always wonder how deep it is. Is it thin? Like just a..."

"Veneer?"

"Yeah. Or is it a thick piece of wood?"

"It's not a veneer."

"Sounds sophisticated... Bronze Madonna" Daniel grinned.

"It's Bronze Madro—"

A glass bottle fell out of the Asian man's hands and clanked against the concrete but did not break.

"I'm guessing you don't want me to smoke in here?"

"It's alright." Norman lowered the passenger window for him. He watched as Daniel lit his cigarette and focused on his mouth as he puckered his lips around the filter. The AC blew the smoke forcefully back into Daniel's face.

"Keeping it awfully cool in here, Norman."

Norman smiled just enough to pull at the corners of his mouth and turned the AC off. The sound of the air relenting seemed to diffuse the tension in the car altogether. Now Norman could hear the faint crackle of the cigarette burning when Daniel took a drag.

"So how long have you known?" Daniel asked.

"Known?"

"What you told me." The smoke from the cigarette crawled slowly behind the driver's seat like a feline in tall grass and settled behind Norman's seat amidst a pile of neatly coiled rope and unopened duct tape.

"How long have you been working for Oscar?"

"Bout three months I guess."

"Do you mind if I ask you why?"

"Well I've got to eat, Norman."

"You know what I mean."

Daniel pulled from his cigarette harder and his cheeks caved in around it. "The first three years I lived here I was booking a lot. Mostly commercial shit. Nothing that I would show friends back home but Jesus... the money was fucked up, Norman."

"Three years isn't so long."

"Well there is something about when you're booking. It just feels impossible that it would ever stop."

The bicycle tire squeaked against the brake louder and louder as the Asian man peddled closer to the car. The predictable tempo of this comforted Daniel. The man smiled in at them as he rode by, boasting only bright pink gums. Toothless other than two jagged K-9's. His eyes were as benevolent as someone who was about to give directions to a lost couple but his pupils contracted in an odd vertical manner taking the shape of fingernail clippings.

"You've got plenty of time to figure it out. You can't be older than what... 25?"

"I'm 23." Daniel said with the first bit of acid on his tongue. "Everyone transitions around this age anyways." Daniel flicked his cigarette aggressively out the window but the tip caught the frame and it bounced back onto his lap sending ash everywhere.

"Oh shit. Shit, I'm sorry."

Norman leaned over and grabbed the cigarette from between Daniel's legs. He casually brought it to

his own mouth, took a long drag and blew it in Daniel's face slowly. Then he leaned over Daniel and dropped it out of the passenger window. He looked down at Daniel's lap and brushed away the ashes. His nails were surprisingly long and were catching on the fabric of his pants like a cat's on the side of a couch. He left his hand lingering on Daniel's hip. Daniel put his hand on top of Norman's and pulled it against him tighter. Then put his hand on Norman's crotch.

"You feel nice." Daniel said.

Norman watched his hand as Daniel started massaging the length of him.

"You sure you just want to talk?" Daniel whispered and he leaned over and kissed Norman. The dem on his breath was still burning. Daniel unbuttoned Norman's pants and stuck his hand down them.

"I won't come." Norman said.

"What do you want me to do?" Daniel rubbed harder. "Tell me what you want me to do."

Then a loud thud shook the back bumper of the Jaguar.

"What the fuck." Daniel jumped back and the two watched a white Jaguar of the same make and model speed off down the street.

Norman buckled his pants and got out. Daniel leaned over the back seat and out of his periphery saw the rope and tape. He looked back up at Norman making eye contact through the glass of the back window. Norman lifted a taxidermy animal of some kind, still attached to its mount, up from behind the car.

"What the fuck?" Daniel said to the empty car. He couldn't make out what it was but it looked somewhere in between the size of a dog or a cat.

Norman started to walk around the back of the car towards Daniel's door. He held it at eye level with Daniel who was inching away from the window and Norman bent down.

"Can you explain this?" Norman asked.

"What? No. What do you mean?"

"Take it."

"What? Why?"

Norman pushed the animal through the open window and Daniel took it. It barely fit through and the fur was getting caught in the window frame. Now Daniel was able to see it was a stuffed wildcat of some sort. He turned back to Norman who was walking around the back and studying the bumper as he passed it. When he crawled back into the car Daniel's hands were shaking and a thin veneer of blood had gathered on the oversized fangs of the animal.

"Here, let me see it." Norman said and took it back. He held it against the steering wheel. The animal's eyes were opened wide and its mouth snarled as if it had been killed in the moment it was attacking something. The wood of the taxidermy mount matched the Bronze Madrona of the car perfectly. A drop of blood fell from the fang onto Norman's white slacks.

"Hey, what the fuck, Norman." Daniel said. Both of the men looked at each other and then looked around the car to see if anyone was around. Everything was still. Norman brought it back up and toward Daniel causing him to recoil towards his window and then placed it in the backseat.

"What are you doing? Why do you want that in your car?"

"I may need it for insurance purposes."

"Someone just threw a dead cat into the back of your car."

"You make it sound like it just died."

"Does it make a fucking difference, Norman?"

"Less wanton, I suppose."

"We are in downtown Los Angeles and a fucking mountain lion just flew into your car, man?"

"I'd say it's more the size of a Bobcat."

"Well it's dead and it's fucking bleeding. What sense does that make?"

Norman looked in the rear view mirror and around at the sidewalk. "You shouldn't walk home. I can take you."

Daniel looked back and the animal's eyes were pointed straight at him. "I swear to Christ the pupils on that thing just dilated, man."

Norman grinned. "I think you're getting carried away, *Richie*."

The blood from the fangs was dripping on the tan leather. Daniel looked back at the rope and tape.

"Hey, I think I'm just gonna walk, Norman."

"It's getting dark. I'll take you."

Norman put the car into gear and began driving down Main.

"You live in the Brewery apartment lofts?"

"Why do you say that?"

"You mentioned it earlier. It's not the first time I've taken one of Oscar's boys back there." Norman looked over at Daniel. "Relax."

The waning blue of the evening made the black power lines thinly sliced scratch marks in the sky. The pink bougainvillea seemed to pounce out at Daniel from the twilight shadows like 3D illustrations. Daniel rubbed his eyes to refocus as they passed each empty business lot. All resigned till the morning.

"It's up on the right just another block." Daniel said.

Norman smiled. "I know."

Daniel realized he had lost his cool. "I'm sorry, I know this sort of ruined our time together. I hope you'll..."

"I won't say anything to Oscar."

Daniel took a deep breath and rubbed the woodgrain under his window.

"Hey Norman, I have a question for you."

"Ask me anything."

"Why did you say you wouldn't come?"

Norman tightened his ten and two grip on the steering wheel. "I took care of myself before I came to meet you."

"Why?"

"Perhaps I'm here to give *you* something instead."

Norman pulled up to the brewery apartment entrance. The Jaguar was exquisitely quiet as it crawled to rest under the street lamp that was flickering to wake itself for the night.

"Well if next time you want to..."

"I don't see anybody more than once."

"What? Why? I mean, you don't want to get to know..."

"I do this for these moments. These initial moments. As ephemeral as they may be, there is a, well I wouldn't call it magic, but there is something about the moments in between the perfunctory and what comes next."

"Did we get there? To what comes next? I mean, do you think we would have if *that* didn't happen?"

"Maybe *that* is what got us there."

Daniel stared back at the cat and then back to Norman, unsure if he should leave yet and asked, "That's it then?"

Norman ran his finger from Daniel's sideburns down his jawline. "Well, have you told me exactly what it is I want to know?"

"I'm not sure I follow."

Norman rested his finger on Daniel's mouth and pulled it down so the glossy wetness of his lower lip was exposed. "You know the rest of what's inside of us looks just like this."

Daniel watched Norman study his mouth and move his finger across the inside of his lip.

"*Richie*. Have you felt vulnerable? Like I have?"

Daniel couldn't find his breath to answer.

Then the wind from a passing car shook them in their place. They looked up to see it was the White

Jaguar again. Norman watched, unaffected as it sped away into obscurity.

"That was the same fucking car as before, Norman."

"You're going to leave a dent in the Madrona if you don't relax."

Daniel relaxed his thumb.

Norman sighed. "I can always tell."

"Tell what?"

"Who's acting."

"What do you... Was I not..."

"It's fine. It's of no difference really... your natural predilection."

"Well, for what it's worth, it wasn't hard for me to..."

"It's ok."

Daniel got out of the car. He leaned back down and rested his elbows on the open window. He tried not to stare at the blotch of blood on Norman's white pants.

"Hey, Norman... my name... it's actually..."

"It's of no difference."

Daniel glanced at the animal once more and sighed. "Well maybe I'll see you around sometime, Norman."

"Stranger things have happened." Norman smiled just enough to pull at the corners of his mouth.

"Goodnight, Daniel."

The small stamp of blood on the bumper grew smaller and smaller as the white Jaguar crept away into obscurity, barely making a sound.

-Cookie