

PANDA, PENIS, EYEBALL

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The first three weeks are a shit-crock of clanging lockers, sloppy-joe lunches, mildewed showers and dried-up barf outside the art-room steps and then one day, like a movie shot that brings the hero into focus, you get a load of Val Montero. Val Montero has been moved to the desk in front of you by Mr. Dooley (aka Doodad), the prick teacher of AP American Lit. For the next fifty minutes of Edgar Allan Poe rapping, tapping, and crapping on his chamber door, you ponder the wonders of the universe before you: the clipped line where Val Montero's brown hair ends and his tan neck begins, and where his tan neck ends and his faded red t-shirt begins, and where his faded red t-shirt clings to the knobs of his spine like saran wrap on a snake. But spines are dangerous. Spines are tricky. Spines make you think of your mother hunched over in the bathtub.

You do your research: Val Montero lives at 501 Deseado, an address as remote from your trashed-out apartment block as you can get and still be in Sacramento School District #2. Also: Val Montero is president of the Spanish Club. (You transfer out of French class—*Au revoir!*—and into Spanish. *Hola!*) Also: he is equipment manager for the basketball team. (Go Monarchs! Not that you've ever been to a single fucking game.) You join Spanish Club just in time to forge your father's signature on a permission slip for an outing to the Spanish Folk Art

Museum, where you latch onto Val in front of a Guatemalan Ceremonial Tzute and dig for more info. His parents are divorced, he lives with his mother, and his mother teaches French Literature at the U. (*Mon dieu*, should you transfer back?) You tell him your mother's dead, hoping to milk even a bathtub suicide for sympathy, hoping his lush brown lashes and big sable eyes will swallow you whole with sadness and regret, but you get only the Blank Stare. You've seen it before: kids who can't imagine a universe where Mom would *adios*-herself into oblivion.

That Friday night: since the-man-who-would-be-dad doesn't notice anymore, you leave at 10pm for the bus stop at Mountainview Parkway and Dillman where you stand with all the other queers and maniacs until the bus lumbers up and you pay your fare and watch out the window as the bodegas and bail-bond shacks and crack houses and Catholic churches change into boutiques and florists and bookstores and sushi bars. You walk the six blocks to 501 Deseado and note its white stucco, its red-tile roof, its million-year-old cottonwood, its wrought iron railing around its second-floor balcony, where *les* French *fenêtres* are open and a white curtain billows out and sucks back in like the whole place is breathing. Behind the curtain, a flickering light, maybe a TV, maybe Val's lovely mom? Reading Proust by the light of the tube? You stroll past the house and turn around and come back and this time you take the flagstone walk around the side, not too slow, not too fast, and there's the back door open, the handle on the screen almost speaking out loud, *Try me* and whaddyaknow—we must be expecting Baby Boy Val home soon—you are inside.

Kitchen dim. One tiny light over the sink. Smell of singed beef and Dawn detergent. Dishwasher humming. Refrigerator humming. TV upstairs humming. You open a drawer. Bread knives, carving knives, paring knives. Blades. Blades are dangerous. There wasn't any water in the bathtub, only blood. Reddish black and plentiful. The last thing you remember

saying to her—*I hate you.*

You shut the drawer and move down the hall to the living room. Streetlamp through the window glitters on the mantel. Glass figurines like carved air. *She* would love this. Parrots, tigers, a camel, a whale. A panda bear no bigger than a baby's hand, prisms light from the street onto your palm. You stuff the panda in your pocket and sit on the couch. You whisper *Hi, Val.*

Mr. Dooley makes the fatal mistake of turning his back to the class to write *The Scarlet Letter* and *Nathaniel Hawthorne* on the board. Sixteen kids simultaneously whip out their smartphones and one or two dweebs pass notes. Val's neck vein pulses sexily not inches from your nose. He doesn't know you were in his house. He doesn't know you walked out as slowly as you walked in and watched from the corner until his little red VW chugged up and he slammed out of the car and into the house. A bubbled square of yellow bathroom light beamed for a moment from the second floor. Then nothing. You got back on the bus and sat among the late-shift crazies and the crack-addled ladies of the night, home again to the man-who-would-be-dad and his silent smoking in the dark. *Miss me, Pop?*

After fifty minutes of Dimmsdale v. Prynne, you try to shadow Val into the hall but Mr. Dooley stops you. Clicks a pen and clears his throat while the room empties. Starts in on some hoo-ya-ya about your *excellent* work. Your essay on *The Red Badge of Courage* was something something something. Val will be halfway to sixth period before you get the hell away. You try to focus on Doodad's words. You hear *essay contest* but you're pretty sure he's looking at your boobs. You only wore this top to see if the-man-who-would-be-dad would make you change. You hear *scholarship*, you hear *talent*, you hear *promising*, and you try to keep your lunch down when Doodad

puts one of his hot paws on your shoulder.

You do your research: Mr. Grant Dooley lives at 4937 Altamira Drive. That's the easy part. Otherwise, Grant Dooley is difficult to decipher. You descend into the netherworld of dirt, gossip, and grapevine—girls from even worse apartment blocks than yours, girls who flunk *gym*, girls who wear black lipstick, girls who eat M&Ms and Quaaludes for lunch, girls who suck cigarettes and say: *Doodad? Divorced. Drinks. Disgusting.* He touched me, you say, squirming like you just got slimed. *Oh yeah*, they shrug. *He's pervier than a homo wiener dog in heat.*

Altamira Drive is a toxic, apocalyptic wasteland of scorched yards, dying elms, cracked asphalt and crumbling brick abodes, some with chain link fences choked with Safeway bags, McDonald's cups, wind-blown straws, and condoms. You try the bell at Doodad's door, 4937, praying out loud he is not home in the middle of a Saturday with the sun blazing down like a nuclear holocaust, but prepared nonetheless with stupid questions about the so-called essay contest just in case. No answer. You find the paint-blistered gate at one side of the house. The hinges give way when you open it and the whole rotted contraction clatters to the ground.

On Doodad's sad little patio there's an aging barbeque grill, once painted red, now looking like a stiff breeze would collapse its atoms into a mound of rusty dust. The same color that still clings to your bathtub at home, you can't get it out. Couldn't she have done it somewhere else? Well, she liked to drink in the bathtub, she liked to snort in the bathtub, so maybe she liked dying in the bathtub too. Or maybe she wanted to make sure *you* would find her.

You try the back door. Locked, of course, along with every snapped-tight blinded window. But. Crouched there in the weeds you find a two-foot stone carving of a raven. Oh, Edgar, you laudanum-loving loony you, who are you kidding? You rock one corner back and there's the key. Dooley Dooley

Dooley—deception—not your strong suit.

The kitchen smells like week-old trash and vodka and you feel like calling out *Mom! I'm home!* Computer on the table and you touch the mouse. The screen scratches on with a grainy shall-we-say *blow-up* of a girl's mouth wrapped around a man's dick. Oh, Doodad, couldn't you surprise me? No wonder Mrs. Doodad left, and stripped the place to the floorboards, given the hollow sound of the hallway and the state of the living room: bare except for a beige recliner with shoe dirt on the footrest and hair dirt on the headrest. The whole sad affair faces an entertainment center containing no entertainment. No TV, no video devices, no speakers, no CDs, just a limp length of Comcast cable coming out of the wall and hanging there like a—oh, never mind. One ashtray holding a key ring, no keys, just a charm, which is in the shape of—*yawn*—a penis. A penis *inside a tube*. Turn it one way and a yellow condom rolls up and over. Turn it the other and it rolls back down. Not cute, Dooley, but *she* would like it. You put it in your pocket, kick the recliner, and leave.

You go early to a Monarchs basketball game. Val's pre-game grub-work—lugging duffel bags and fetching water bottles—is beneath him, but every move he makes makes you happy. He hands a clipboard to a coach like the damn thing held commandments. You sit through the first half of the game watching various cheerleaders show their crotches and various Monarchs show their inability to shoot, dribble, pass, rebound, or even run. You watch Val Montero at the timer's table, making little pencil marks in a ring binder every time something almost happens but doesn't.

At halftime you watch a man handsome enough to be a model in a Maserati ad go over to Val and hug him, shake his hand, hug him, and talk talk talk, touching him, laughing, mock-punching him, hugging him. You realize this is Val

Montero's father.

You do your research: The man has the heartstoppingly unbelievable name of Maximilian Emiliano Montero. He lives at 2828 Rio Linda Drive, a neighborhood for all practical purposes on Neptune. He is an ophthalmologist. Bits of his life drop from Google like gumballs from a glass globe: Sacramento's Bitchin' Bachelors, Sacramento's Top Docs, Sacramento's Most Macho. Hell, could be Sacramento's Most Spectacular Hunk of Humankind, for all the ink the guy gets.

Saturday night: you take money from TMWWBD's wallet and hail a cab on Mountainview Parkway. You've never hailed a cab before. The ride is long, ditching the city and climbing S-curves through dusk-blackened pines, far-off lights sparkling behind you like crystal meth on a mink coat. The cab crests a hill and passes under a fake-looking archway: LA ENCANTADA, meaning *we're rich*. You say, *Let me out here*. You give the cabbie all your money and wonder how you'll get home.

The air is different here, more expensive, drenched in the puff and wheeze of plants too delicate to grow below the poverty line. You find Rio Linda, where even Helen Keller could tell there's a party on. You smell cigarettes and pot from four houses down, and the techno beat vibrates the blacktop like there's a DJ in the sewer. Jags and Saabs clog the street, parked odd-angled on the shoulders where there is no curb. 2828, all three glass-fronted floors of it, shimmers like a freshly-landed UFO. A few couples have spilled onto the porch, or whatever you call it on a house like this, and it feels like the deck of a cruise ship. A Barbie in a blue dress says *Hi*, frowns at you, and presses her boobs back into the bald guy next to her, caressing the chain tattoo around his neck.

Inside. To your left, the living room, and its bobbing amoeboid mass of mega-wealth. A few people dance in that discombobulated pseudo-disco-jerk-shit that only rich people get away with. *Mom*, you want to say, *this is a party*. To your right,

stairs covered in white carpet thicker than a Kotex superpad. On the first landing, five closed doors. Next to door number one is a tiny table with a tiny pronged stand holding a tiny round sculpture of an eyeball shooting red veins out the back of the blue pupil like flame off a dragster. *She* had blue eyes. You put it in your pocket and climb the next flight up.

Two doors, one partly open, so you go in. Black-and-white twilight, dense with presence, like planets bending space. Movement on a bed. A crack of light from a bathroom door. Your eyes adjust and you see a spine. Female. Undulating upward like a cobra. She sits astride a man—big legs, even the *hairs* are big—rocking. You watch. The movie-sex lighting makes you feel you're meant to watch. Quick-breath in-and-outs, then gasps, then snorts, then sighs that slide into groans, then lower into growls. The spine speaks to you, teases you, reminds you of that night. Even dead, she didn't fall back, she hunched over, every vertebra accusing you. You hadn't meant you *hated* her exactly; you just wanted something that day. Money? Mothering? Breakfast?

The spine on the bed whips back a little, then arches forward, bridging the beginning and the end. He moans, she giggles, and it's over. The spine tilts left and falls onto the bed. Maximilian Emiliano Montero props up on his elbows and starts to say something, but he sees you instead.

He doesn't look mad, just woozy, puzzled, bamboozled. Who are *you*? he asks.

You weren't prepared even for this low-level probe. Finally you say: A friend of Val's.

Val is here? Max sits up, swings his legs over, bunches the sheet into his lap. Spine Girl sits up too and skooches back and hugs a pillow to herself.

You stand there. Max unbuckles all six feet two or three of his bitchin' bachelor bod. Wait a minute, he says, winding the sheet around his waist. He pads across the white carpet and grabs your arm like he might snap it off.

Did you just walk in here? Into my house?

You look at him: Val's eyes, Val's ready-to-kiss mouth, Val's brown hair with bonus sideburn silver.

Sit down. He drags you to the edge of the bed and you sit. He switches hands on the sheet, takes a phone off the dresser, and thumb-dials 911. He wants to report an intruder. You are an intruder.

Spine Girl drops the pillow, not embarrassed—why would she be with those tits?—and slut-walks her back-lit silhouette to the bathroom. You wonder if she will sit her lovely spine in the tub.

Max touches the base of a dresser lamp. Instant gold light, as if he did it with his thoughts. You're not going anywhere, he says.

Where would you want to go? You've never sat on a bed this nice. You've never felt thread-count this high, smelled perfume this exotic, or hung out with a Maserati model with a sheet around his waist.

You know my son? he asks.

You've seen cop shows. Better not to speak.

What's your name? Where do you live?

Hasn't Max ever heard of Miranda?

Okay. Let's just wait for the cops to take you home.

Yes, let's just wait. And hope they will storm up the stairs like they did that night, a whole squadful in those creaking belts and laced boots and dumb hats and the little shoulder-mounted, static-squawking boxes they talk into; hope this time they will handcuff you, question you, get it all on tape. After all, you have the panda and the penis and the eyeball in your pocket. You have a lot to say, a story to tell, details, memories, important shit, like the time she tried it with pills and said it was your fault.

Don't go anywhere, he says. He trots to the bathroom, trailing sheet.

You lie back and bury your face in the still-hot bed and

the smell of sex, the smell of money, the smell of getting what you want. You hug Spine Girl's pillow to your chest and wait for the sound of the squad on the stairs. Wait for the circle of blue uniforms to surround you. Wait for them to see you, stop you, hold you down, and at last to know you are guilty.