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LOVE WITH BITE

THE MEMORY IS WEDGED in my mind so vividly I can neither forget or ignore it, like a piece of gristle forever lodged between my teeth. It begins with me standing at the kitchen counter, dipping barbeque flavored chips into a vat of French onion dip, listening to my mom's hurried footsteps thump around the house as she gets ready for work. A chair scrapes against the floor, she mutters a muffled curse, keys clink as she grabs them from the table in the hall. I am mere seconds away from freedom.

The steps pause. Get louder. Stop. I can feel her looking at me from the doorway. I stare down at my feet. There's a litter of chip shrapnel on the floor beneath me. When I'm done I'll have to remember to crush the crumbs until they're too

small to be identified and kick them under the cabinets.

“There’s some of those frozen enchiladas you like in the freezer, Sammy. And a twenty on the fridge if you want pizza instead.”

I turn and force my lips together into a tight smile although I know these are not the words she wants to say. My dinner options are not news, and haven’t been since several months ago when my dad was given the option between taking a new position with a major pay cut or unemployment. He took the pay cut, hoping that his loyalty to the company he’d been with for almost twenty years would eventually pay off. It wouldn’t. They’d fire him the week before they owed him a pension and hire some kid just out of school to replace him for half the pay. In the meantime, my mom had returned to nursing, working several nightshifts a week to help pick up the slack. “Okay, thanks.”

“You have any plans for tonight?”

“Not really. Just gonna hang out.”

“I hope you won’t be too lonely.”

We were engaging in what I had come to recognize as the delicate dance between teen-ager and teen-parent that prevented either side from shouting. I could give her a break, tell her what she wanted to know without making her work so hard for it, but that wouldn’t really be fair to all the other teen-parents, would it?

“I’ll probably meet up with Patrick”

“Here?”

The question is fired too fast, her voice too loud, tone too sharp. It makes something under my skin bristle, makes me want to bare my teeth and stomp my feet. I swallow my reaction. This whole thing will be over much quicker if I just give her what she wants.

“Yeah, here.”

“Good. You know I don’t want you going over to his house. It’s nothing against Patrick, just . . .”

“Yeah, I know.”

Mom hasn’t wanted me over at Patrick’s since the whole neighborhood found out his younger brother was a sociopath after the eight-year-old got expelled for peeing on the school principal. I’ve known that he’s a psycho freak for years. The damn kid picks up a knife and chases anyone who yells at him, laughs at him, or tries to discipline him. I’d been on the sharp end of the chase several times before,

although why Patrick's parents don't just lock the knives up is beyond me. I guess they think it's funny or something. I don't think they find it so funny now that the secret is out, neighbors staring at them wide eyed in horror every time they leave the house. Personally, I think pissing on the principal is the first thing that kid has done that makes any sense. I had the same principal in elementary school. The guy was a total prick. I'm a little jealous that I didn't think to piss on him first, though I'd never admit it.

Mom stares at me a moment longer, like she's trying to read what I'm not telling her, then says, "Okay, well, try to keep it down, 'cause, well, you know."

"Yeah. I do."

I can tell that she wants to hug me, so I scoop a heaping glob of dip onto a chip and shove it into my mouth, dribbling some French onion down the front of my shirt in the process.

"Have a good day, honey. I'll see you tomorrow. Love you."

"Yeah, you too."

Her steps fade, the door opens and closes, the bolt clicks shut in the lock and I am alone. Finally. What she doesn't know is that I don't want to go over to Patrick's for my own reasons. Namely, his sister, Tami. Almost every week for more than the last three years, except the weeks when I forfeited my allowance due to bad behavior, a portion of my proceeds when to Patrick in exchange for a peep at his sister in the shower. It wasn't just me. Lots of the other boys in the neighborhood anted up, too.

This has been going on since I was twelve and she was, like, fifteen. Maybe you think I'd be bored of it, but Tami's eighteen now, an actual woman, and something about the forbiddenness, the illicitness of it provides just as much thrill as the show. That is, until last week, when I pushed my eye up to the hole and Tami looked straight at me and said, "You know, Sammy, you should try holding off for a few weeks, save up your money and take me out on a real date."

I fell back from the wall, spun towards Patrick and asked, "She knows?"

"Of course she knows."

"Why'd you tell her?"

"I didn't. It was her idea. She's the one who drilled the hole and set the rate. What do you think I am, some kind of pervert?"

So, yeah, going over to Patrick's right now isn't really an option until I grow a pair and figure out what I'm going to do. Although I can't say that I'm too thrilled about him coming over here. Not that Patrick is a bad guy, he's not.

He's my best friend. It's just that he's different. His boundaries are a little nonexistent. Sometimes the things he does are just a little too strange, and I like him better when he doesn't do them here.

The sound of the rattling doorknob carries to the kitchen and I'm on my way to the front when Patrick starts kicking his foot against the bottom of the door.

"Dude, cut it out."

He kicks louder, harder.

"Give me a chance to get the frickin' thing open, will ya?"

The wood shimmies under my hand as I turn the lock and open the door.

"Dude, what took you so long?" Patrick asks as he brushes by me. Before I can respond he's down the hall, opening the door to my parent's room. I hurry to catch up with him.

Pausing at the door, I take a deep breath before stepping inside. I never come in here. Not ever.

Patrick is one of those people who feels a need to get acquainted with the intimate details of a person. Any person. He bends and picks up something shiny and pink from where it is puddled on the floor. It's my mom's, a slip or a nighty or something, and not just a normal one but something that's kind of sexy and that a guy doesn't want to think about in relation to the woman who gave him birth. Having seen the faded, full length floral things in the laundry hamper for years, I know that it's not something she would normally wear. It crosses my mind that last night was one of the rare occasions that she and my dad were both home, which makes me shudder. While I do that, Patrick slips the thing over his head, pulling it down over his lanky frame.

If any other guy were to do that, I'd think he was queer, but not Patrick. It's just something he does. Male, female, it doesn't matter, he just feels compelled to wear other people's things. It's like, by doing so, he's trying their life on for size.

He grabs this turtleneck thing my mom bought my dad which she calls a dickie and my dad says is named that because that's what he feels like when he wears it. A quick yank over Patrick's narrow head and it's on, quickly followed by one of my dad's ties, still knotted. Holding a pair of my mom's earrings up to the sides of his face and inspecting his reflection in the mirror, he says, "Oh, that reminds me."

That's normal for Patrick, too, for him to start a conversation in the middle, like we've been talking all this time. Setting the earrings down, he pulls the slip up, digs in his back pocket with one hand and flings the borrowed clothes off his head with the other. He holds up a scrap of a CD and grins. The disc has been roughly cut down to a smaller size and looks like it's been chewed on. Probably by his sociopath brother.

"I stole it from my sister. It's supposed to be from one of those bands that puts subliminal messages in the music."

"Will that thing even play?"

"Sure."

He leaves the room. I fuss to return items to their original locations and chase him down in the living room. The disc is already in the player, the remote in his hand.

"Okay, but we've got to keep it down."

"Why?"

I don't want to say. Can't. My eyes betray me, involuntarily darting a glance down the hall. He notices and stares at the closed door at the end.

"Who's here?"

He stalks down the hall towards the closed door. I catch him by the sleeve. He ignores me, so I grab him by the arm and force him to stop. His fingertips rest on the doorknob.

"Patrick, don't."

"What?"

"It's Gran."

"Gran's here? That's great, I haven't seen her in forever."

He taps on the door, shakes my hand loose and enters the room.

"Stop."

It's too late. I try to read his reaction through his back. A series of muscles twitch near his shoulder blades, visible through the thin fabric of his t-shirt. The tendons in his neck tense and bunch. His ears turn red. When he looks at me, his face is pale.

"What happened?"

It's an accusation. He stares at me from beneath lowered brows, his teeth bared. For a brief instant I get a flash of him attacking me, his long fingers wrapped around my throat. I think he sees the scene, too, because he takes a step back, keeping his eyes on me warily.

"She's sick. End stage lung cancer."

"She doesn't smoke."

"I know."

He turns sideways so that he can see us both, his eyes flicking between us.

"How long?"

I shake my head.

"How long?"

"She hasn't been conscious in four days. Hasn't had anything to eat or drink in six."

"Why aren't you doing something?"

"Patrick." I step forward, closing the distance between us, and put a hand on his shoulder. "There's nothing left to do. A nurse stops by from hospice a few times a day, but, it's over."

"So you're just waiting for her to die?"

"Yeah."

"Here? Like this?"

"My parents can't afford to put her in a full time hospice center. I think she'd like being here better, anyway."

We gather by her bedside, shoulder to shoulder.

"Dude, that sucks. I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you tell me? I love her too, you know."

I look at him, curious. He doesn't look back. He stares down at Gran, grey and shrunken and tiny against the white sheets. Wrinkles etched deeply into the folds of skin that pool inside the hollows of her face formed by the illness, as it eats her away from the inside. Reaching out, he strokes the back of her hand. Nothing happens. She doesn't react, not that I expected her to.

“Gran always treated me, well, like me. And she liked who I was. It was okay with her.”

“She did like you. She always said you had spunk.”

“Spunk,” he repeats, barely a murmur.

“And she was always good for a piece of candy.”

“Yeah. Except for the time she forgot her glasses and tried to give us those nasty cough drops, said they were jolly ranchers.”

“I remember that.”

Silence settles over us like a shroud. I can't imagine life without Gran. I don't want to. This, though, Patrick here beside me, keeping vigil over Gran, this feels right. I'm glad he's here. I close my eyes, trapped in the memory of Gran during happier times. I feel Patrick move beside me, closer to her.

“What are you doing?”

There are no words to describe my horror.

“What?” He doesn't look at me, doesn't stop, just pushes his finger further into the limp pocket of her mouth.

“Stop. Stop it.”

“What? She doesn't feel it.”

“You don't know.”

My hands clench into fists at my side. I see a premonition of myself beating Patrick to a bloody pulp. I wonder if it's self-defense if you're defending your almost dead grandmother.

“Neither do you. Now stop.”

“They're loose.”

“What?”

“Her teeth. They're loose.”

“So? Stop. Patrick, I mean it. Get your hand the hell out of her mouth. Right. Now.”

His face turns placidly towards me. “What's your problem?”

“What's yours? You're violating my grandmother.”

“I'm not.”

“You are.”

“Am not.”

Stepping forward, I grab his wrist and wrench his hand from her mouth.

“See? You helped.”

He smiles as he holds his open hand towards me, two grey teeth centered on his palm. Bile splashes up the back of my throat. My vision clouds with hazy spots.

“I can’t believe you did that.”

“Why not? She’s not going to need them. And they fell right out, you saw.”

“Why?”

“What’s she gonna leave you, Sammy? Some cash? Some photos? This,” he raises his palm higher, “This will last forever.”

“Get out.”

“Come on, Sammy. Don’t be like that.”

“Get out!”

The force of my words vibrates off the walls. From the look on Patrick’s face, he knows I’m serious. The large lump centered in his skinny throat bobs as he swallows hard. Shoulders hunched up by his ears, he leaves the room. I march after him, ready to attack, wondering what I’ll tell my parents, how I could possibly explain this, if they’ll even notice.

Patrick stops at the front door. I shake my head, cutting off whatever it is that he was going to say. He grabs my hand, rolls my fingers tight around the tooth he pushes into the flesh of my palm, right against my lifeline.

“You’re going to thank me one day.”

I raise a finger and point, too livid to speak. The tooth digs deep into the skin inside my fist. Slamming the door shut behind Patrick, I throw the lock and lean my back against it, sliding to the ground, struggling to catch my breath.

Opening my hand, I inspect the tooth, this piece of my grandmother, this part of her that now belongs to me. The molar is worn to a shrunken nub, the grey surface etched with black lines in the crevices like a piece of rock. Like a stone, it will stand the test of time and last, if not forever, then as long as I need a piece of her to be with me.

Shadows stalk out from the corners as the sun sets outside, growing longer as the day gets older. I sit until dusk has settled, its gloom filling the room around me. Then I rise, flicking on lights around the house. I go from room to room, erasing any trace of Patrick’s visit. I remove the CD from the player and throw it in the

trash. I nuke my enchiladas, and eat them at the counter, the tooth sitting before me. I crush my chip crumbs and push them against the baseboard under the cabinets with the toe of my sneaker. That night, I slip the tooth under my pillow before I go to sleep. I can feel her with me.

A lot of time has passed since that late spring day in '95. Decades have gone by, and I've still never spoken to Patrick again. For a while our eyes would catch, snagging against the others' in the halls between classes, but all too soon the face of a friend became the face of some kid I used to know. I could never forgive him for what he did, no matter how grateful I was for what he'd given me.

Gran was gone two days later. It felt like she took a part of me with her. Just a little piece. But I had a small part of her that had been left behind, just big enough to plug the hole she left.