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A Few of Our Favorite Things

 I’d forgotten what bathing was all about. I spent so many months surviving that when I enter the fountain and find the bottle of body wash Ines chose for me, it takes me a minute of staring blankly at it to remember what it’s for. When I pop the cap on it, the smell of the cologne-style scent is almost overpowering. I cough, forcing myself to squeeze it into my hand. The viscous liquid runs through my fingers, and I flash back to the fight in the basement, when my hand was covered with the thick mutant blood. The blue color is strange to me, and it drips into the water, forming a soapy mass of whitish, bluish bubbles, which I gladly wade into as I remove all of my clothes. Lathering myself up begins to bring back the memories of hot showers, and only then do I start to feel disappointment with the cold water I’m using now.

 The aroma of her multiple soaps wafts across my nostrils, and at once I can’t help but feel goosebumps at the thought of her warm lips and tongue. I’m still trying to process the situation, and this new bathing experience doesn’t help make it any easier. As I clean myself and start to realize just how incredibly unclean I’ve become, I try to plan what I’m going to say to her when we next see one another. It’s hard. I suppose we should eat once I’m done. We have that second possum to cook.

 The clothes collected earlier are laid out neatly in the next room, organized into various outfits by the time I finish my bathing. I can see she’s sorted the practical and the stylish into two separate categories, and that sets me a little at ease. It doesn’t appear we’ll have to argue over what is valuable and what isn’t, but I tell myself to be patient with the sentimentality of her flashy choices. She’s also arranged my suits (both of them), and I find myself admiring the dark gray one with the blue swirly tie. Man, I bet I’d look good in that. By the way she’s positioned it compared to the other clothes, I imagine she expects me to put it on. When she first picked it out, I would gladly have said yes, but now, after that kiss…

 After almost a year to myself, I have no clue how to respond to this sort of thing. I was never good at this back when life was normal, and it sure as heck hasn’t been an issue for me till now. Does life even work like that anymore? How do we begin to have a conversation about it with all the things that are necessary to consider? Will it make us better able to survive out here, or is it a weakness we can’t afford? What will we do if it doesn’t work out? Could we still travel together? But, really, doesn’t our situation mean that we may as well be a couple already? Is that what I really want? Is that what *she* wants? In my gut, I don’t think it’s a very good idea.

 That suit, though…it’s a good-looking suit.

 The clean traveling clothes lay there, ready to go when I am, but the suit pants fit pretty nicely. The dark blue shirt is nearly perfect, too. The sleeves are a bit short – I roll them up. The suit jacket doesn’t quite fit – it’s too tight (really, all of this is too tight and doesn’t give me the space I’m used to, but dress clothes were never all that wonderful to me anyway).

 Then there’s the tie. I toss it around my neck under my collar and hold both ends out, just now realizing that there’s absolutely no way whatsoever I can remember how to tie it. The countless rounds of trial and error bring back memories of my teacher days, and I begin to feel remorse for how few they really were in retrospect. All the things that seemed such a chore back then…what I wouldn’t give to just sit down with some coffee and grade a few papers just now! I sigh and stop, my hands hanging on my tie as I stare at the floor.

 “You look good,” she says from behind. I turn, trying to think in that moment what to say to her, but my words flee at the sight. She has a white skirt with a red top and bright-red flowers that stops just above her knees, her legs disappearing into high-cut boots. Her hair has been brushed and tied into a loose French braid draped over one shoulder. I can’t tell if she’s put on any makeup, but her lips seem redder than usual.

 Her cheeks flush as I stare, and I realize how dumbfounded I must look right now as I force myself to close my mouth.

 “Th-thanks…” I stutter. “You look…good…too…”

 Such an understatement.

 Without talking at all, she approaches me, and I feel my neck getting hotter. I’m grateful it’s mostly hidden by the collar as she works her long fingers to tie my tie properly, then cinch it up like a gentle hangman. I reach up to adjust it and my hands brush against hers. Her skin is soft from her bath and smells like lotion. More goosebumps for both of us.

 “We should get a fire going,” she suggests, looking down at the floor and twirling a finger in her hair. As I look at her, I notice that she has picked up the possum in the other hand. Somehow, the way she’s holding it by the base of its tail just makes her even more adorable.

 We start the fire in no time at all, not speaking to each other except as necessary and always as politely as possible (“Pass me the fork, please”). The possum is roasting and we both sit, her on her knees beneath her skirt, me with one leg stretched out in my kakis, the picture of a happy 60s couple enjoying their post-apocalyptic dinner.

 “This is nice,” she finally says.

 I nod and smile. “Yeah…I think so, too.”

 She stares at me happily for a moment, listening to the crackling of the fire. After taking a bite of her food and brushing crumbs off her top, she gets a sparkle in her eyes.

 “Let’s play a game,” she proposes. I have no idea what she has in mind, but I can’t possibly say no at this point.

 “Sure,” I reply.

 She stands and comes to the other side of the fire. She sits cross-legged, facing me and settles in eagerly.

 “Let’s each say something we think the other person doesn’t know about us, and try to top it every time.”

 It sounds interesting. “Okay,” I say. “You go first.”

 “Oh, okay, but first, here’s the catch,” she tells me, her grin spreading mischievously wide. “I go first, and then you go, but if yours doesn’t top mine, I get to ask you any question I want, and you have to give me the honest answer.”

 I knew it; with Ines, there’s always a catch. This could get *really* interesting really fast. “Alright. And the same applies to you?”

 She nods excitedly, her braid bobbing up and down.

 “Well, don’t take all night, Blanch,” I jest, leaning back to rest on my elbows.

 “Hmmmm…” Ines ponders for a few moments, the fire and her eyes dancing together. After a few seconds, she perks back up and starts the first round.

 “Well…I hate politics,” she tells me proudly.

 I raise an eyebrow. “Like, in general, or specifically in America?”

 “In general.”

 “And do you mean politics in government, or all kinds?”

 She scrunches her face. “All kinds?”

 “Yeah, like office politics, or company politics, or politics in the workplace with coworkers and bosses and stuff?”

 “Oh! Yes, all kinds. I don’t like the drama.”

 “So you don’t like people?”

 “No, I like people…sometimes…”

 I give her a wry grin, and she clarifies.

 “I guess I just don’t like what happens when people get together.”

 I laugh and gesture all around us. “Well, problem solved.”

 She laughs with me. “Okay, your turn.”

 I nod and begin to think, and she leans forward, elbows in her lap, chin in her hands, looking at me expectantly. I got it!

 “My grandfather bought me a car when I was twenty, and paid cash for it.”

 “Ooooooh,” she coos. “What kind of car was it?”

 “A blue 2011 Toyota Camry. They wanted seventeen thousand dollars for it, but he negotiated them down to thirteen thousand.”

 “And he paid with *le fric*?” she asks, open-mouthed. I assume ‘le fric’ is French for ‘cash.’

 “Yup,” I say with pride. “Laid it all down in hundreds on the table for them. That was the thing that made them take the deal.”

 “That’s amazing!”

 “Yeah, he was kinda rich and stuff,” I say with a veneer of faux modesty.

 “That must have been nice, to have a rich grandfather,” Ines says with a hint of jealousy.

 “Kind of,” I say, the fond memories drifting back into my consciousness. “He was generous like that all the time, but he never did it without a good reason. He bought me the car because my old one was unsafe, and I was working and going to school full-time. He saw how hard I was working and decided to help. He wouldn’t just give me money just because I asked for it, like for pizza and parties and stuff. He always made sure that I worked for what I got, and that I deserved any gifts he gave.”

 Ines smirks. “Then they’re not gifts.”

 “Huh?”

 “They’re not gifts. If you earn them, they’re not gifts.”

 “Well…you know what I mean…your turn.”

 Ines looks away. “I never knew what to call my grandparents in English.”

 “What do you mean?”

“It was harder in English. I called them Mère and Père in France, but I heard someone over here call them Mammy and Pappy, and so I tried to figure out how to change them in American, and I couldn’t.”

“What did you do?” I ask.

She shrugs. “I didn’t change them.”

I laugh. That is so like her.

“Okay, your turn,” I tell her once more.

She fidgets with her skirt. “You know, that whole thing about ‘pop’ and ‘soda’ is dumb…”

“You’re stalling,” I sing.

She pounds the floor with her hand.

“I don’t know--wait! Yes, I got it! My papa got me a *cheval*, a horse, for my birthday when I was twelve!”

“For real?!”

“Yes! I was at a birthday party and they had horse-riding, and I was good at it, so my papa got me one the next year.”

“That’s cool,” I tell her.

She nods, but then appears sad.

“We were good friends, but she died when she got hit by a truck that was speeding and crashed into our field.”

“Oh, no! That’s terrible.”

She nods again and sighs. “Her name was Caramel,” she says fondly, putting as much accent into the noble-sounding name as she can.

I gaze at her thoughtfully and sit up.

“You know,” I start, trying to say this carefully. “No offense, but I never imagined you as the type of girl to want a pony for her birthday.”

Ines smiles, her cheeks like little tarts in the orange light.

“I don’t know…” she sighs, tilting her head. “I suppose I hate it when people try to get me to do girly things just because I am a girl, but I don’t mind doing it on my own. I miss all the ways I used to do my hair.”

She fiddles with her braid absentmindedly while she talks.

“I’m more comfortable doing things like that when I am with people who know better than to assume.”

I snort. “I’m the opposite. I do manly stuff cuz I’m a man.”

She giggles. “Of course, Your Majesty, like *scavenging!*”

“Yup. Just like that. And I’m good at it, too, since I’m a MAN!”

“Fine, now your turn.”

“Wait, hold on,” I intrude. “That didn’t top mine.”

“What? Of course it did!”

“Did not,” I argue. “Doesn’t even compare.”

“Imbècile!” she gags. “She was my close friend!”

“My car was expensive.”

“She was hit by a truck! The story is filled with la mèlancolie!”

“My car was *expensive*,” I repeat.

“Caramel was priceless!”

“Really? How much did she cost?”

Ines opens her mouth to yell at me again, but pauses and thinks.

“Ummmmm…I…well, I think she was almost eight hundred.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Eight hundred what?”

She gives me the look she would probably give to someone who asked for directions on how to pour a bowl of cereal. “Francs? What else?”

I grin. “My car was almost double that in dollars.”

She sputters. “Our money is valued differently. The Franc is different.”

“Yeah,” I chuckle. “It’s worth *less*. Mine beats yours by, like, a lot.”

She crosses her arms. “So how did you lose your car?”

I cross my arms also. “It was destroyed by mutant cannibals.”

She sticks her tongue out.

“Fine. What do you want to know?”

Now I have to decide. I was so focused on winning the argument that I hadn’t decided what to ask if I won. I have trouble coming up with a creative new question on the spot, so I go with an old classic that I suspect might be interesting.

“What is your biggest fear?”

She gives me another incredulous look, but I just smirk and gaze back at her. She sits there, and slowly, a frown creases the softness of her face. At first, I start to regret the question; stupid me - I spoiled the fun with something that made it get serious. I thought at first it would be thought-provoking, but now it just seems petty.

“Sorry,” I say after a bit of awkward silence. “I’ll think of another one.”

“No,” she says quickly, catching me off-guard. “I’ll tell you.”

I sit quietly, my eyes searching her for any sign that I should retract the question in spite of her words. As I wait, the analytical side of me finds this absurd - how did I go from seeing her as someone who is just as tough as I am to making sure I’m sensitive about her feelings? Did this all happen because of the kiss, or has it always been this way? I can’t figure it.

Her eyes are pristine and have a mistiness about them. Her tone is somber. She says it to me, and at once I can tell it comes from the deepest part of her. Her tongue moves inside her open mouth, but she lacks the ability to describe the intensity of the plea.

“I don’t want to be alone,” she finally tells me.

The image of her lying on the bed, refusing to drink, her sunken-in eyes filled with desolation and despondency, flashes before me. The last piece I need to fully understand her falls into place.

I try to speak, to tell her that she doesn’t have to be alone any longer, that she never has to go anywhere unaccompanied ever again, but I can’t express it in words any more than she can. I simply reach out and pull her closer, holding her there as she rests her head against my shoulder. We lean against the wall, feeling the inestimable comfort of one another’s steady breathing, our body heat seeping through the thin, delicate clothes from an alternate world. The dull beating of our hearts takes a few minutes to sync, and by that time, both of us are fast asleep.