

Miss Mercy

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"How does it feel, where you are?"

"It's okay. You keep it cool in here."

"Not this room. Don't be stupid."

"I don't understand then."

"Describe where you're sitting."

"Smells like medicine. Piss, a little bit."

"I just told you. Not here. I already told you what I want."

"So where?"

"Anywhere good. Nice. Someplace where you've been, with food that you liked. Someplace I wouldn't know."

"Wow, I don't know."

"I'm waiting. The clock is ticking. Don't cheat me."

"I'm thinking."

"Take a minute."

"Okay. I was in Lyon, in France, okay? When I was in college, I was in France for this one summer."

"I've never been to France."

"Okay, so France."

"You went to college. What were you going to be?"

"I don't know. Shit. Not this I guess."

"I suppose so."

"Sorry. I guess I sound insulting."

"You're trying to be honest, I believe. That shows respect. You're doing all right."

"There was this café downstairs from the place I was staying."

"It's the food I want to hear about."

"Do you like French food?"

"Once."

"Sorry."

"You don't need to keep apologizing; it doesn't exactly suit your line of work. Just tell me where you're sitting over there in Lyon, in good old France."

"I'm sitting, now I'm sitting at a small table in the café. This table is round, and black, and the edges are scratched up with little white lines, and there's some little brown craters on the edge, that's where people parked their cigarettes without putting them out, and they burned along down the table."

"I like that. How does it smell?"

"There's a lot of water around because it just rained. Yes, that's right. So it smells like water."

"What does that smell like?"

"What does what?"

"What does rain water smell like?"

"Oh. I guess it's . . . it's . . . hm. Like. Dirt. A little. When it rains? And it hasn't rained a long time? Then the ground just opens up –"

"Like a woman, you might say."

"Yes, like a woman –"

"Mother Earth."

"Mother Earth. And you smell the dust smell rising up because it's just rained, and the air is fresh and clean for a little while and you can smell everything. And there's this bakery next door and they're baking bread. And the guy inside is making fresh coffee from this big espresso machine with little gold tubes and black knobs and a brass eagle on top. So I smell bread, and coffee and cigarettes because the table next to me, they're smoking these little black cigarettes, and the rain makes everything smell like fresh plowed earth."

"I can smell it. I want some coffee. Bring some coffee."

"Now I'm drinking coffee, the guy brought me some coffee in a little tapered white demitasse cup with a gold painted rim, in a little saucer and its kind of cute, like a toy cup and there's this thick brown foam on top of the coffee, and there's a tiny silver spoon next to it in the saucer."

"Coffee is a very sensuous thing. Drink your coffee for me."

"Would you like cream in the coffee?" "Is it good espresso?"

"Yes. I think so, yes."

"Don't you dare put cream in my coffee. Just a spot of sugar. You have to drink espresso in a toss, in ten seconds or it loses the correct taste. Did you know that?"

"No."

"How does the cup feel?"

"I lift the cup, and its shiny with sunlight, and hard. The gilt line around the top has a little nick in it. And I sip the coffee."

"Yes? Yes?"

"It tastes good."

"No!"

"I don't know what you want from me! I'm sorry."

"It won't do! You're cheating."

"What do you want me to say? It's fucking coffee."

"Should I call the escort agency? Ask Miss Ursula to send another girl?"

"No, I can do this." "Try again. Don't cheat this time."

"It tastes bitter –"

"No! You're cheating again."

"Okay! Fuck. Wait. Okay. I've got this. I lift the cup."

"The cup."

"I put the cup to my lips and the steam touches my nose at the same time my lips meet the coffee which I've put a little spoon of sugar in. I take a small sip, because I don't know how hot it might be, and the hot coffee washes back on my tongue and it hurts a little and I like it, I like the way it feels, and I take a little breath up through my nose and let the air into my mouth so I can really blow up the taste and get all of it in my senses."

"Keep going."

"It's the taste of smoke outside at night, burning wood, darkness, a bitter taste and the things that taste bitter are the things you go back to, coffee, beer, things that shouldn't taste good, but that's why you always go back to them, because they taste exactly as they are and they taste bitter, and you feel comfort, because the bitter makes me think of my mother's kitchen, and sitting late at night with the radio on and talking and money and ... fuck . . ."

"Are you crying? I'm not able see you from here."

"I'm okay."

"You sound bad. I'm not trying to make you cry."

"I know you're not."

"Let's go back. What are you having with your coffee?"

"I don't usually eat with coffee."

"This time you are."

"They had this cherry strudel."

"They? Think again."

"Right. Yes. The coffee fills my nose with smoke and bitter dark, and there is this cherry strudel, and eating cherry strudel with my coffee makes me feel like I'm rich. I have a fork, a silver fork, and I press the side into the cherry strudel and a piece comes off on the fork and I lift the strudel to my lips and put the drippy warm strudel in my mouth. And it tastes like cherries."

"What do cherries taste like?"

"Wait. I have to get something from my purse."

"Hurry. I want my strudel."

"I got it, wait. I have to tear the foil. They make these things hard to open."

"I can't turn my head. What is it?"

"Wait. I got it. It's open. They have this screwy little cartoon strip inside that shows this cartoon dude unwrapping one and putting it on his dick."

"May I see the package? Hold it up to me."

"Here."

"It's red, it looks like."

"Cherry flavored. Am I cheating?"

"Oh. Oh I see. Go on."

"Wait. Mmmff! Yuck. Tastes like rubber and cherries. Okay. Cherry strudel. I'm tasting my piece of cherry strudel, and my mouth waters at the taste, as if running to meet it. The sweetness is sharp edged and

smooth and soft, with crusty crinkles and the cherry gives me a high acidic taste at the sides of my mouth, and the cherries burst into hot little globules of sugar, and it tastes like a candy sucker at the dentist's office when I've been a good little girl."

"That's fine. That's enough."

"How'd I do?" "Thank you, Miss. With all my heart. I'll tell the agency I'm very pleased with you. In the drawer of the night stand there, behind the pill box there's a small brown envelope with two hundred dollars in twenties. Take it for yourself. Just between us. A little tip."

"I want something else."

"What can I offer you?" "I've given you a taste of coffee and pie again. Give me a taste."

"What of?"

"Car crash."

"I see."

"My mother."

"You don't have to talk about her, not if it hurts you."

"Hurts me? That's funny."

"I mean it." "What's it like when it happens?"

"I'm listening to the radio, I'm thinking about my lunch and what I would like to eat and where I would like to eat. There is a small restaurant with espresso coffee served in real cups and some excellent cherry strudel. That is what I'm thinking of when I look up at my rear view mirror, as I'm waiting for the light to change. I see a huge engine grill flying towards me and there's a ridiculous little metal dog on the top and the word Mack."

"Were you scared?"

"Not really, no, I never was. There's no time. There was just the grill, and a kind of rudeness, like being pushed very hard in a crowd, and then something rather soft spreading over my head and bright flashing sparkles passing by which are tiny pieces of tinted glass which had been my sunglasses but are now being pushed inside my skin, and there is cold air and rain on my face and a buzzing in my head and a great emptiness and silence and everything seems kind of silly and embarrassing and sad. I feel exposed just laying bunched up against the curb and not moving, like I should be doing something responsible, maybe directing traffic or some such thing. And then I'm in a bed and I don't remember. Is it enough?"

"Were you scared?"

"Why do you keep asking?"

"I want to know if my mother would have been scared."

"There was this moment, I kept fading in and out, and once I touched my teeth with my tongue and they weren't there anymore and for a moment I had this idea I should get up and look for them. Then I felt a little scared I think, because it was a strange thing laying in the street and not having teeth. Then I don't remember. I remember people standing over me. Then I don't remember again. You're only scared if you think too much and when it happens to you, it's very hard to think."

"Do you think my mother was scared?"

"I wouldn't know. Did she die quickly?"

"They say she did."

"Then she was probably all right. Does any of this make you feel better?"

"Not that much. You?"

"It makes me more sad, remembering how it is to sit in the sun with good coffee. But I don't mind being sad."

"I do. Truth doesn't set you free does it? That's just bullshit they tell you, isn't it?"

"Maybe the truth sets you free after it's done fucking with you."

"Should I get dressed?"

"I'm going to rest now, I suppose. Before you put your clothes back on, please come stand beside me."

"All right, I'm over here now. Look up at me. Can you see me okay? Should I turn on another light?"

"No. Just stay there a moment. You look so fine that way. You're very fine. What a fine young woman you are. I'm imagining you that way on a nice bed. The window light on your breasts, your nipples are just marvelous."

"Hey, you. How do I taste?"

"Your cunt would taste salty and it would remind me of hot green tea, and the secret hair would smell of mammalian sweat and female steam. Would you mind, could you just touch my lips please? You don't have to do anything else."

"Can I kiss you instead? Wait, let me get in close . . . did you feel that?"

"My heart is shaking. I never hoped to feel that again."

"Fair enough?"

"Thank you. Fair enough." ▣