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I, Lance

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DeYoung: I, Lance

I, LANCE

Jason DeYoung

When in doubt, blame your country.

This is what I've learned by sitting in the hospital with my neighbor. Government is the solution to the problem of government. We're all unhappy. I don't know how we're not all weeping constantly. One simple emotion is not enough. Or is it too much? I'm totally mixed up.

Why I stay here, I don't really know. I had woken to the sound of knocking on my door a week ago. My neighbor, Mave, a tall brunette with magnificently full hips, was crying on my doorstep. Her head ringed with a halo. "I don't know what I to do," she wept over my welcome mat.

I don't know what I to do—this was my immediate thought, as well.

She walked in without my asking her.

This was the opening to a fantasy I'd had many times about my neighbor, but she was never weeping and sporting a potent Christian symbol, which I'd always assumed to be apocryphal at best, but complete horseshit in truth. Truth is inevitably the worst—it will always trump fantasy.

"Can I have some coffee?" she said, teary-eyed as she plopped down at my kitchen table.

She was going through something like tragedy. That's the only way to explain her behavior, I later realized. We'd never said more than a dozen words to one another in the year and half I'd lived in the house next to hers, and those words had never been about more than the weather and the plants we were growing in our yards. I grew vines; she grew flowers. She'd once asked for a clipping of my purple sweet potato vine, but she had never gotten it.

"I don't know where it came from," Mave said, exhausted, her hands up in the air, waving about her head.

As a kid, we were told in church that if you got in a dry, dark closet and dragged a comb through your hair, you could see a

halo of static electricity form over your head. If you had a mirror in there with you, that is. I told this to Mave.

She blinked at me. Her halo slumped around her brow. What she thought I would do for her, I didn't know. For the first time in my life I felt I had lost touch with reality, as if it had died. And I wondered why she didn't go over to the Fishers' (her neighbors on the east side). The Fishers were family people, stable, wealthy, Republican. They would have just eaten up a woman with a halo.

Put the possibility of death or tragedy into any situation and it will speed things right along; it will make everything a little more real. That's how it goes on television, and I suppose it holds up in life, too.

Mave is dying, or that's how it seems. The halo grows stronger—her body grows weaker. On that morning she came to my door, the halo was a faint golden-yellow ring; now it's closer to the color of brass, as if blood has mixed in with the golden-yellow. Her rounded face has gone angular, her eye sockets have darkened, and veins have emerged on her hands as the skin tightens. I love her now.

I hold her hand, and we watch cable news because that is what she wants.

Sometimes I lie in the hospital bed with her and feel the heat coming off the halo. And hourly we watch tragedy and mayhem unfold. Weird accidents, arrests for victimless crimes, brown citizens suffering, poor people disenfranchised, one group slaughtering another group—it's endless. I have to get out of the bed when the halo starts to make me sweat, or when the nurse comes in and says that I shouldn't be in the bed with such a sick woman.

I wonder why a reporter has not shown up to interview Mave. There has to be at least one loose-lipped nurse here ready to ride some coattails to a few minutes of fame. I imagine this chatty nurse on the cable news telling how Mave is just the sweetest person, "a real angel." That would be the tag—a real angel.

But I shouldn't distrust people so.

Take the blind flower salesman in the basement of the hospital, for instance. He trusts everyone who buys flowers from him. "Do you ever get cheated?" I ask him.

"Nope," he says angrily.

How does he know? I don't ask this. For some reason I believe him, or want to.

"You want a handjob?" Mave whispers to me one night when the news starts to repeat. The halo is so hot now I can only be in bed with her for a few minutes. I tell her no thanks, for fear of exhausting her further, and then she asks me if I'll kiss her mouth, and I do so and she holds me there, the halo's heat scorching my brow.

I have a vague sense of reality—like there's a ghost of it eluding me around corners. It's a new sensation or paranoia. I'm a thirty-three-year-old male, with a college degree I don't use and a slowly forming Jesus-Christ complex. You know he was thirty-three when he died?

Bombs go off in the East, heads are cut off on the Dark Continent, some mother in the South has hidden her child's prosthetic arms, and the cops found the child eating from the pet's dish. In the "For Your Health" segment, the newscaster limns a new method for dissolving your wrinkles with a mild acid. How did we get so twisted in our pursuits?

The halo consumes Mave. I want to switch off the television and make love to her. But everything is too hot. Mave wishes to be touched at all times. She weeps in self-pity when the television is off.

"I want make love to a woman with a halo," I tell the blind flower salesman in the hospital basement.

"Of course you do," he says, as I give him my money.

"And you never get cheated?" I ask again. I'm not sure if he knows it's me asking again or not.

"No, I never get cheated."

“How’s that?”

“I see what you don’t.”

This is too easy, too prophetic sounding, and, because I’ve watched too much cable news recently, I can no longer accept prophetic—I want fast, clear, hard, concrete answers.

“Just because my eyes don’t work doesn’t mean that I can’t sense when someone is nervous or lying or giving off a smell—most folks will give off a smell when things are abnormal. But you’re a good boy. You’re not gonna cheat me.”

It is the power of suggestion that keeps him from being cheated. How could anyone smell anything over the stacks of flowers he sits between? (I wish I could say for irony’s purpose that these flowers are amazingly beautiful, that the blind man in the hospital basement sells the best-looking flowers I’ve ever seen. His flowers are wilting. He is a smiling blind man among dying flowers.)

All things are a little harder in the hospital.

I go to the hospital chapel and ask the minister to come with me back to Mave’s room.

When we get there, Mave is standing in her gown in front of the television, doing the exercises on the “For Your Health” segment.

The minister comes in and stares at Mave. He tries very hard not to balk in astonishment. The halo has turned almost completely red: its dark light looms over Mave’s angular face, and it highlights her skull. Mave stretches and then lunges, following the television exercise leader’s direction. “This will improve the circulation in your upper body,” the television says.

It’s pretty easy to understand Mave’s addiction to television: it’s a reality for her as this unbelievable thing is happening to her. A halo seems to be draining her of life.

I still don’t understand why I’m staying here, watching her wither, wanting to love her.

The minister can’t do anything for Mave, as I’ve suspected. He sits and talks. He prays before he leaves. He asks me to make her as happy as I can.

DeYoung: I, Lance

"I don't really know her," I whisper to him in the hallway.

"What?"

"She's my next-door neighbor, but we were never really all that close until the halo."

He nods.

"I don't know what I'm doing here. Why I won't just go home. My job has fired me."

"You're drawn to her?"

"Yes."

"It's not about you," he says.

"But it is."

"Are you dying?"

"We all are."

He looks cross at me for a moment and then regains his composure: "You are not dying in the immediate sense. You brought her in?"

"Yes, she came to my doorstep. It took some time to convince her to come to the hospital. She was afraid—she begged me not to leave her."

"Does she have any family?"

"Not here. Not in town, I mean."

I walk back into Mave's room. She is in bed.

"Lance! You've come to see me!"

My name is not Lance. I don't know who Lance is. In the short amount of time while I was out in the hallway, her mind has started to short circuit. She is grinning. It's a grin of total insanity, which can also be interpreted as a smile of utter and complete happiness. The newscaster announces that in South America the US government is raiding and destroying coca farms, and coming up this hour there will be an update on a dead popstar's murder and its possible connection to the State Department. It's all very titillating.

Without further hesitation or thought, I accept that I am Lance.

“Yes, I’ve come to see you. I’m sorry I’ve been gone so long,” I say, and I’ve never seen Mave so happy. The halo begins to pulse.

I become Lance. Mave is still Mave, but a different version of Mave: a younger version.

Lance is an old fiancé, a man she left.

“Do you still love me, Lance, after all I did?”

“Yes, I love you. I love you,” I, Lance, say to her while petting her hand. The halo burns red-glory.

I spend the night loving her, and she loving me. From the wall-mounted television, the newscasters look down upon us.

I go for more flowers the next morning. The ones I bought the previous day have all but turned brown. Fresh flowers make Mave happy.

When I arrive in the basement, there is a woman tending the flower stand.

“Where’s the other guy?”

“Are you the guy who was stealing from him?”

“No.”

The woman stares at me. I, Lance, former customer: I look suspicious to her.

“Well, I fired him.”

I don’t stick around to ask any more questions. The ghost of reality that has been causing me paranoia and doubt has finally caught up to me, and it has gained corporeality. I rush back upstairs.

As I enter, Mave turns to look at me. She doesn’t smile. “Where’d you take Lance?”

The halo is as brown as a full tick.

Mave’s lips are curling back on her mouth.

I can hear the clicking of her IV machine.

The television news endlessly drones. Over and over we are told who is important and who is not.

DeYoung: I, Lance

"I am Lance."

"No, sweetie. I don't know who you are. But you're not my Lance," she said. "But don't worry. He'll be along, I suppose. We're going to get married. Can you believe it?"

Everything began to speed up after that. Her miracle, her halo, consumed her, and I wake one morning and she is dead. The halo has blinked off.

Inside the television, a man tells me that another series of beheadings has occurred in the Congo, that bees the government genetically modified to produce more honey are now coming after me (us), that for our health we should eat more and then we should eat less, for our protection we should stay indoors, for our livelihoods we should drive with our windows up and our doors locked, for our sanity we should stay off our porches, for our appearances we should bathe in acid, for our fears we should be on the lookout, because we are living in terrible times, when your neighbor might be your worst enemy.

I turn the fucking thing off.

In the screen's reflection Mave and I are cradled in the hospital room. Her body and I have entered some alien, ore-colored universe awash in peace. We are two people isolated. And all I think about is how sad, how terribly sad I am that she has died. And it is the least confusing thing I've felt in months.