

Comet

By David Gardner

They were siblings, both in their late twenties, about as well matched as vanilla and vinegar. His face was bland, flavorless, practiced at revealing nothing. To her, there was a hardness, a sharpness, to the way she looked out at the world from behind eyes that had long ago taken in the welcome mat. Her attire was at once street casual and armor against the world: an old army fatigue jacket with a Big Red 1 patch and sergeant's stripes, two buttons missing. Doc Martens. A pair of loose-fitting pants that had survived the eighties: thin material, elastic waistband, colors that were together only because they were compelled to be. He flavorless: khaki pants, a short-sleeve pale yellow shirt with a button-down collar, light brown Hush Puppies and a green sweater-vest.

They had come to the food bank, but not together. She had arrived several minutes before him and stood in line, agitated, talking to herself, muttering and gesturing, angry. A space opened up between her and those around her. When he arrived she immediately accosted him, picking up the thread of an earlier conversation, just as if there had been no interruption. "Mitch wasn't even there, asshole! He left before Mama went to bed." Her voice was low, harsh. Her eyes tried to aim resentment at him, but she was having trouble focusing.

His face was passive, betraying nothing beyond the fact that he was used to this, had been through it before. "Claudia..."

"Don't call me Claudia, asshole! You know I hate it. Goddammit! My name is Comet. Wait here." She stomped over to a volunteer sitting behind the sign-in desk. "What the fuck is that?" she asked loudly, pointing at the frozen hamburger patties in a box on the table. Then, seeing 'Claudia' on the woman's name tag, "Don't you hate that fucking name? It's shitty."

The woman turned and opened a door behind her. "Erin!" she called out in a thin voice. "Erin, can you come out here? Now?" An uneasy silence replaced the animated talking that had been going on among the people waiting for food. Some pointedly ignored Comet's outbursts, looking around the food bank as if for the first time, taking in the beat-up wooden shelves along one wall that held the boxes people used to collect their food, or looking down at their feet shuffling across the cold concrete floor. A little girl peered out at Comet from behind her father's legs, where she had taken refuge.

Comet had returned to her place in the line when Erin, the food bank manager, appeared. She talked briefly, quietly, with the woman behind the desk and then walked over to Comet. "If you continue with your inappropriate language you will be asked to leave and not allowed to return. Do you understand?"

"Who the hell are..." began Comet but she was interrupted by her brother who put a hand on her shoulder and stepped in front of her.

"I'm sorry," he said, "My sister is having some problems today. I'll try to keep her under control."

"Shit," Comet said and turned her back on Erin and her brother.

"I'm warning you," said Erin.

"OK! OK! I heard you! Now leave me alone. I'll be a real good girl and you can give me a lollipop when I leave, OK?" She tapped the shoulder of the man in front of her. "Got a match?" she asked, taking a cigarette butt from her jacket pocket and putting it between her lips. The man pointed at the No Smoking sign on the wall and inched away from her.

Comet replaced the butt in her pocket and turned to her brother. "Mitch wasn't even there," she said again. Her voice had lost some of its edge and she sounded almost mournful. "He wasn't even there."

"Clau--," her brother stopped abruptly, then tried again. "They found Mama's disability check on him. He took it. He stole it from her. Why do you keep defending him?"

For almost a minute there was no reply from Comet. Emotions flitted across her face in the same way colors flit across a cuttlefish, one replacing another, abruptly, unpredictably. "Eugene, couldn't you talk to Mama? Ask her not to press charges? She'll listen to you. Mitch isn't really bad." She tried to sound conciliatory but it came out cloying.

Eugene's face and voice both dropped their veneer of detachment, taking in their stead a look and a tone of disgust. He turned on her and in a low, harsh whisper told her, "He stole Mama's disability check! Of course I'm not going to 'talk to Mama'. Mitch is a thief, a jerk, a parasite. He's worthless."

Comet understood now that the war was lost but not necessarily the battle. She slapped Eugene, hard, the sharp sound of skin on skin slicing through an atmosphere already thick with tension. Without waiting to be told, Comet left, sending the little bell flying across the room as she jerked open the door. Once outside she turned, flipped everybody the finger and started yelling, her eyes bulging, the muscles in her throat knotted. "FUCK YOU!"

FUCKYOUFUCKYOUFUCKYOU! ALL OF YOU!" She ran off.

Once again Eugene's face was impassive. Nothing was there other than the red welt on his cheek. And the tear making its way down his cheek.

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