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You Pretty Thing by Lee Battersly

It took three minutes for the elevator to rise from the highest publicly accessible floor to the penthouse. I occupied myself with thoughts of what was to come, and tried not to think about what might fill the spaces between floors. Jonathon Rhodes was not the richest man in the world, but once you had his sort of money, the point was moot. How much is enough? If what I was here to confirm was correct, then quantities I couldn't even begin to imagine had already been spent. My retainer no longer seemed quite so large as it had when I signed my contract. The tiniest of bumps announced the journey's end. I stepped through the doors before they had finished opening, and pulled up short at sight of my surroundings. Whatever I had expected, this wasn't it. A man as rich as I knew Rhodes to be... there were no signs of opulence, no hints of excess. I had thought to find wall hangings; statues; deep pile carpets; leather furniture bearing teams of supermodels. I had not anticipated emptiness. Bare concrete stretched away from the door in all directions. Brickwork lay exposed on walls, pipes and wires hung in careless profusion. The absolute minimum of furniture had been arranged in a circle several feet away: a simple desk, two folding chairs, and a portable television on a metal table. Even the view across the city was hidden behind vertical blinds that looked as if they had come straight from the discount rack. A lone figure sat in one of the chairs. He stood at my entrance.

"No, Doctor Dunstan, you are in the right place. Please, come in."

He gestured towards the empty seat. I took a couple of fumbling steps forward, before my resolve deserted me again, and I simply stared at him. He was beautiful. Breathtakingly so: slim, willowy, a face so unlined and beatific it might have belonged to a plaster saint. His hair hung to just above the shoulder, thick and black, and the lips that smiled at my confusion were the right side of full. I shook my head to ward off the beginnings of entrancement, and he laughed.

"It'll pass, I'm sure," he said, as if he were already used to the reaction, and once more indicated the seat. "Come."

I sat, and placed my briefcase on the floor beside me.

"Not what you were expecting, was it?"

I shook my head. "No, not quite."

He smiled. "I'm re-furnishing. I found my previous taste somewhat... gauche, perhaps. Over the top. I have a different outlook now."

"I see."

"Perhaps."

"You... you're..."

He tilted his head in acknowledgment. "Thank you. Drink?"

He pointed to a small side table, upon which rested a jug of water and two glasses.

"Please."

He reached for the pitcher and a glass. As he raised them, the glass shattered.

Shards tinkled on the concrete floor. He hissed, and drew his hand up to his mouth.

"Are you okay?"

"It's nothing," he said, waving away my attempt to lean over and help. "My fine motor movements still need some getting used to, that's all." He pulled a piece of glass from his palm and flicked it away. I proffered a handkerchief. He accepted it with a nod, and balled his fist around it. "This body is much lighter than my old one. I have to remind myself not to be so heavy with everything."

"Then you're—"

"I'm fine, just fine." He flexed his injured hand. "Perhaps we should begin."

"Yes, of course." I opened my briefcase and removed a tape recorder. "I trust this will be sufficient?"

"Fine, fine," he nodded. "As per the terms of the agreement."

I placed the recorder on the floor and pressed the start button.

"Can you tell me your name, please?"

"Jonathon Edmond Wilhelm Rhodes."

"And do you know why you are here?"

"Yes," he settled back in his chair, dropped his chin to his chest. "I am answering a series of questions in order to prove that I am, indeed, the late Jonathon Rhodes, and not some well-trained imposter or robot." He smiled. "How am I doing so far?"

I shrugged. "Explain to me why this is necessary."

His expression darkened. "I had cancer. The whole world knew that. In my lungs, my colon, every part of my damn body."

"And?"

"And I died, all right? Sixty eight years old, at the height of my power."

"Can you describe what happened?"

He stared at me for a long time. His voice, when he continued, bore an edge at odds with the fineness of his features. "Something crushed me from the inside, and took about six months to do it. Every breath I took was through powdered glass, every movement sent knives down my bones and into my joints. Even pissing made me faint. By the time I died I was in an induced coma. So all I remember is pain, and then waking up. In my new body."

"What do you remember, prior to your death?" I pictured him as he first appeared in my office: ancient, withered, a brittle carapace of a body with wet eyes that twitched ceaselessly, paranoid of everything and everyone, his voice a laboured and angry croak. Now, this unlined angel sank into his chair in an unconscious imitation of that old man's hunch, and regarded me over steeped fingers.

"Everything," he said, his tone flat.

"Everything?"

“Yes.”

“Can you recall how you described your plan to me?”

At this, he leaped from his seat and began pacing back and forth around the empty space, acting out our first, and as far as he was aware, only meeting.

“You were there, behind your desk,” he said, indicating a spot ahead of him.

“Window there, couch there, some anonymous pot plant there, needing water.”

Quickly, he sketched out the confines of my office: the position of diplomas, the picture of my ex-wife and son on the desk, even the direction the pattern took across my carpet. “I was stuck in a wheelchair. My mouth worked, and my eyes, and that was it. You notice things when you have no other means of distracting yourself. You were thinner.”

I placed a hand on my stomach. He was right. His recall was perfect, in every detail.

“And what was your plan, Jonathon?” A slip: I should not have acknowledged him by that name, not until I presented my findings. If he realized, he made no comment.

“This,” he said, indicating his body. “A clone, created from genetically manipulated junk stock. Download myself into it via a brain transplant at the point of death.”

“The cancer?”

“Not in my brain.” He tapped the side of his head. “All my memories, all my experiences. I’m me. The body is just a vessel.”

“Except?”

“Except I have to prove it. Beyond reasonable doubt.”

I reached for my glass of water, remembered the accident, and settled instead for swirling some spit around my mouth.

“Surely there are recordings of the operation, testimony from those who performed it, financial records to prove what you paid for.”

He stopped pacing, stared down at the spot where his chair had sat across from me at our last meeting.

“They prove the operation was carried out, and that I died. I can’t prove that it’s really me in here.”

“As opposed to?”

“A robot, a well-trained imposter, an alien ventriloquist, I don’t know. It doesn’t matter!” He raised his fist, made as if to bang it down on the corner of my invisible desk, stopped himself. “It’s not what I have to disprove that’s the matter.”

“Mister Rhodes.” He turned his head towards me. “Sit down, please. Please.”

With reluctant steps, he approached his chair, and sat.

“Do you remember why you came to me?”

“I...” he paused, as if the question occurred to him for the first time. “You didn’t work for me. You’re impartial.”

“Yes, that’s true. But why me, in particular, and not a judge, or a bus driver, for that matter?”

He blinked several times. “I...”

I made a show of picking up the recorder and placing it in my lap. “My name is Doctor Alec Dunstan. I am a consulting psychiatrist, specializing in the field of hypnotherapy. At our last meeting, Mister Jonathon Rhodes instructed me to implant a post-hypnotic suggestion. This, I did. Under his instruction, I then removed all memory of this act.” Rhodes said nothing, but the look of surprise on his perfect face increased with each word. “I have copies of these instructions with

me today, and I shall provide them to Mister Rhodes.”

“What the—“

“At the time of his death, Mister Rhodes had no conscious memory of these events. Therefore, should I speak the trigger phrase and the person sitting before me undertake the agreed upon actions, I will consider it absolute proof that the person in question is Jonathon Rhodes. Do you understand?”

Rhodes gaped a moment, then: “Yes, I understand.”

“Good. Mister Rhodes, the squirrel hunts in darkness.”

As soon as I had finished, Rhodes stood, took three steps to his left, bowed, and stuck two fingers in his nostrils. He crossed his eyes, bowed again, and then resumed his seat. I described his actions, then spoke the release phrase.

“The nuts are nervous in the evening.”

Rhodes blinked.

“Mister Rhodes, can you hear me?”

“Uh, yes. Did I—“

“As detailed in the documents I am handing Mister Rhodes, I can confirm that he performed the tasks outlined in his instructions. As per our agreement, I conclude that the person sitting in front of me is, indeed, Jonathon Edmond Wilhelm Rhodes.” I turned off the recorder, ejected the tape, and handed it to him.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

We stood. “The rest of the documentation is in my briefcase. If you can advise me where to send them, I will have copies forwarded to all necessary parties. My card is attached to the front of your copy.”

We shook hands. His grip was firm, the flesh of his hand smooth, and young.

“Thank you, doctor.”

“Good luck.”

“Yes,” he smiled, a tight stretch of his lips. “The consequences of this will be, well, far-reaching, to say the least.”

“Immortality.”

“Well, that might be a bit far off,” he said, releasing my hand. “But another forty or fifty years, God willing.”

“Long enough to prepare another body, and be transplanted again.”

“Plenty. And to deal with any remaining... problems.”

“I’m sure.” I turned to leave. “Oh, Mister Rhodes, one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“My handkerchief?”

“Of course.” He folded the fabric into quarters, and handed it to me. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. By the way, the duck of Princess Anne is a very spoiled duck.”

Rhodes’ face became blank. His hand dropped to his side. I pocketed the handkerchief, led him to the desk, and sat him down. I removed a sheaf of papers and a pen from my briefcase.

I am not a greedy man. The amounts he signed over to me would not be missed by someone who can afford to spend three billion dollars creating a new body. But an opportunity such as the one he presented comes along once, if at all, and I have developed a taste for fine things since our first meeting. A good therapist does not see a patient just once. I had seen Rhodes on dozens of occasions, since he first knew of his illness. But a good therapist knows what to uncover, and what to hide,

and I am very good at what I do. This was my last payday, but only I would remember it. I pocketed my papers and stood.

“A lifetime of ducks is better than an evening of princesses.”

Rhodes blinked.”

“How did I go? Did I--”

“Congratulations, Mister Rhodes. You’re adjusting well.” I poured him a glass of water. “Here, drink this. It’ll help.”

He took the glass.

“Goodbye.”

“I... goodbye, I suppose.”

I left him staring at the glass in his hand. The cassette and papers would be enough for him to return to his previous existence, and for me to quietly disappear from mine. The elevator door closed behind me. I pressed the button for the lobby, and exhaled, rolling the tension from my shoulders as the numbers began to fall. Four and a half minutes, and I would be free. I gazed down at my hands, and congratulated myself on their stillness. They looked old, lined and heavy, the first liver spots beginning to blemish the flesh. I frowned. Something pricked at me, some indefinable wrong that stopped me leaning back against the wall and dreaming of my future. The air in the elevator was stifling. I drew the handkerchief from my pocket and dabbed at my forehead. I realised what I was doing, and pulled my hand away, staring at the fabric.

It was clean. No blood spotted its surface, no stain of red disfigured white. I opened it up, turned it back and forth. It was as unmarked as when I had pulled it from my underwear drawer. Then I recalled his hand as we had shaken, the clean, fresh feel of it: no stickiness, no tickle from the edge of cut flesh. I had glanced at it as we shook. It is something I have always done, just a quick drop of the eyes, an unconscious movement. I had not registered it at the time, but I did not see any cut. And then it hit me, the knowledge of what was wrong. No upward pressure. I could not feel the slight sense of weightlessness that comes from standing within a descending elevator. The numbers were falling, but I was not moving.

As if in response to my realization, the numbers stopped their motion, and the doors opened.

A solitary figure sat in his chair, waiting

Questions for Reflection

- I. Do you think Rhodes has managed to achieve immortality ?
- II. Is this really still Jonathan Rhodes ?
- III. Does the test prove that ?