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# Candles

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## Candles

Nobody knew where he was. Davis licked his cigarette long ways, just enough so the tobacco buried underneath became perceptible to the eye. He put the cigarette into his chapping mouth, pulled out a silver Zippo lighter and snapped his fingers. He pulled up the light, inhaled a thick drag of smoke, and slammed shut the whimpering flame. He wore a long wool dress coat. It had six buttons in the front; only three were functional, while the other three served as decoration. He looked down at the silver lighter for a second and placed it back into his coat's large left side pocket. The reflection Davis saw in the lighter had the eyes of a newborn. Some of the first few drops of rain fell reluctantly onto his face and made him look like he was beginning to weep, but Davis never cried.

Two weeks ago things had seemed different, even though things had always been just the same. Davis opened up his eyes; it was a Tuesday; it was about seven in the morning. The blinds had been left open all night. The sun was already trying to tan his pale chest, and it might have succeeded had not a blonde woman been draping herself across him. Her hand was moving with his chest up and down, as he breathed, as his heart beat. She was naked; her lower half wrapped up by the dark red sheets. He pushed her freckled hand off of him, and got out of the bed. Davis walked over to the toilet. He coughed, left the seat down, and made every effort to relieve himself without touching it. He washed his hands. A grey cat jumped up on the sink and began to drink out of the leaking faucet. Davis pushed the cat off and walked out toward the kitchen. He took a steak out of the refrigerator and poured a glass of water. He threw the steak onto a pan, and used the water to swallow a handful of pills.

Twenty minutes later, he closed his eyes. Standing in the same place he had been before; the girl, the steak, the toilet, and the pills all disappeared. All that was left was Davis and things couldn't be better. A description of the room, based solely on the color burgundy and furniture made from different expensive woods, no longer was important. The room had only been alive; the girl who was sitting on his toilet had only been alive; because he had said so. She started to talk to him, but he couldn't hear her. He said something back, and she smiled and laughed, but he couldn't remember what it was.

The black sedan drove down past the stretch of palm trees and it suddenly was nineteen eighty three, the car told you that. It was brand new; original owner's manual: IN MINT, original first aid kit: IN MINT, and even new car smell: IN MINT. The ashtray was full of cigarettes, hundreds of them, different brands, all packed on top of each other. Smokers lose about 58 percent of their sense of smell. That would explain why Davis didn't notice their presence, but not why the car still smelled new. That would explain Davis's cough, but not why the odometer said one hundred and forty-six thousand. He pressed the gas, turned into the sun, and went off onto the exit 216 off-ramp.

He walked into work, a sterile office building; everything was illuminated in an unnatural white light. Davis once complained that the halogen lights constantly made a high pitched buzzing sound, but nothing was done about it. Everyone who worked there screamed at each other, even when they just were saying hello. "So what did you do on your day off?" screamed the man wearing a grey suit, toward Davis's direction. "Just stayed around the house and tried to get it cleaned up. I got my parents coming down in a few days." Davis tried to reply in equal volume, but his voice would tremble slightly at

unnatural frequencies. “You should have taken that cute blonde away with you for the weekend. Girls like that need to be shown a good time,” the ugly man advised him. This thought instantly caused Davis’s chest to clench up. He felt like he should run into the bathroom, run out of work, run off of the planet. Instead he said, “I think you’re absolutely right, sir.”

“When are you going to clean up this mess, it smells terrible in here.”

“I know, I was just going to get around to it.”

“The cigarettes are disgusting.”

“I’ll get rid of them today.”

“Get rid of them now.”

“I’ll get rid of them now.”

At lunch she got a garden salad, no dressing. He got a glass of water, a big glass of water. He also ordered a hamburger. It was ordered medium-rare, it was delivered medium-well; one hundred and seventy degrees, the perfect temperature for killing any sort of bacteria, the perfect temperature for killing any sort of flavor. The conversation was slow at first, but started to improve after Davis drank the water. “My day was pretty busy; Becky told me I had to have the ALC reports done by Friday. That’s going to be completely impossible for me. I already have too much to do with the meeting next week.” Davis, pooling his resources, replied, “Why don’t you ask that new girl Ann to help you with some of it?” Kristina smiled; he had been paying attention. Davis smiled; she thought he had been paying attention.

“Mom” and “Dad” came to town about a week later and brought with them childhood. “Honey, your apartment is a mess, when are you going to grow up?” Mom said smiling as she pulled off the bed clothes and began to assemble them into the wash basket. She had a way of talking as if she was always joking. Mrs. Reilly never joked. “Really, Ms. Reilly, you don’t have to do that for him,” Kristen responded in kind. “He’s my little boy,” she paused, while the room waited for her to finish the line, “and I don’t care how old he gets, he will always be my little boy.” Davis, who was really huddled in a closet, was talking to his father. “It really looks like you brought yourself together these days overall, Davis. You have a really good job, it’s doing something that matters too, helping people. Kristen is a great girl too.” “Yeah, I know,” Davis smiled back.

Switch to the bathroom, a fast lie, a moment alone, a big glass of water, closing down. The rest of the evening, Mrs. Reilly hung onto Davis. She held his perspiring hand, and would squeeze it constantly. Davis didn’t notice. The moment before a car accident, when the driver looks up, realizes what’s happening, kind of says “oh well” to himself, that was Davis.

Dinner bell rings. The restaurant is five stars. “Dad” used to be friends with the chef.

“I hope he doesn’t spit in our food.”

“Davis, that’s so inappropriate.”

“Well, isn’t he the guy that you used to date before you and Dad got married?”

“Well, yes, but things worked themselves out for everyone. Today he’s happily married.”

All of a sudden Davis was the chef of the restaurant. His marriage with Elizabeth never really was all that great. He started to date her on a rebound, and she had gotten pregnant. At work, he had respect, at home was a different story. The day the Reilly family came in for dinner, he had gotten into a big fight with Beth.

“I just don’t think that it’s right for you to go out with this John guy all the time.”

“We’re just good friends, I don’t see what the problem is. You knew when we got married that I can’t make friends with women.”

Davis spit into Kristen’s food. Davis spit into his mother’s food. Davis spit into his father’s food. Davis spit into his own food.

Coming home the sex was great, that is to say it was long and that Kristen enjoyed it. It all seemed the same to him. The room was clean; the room had once been a mess but his mother had put it all together again. An orchid bought for him when he got his new job, bloomed for the first time in a year. The white petals reflected the light from a lavender candle, brought from “Home” to help him deal with stress. It helped Davis 42 percent as much as it should have.

The next day was a Wednesday. It was windy; you had to wear a fall jacket. The sun cut through the wind in dead moments, when the trees held their collective breaths.

In twenty minutes, a meeting in a hotel lobby; then another day of family togetherness, this time without Kristen; as it turned out, this time without Davis.

“Where the hell is he?” frantic.

“I don’t know” equally so.

“He didn’t call you?” frantic.

“No, he told me he was supposed to be spending the day with you” equally so.

People would talk. Sometimes not right away, but eventually. It was rarity that people could hold out for more than a few days. Those that could were left alone, strapped into a chair. The water would flow so slowly. It would become possible to predict when the next drop was going to fall. Each instant, tension and release, it was sex, it was smoking a cigarette, it was never forgiving an old friend, it was squeezing a child’s hand, it was inescapable.

“Everyone will break.”

“But what if someone doesn’t?”

“Everyone always has, and everyone always will.”

Davis licked another cigarette, futilely. The rain was starting to pour, making it almost impossible to smoke, least of all important to lick. The lights from the street below looked beautiful. Davis wanted to get a better look. The air smelled like lavender.