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## Derek

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DEREK

Keith Meatto

Sharon leans over in bed and invites me to karaoke for her engagement party. It's a bad idea, but I can never say no. When I agree she stays for another hour before she goes back uptown to Richard.

I get to Sing Time the next night. The crowd is frat boys, Asian girls and theater kids. There's a monitor over the bar and on the video a guy and a girl tumble and tousle each other's hair. The lyrics run along the screen, but everyone already knows the words: *Cheer up, Sleepy Jean. Oh, what can it be?*

I leave the daydream believers and homecoming queens and go to Room Six. Richard hugs me as if it's been years, not days. Sharon smiles but stays on the bench. They're both drunk. Nobody else is here. Some party. Richard presses a button on the wall. A waiter appears in 1.2 seconds. Richard says something in Japanese and in 3.2 seconds the guy returns with two beers and a Riesling.

Richard picks a song from when we were kids, when he first claimed Sharon. He sings like a prince. Never mind that he helped turned the global economy into a burning pile of slag. With that voice, I'd marry him.

Then Sharon takes the mike and says to me in a slurry voice: This one's for you. For a second my heart tightens. But when the music starts, it's only that song from the musical about the dictator's wife. The song sucks; it's all sentiment and syncopation and strings. Still, when Sharon hits the chorus, I shiver and wonder why she ever went to law school. After the song, Sharon blows kisses and tosses an invisible bouquet. Then she passes me the mike. I remind her I can't sing.

Who cares? Richard says. We're all drunk. We're all friends.

Every song in the book seems wrong. Finally, I see a tune that's not about love with an easy melody. My voice is too soft, then too loud, but never on key. The whole time Sharon and Richard watch me like a disabled kid's parents. I stumble through

two verses before I put down the microphone. We should have jousted. The music churns along for a while. Then Sharon takes the mic and finishes the song.

Richard suggests another round. I say I need to go. I have first period tomorrow. Emily Dickinson.

Stay, Sharon says. You can teach that in your sleep.

Nobody says anything for a while. Then Richard puts his hand on my shoulder.

Look, he says. Sharon told me.

The air leaves my lungs. Music from the next booth bleeds through the walls.

Let's just hang, he says. It doesn't matter anymore.

Then he pushes the wall button. The waiter appears right away, pad in hand.

Three more, Sharon says, and her voice squeaks.

Two, I say. For the bride and groom.

Then I bow to them both, give the waiter a twenty and go out into the night.