

Infatuation

Have you ever felt like a background character in your own story? That's how I felt every day. First period would come and I would sit in the back of the class. Up in front would sit Felicity Cartwright. Doll.

I didn't know how she got her nickname, but it fit. Dirty blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders like she was in some kind of a shampoo commercial. It caught the light in the morning and glowed like a halo in the afternoon.

A chill ran down my spine. She just did that thing. My thing. You know, the thing where you run your fingers over your ear to put your hair back in place? She did that. My heart melted. Well, maybe not my heart. Something melted.

"Adam!" My name. Crap.

"Yes, Mrs. Mathers?" I answered. Doll was looking straight at me. How can I check her out when she was looking straight at me?

"Were you even paying attention?" Mrs. Mathers said, hands on her hips.

Might as well make this funny, "No, Mrs. Mathers."

Everyone laughed. Well, everyone except Mrs. Mathers... and Doll. Crap.

I didn't catch what the teacher said after that. Having your confidence crumble to pieces is a bit distracting. Oh well. It's not like I had a chance with Doll anyway. Spotless skin, million dollar fashion sense, and the attention of every boy (and a good number of girls) in the school? Ya. This idiot didn't have a chance. Even if I didn't have 800 people competing for my true love's attention, I still wouldn't stand a chance. She didn't date.

"Harsh, man." Thomas whispered to me. "Harsh."

I didn't know whether he was responding to the teacher's rebuke, which I hadn't caught, or if he had seen me deflate when my attempt at humor failed to bring a smile to Doll's face. Maybe I'd ask him later. Maybe not.

"What a jerk." Cassy said under her breath. She takes school way too seriously. Despite her effort, I don't think she ranked in our grade. Neither did I, but I didn't pretend to.

"Wow, man." Thomas again. "Today sucks for you."

"Thanks, Thomas."

"Hey, what are you doing after school?"

“I don’t know. Why?”

“I found some stuff at my Uncle’s place. I want to show it to you.” Thomas’s eyes sparkled. When he got something into his head he wouldn’t let it go.

“What, more porn?” He was also a teenage boy.

“Naw man.” He said. “Better.”

I stopped paying attention to him. Doll always stayed late to talk to Mrs. Mathers. No one really knew why. Well, no one except Mrs. Mathers. She would wait until everyone had left and the door was shut before saying whatever it was she said. Weird, but kind of endearing. She didn’t beat people over the head with her brain, so I could appreciate her being smart. Compare that to Cassy. Cassy *wasn’t* smart, and still tried to hold it over everyone.

Doll flowed out of the room. She held her books close to her chest and walked with purpose. This was one of the few times I could see her in motion. Every day I told myself I wouldn’t be a creep, and every day I hung out by the door. Her skirt swished soundlessly behind her. It was long enough to be decent, and short enough that I could pretend that it wasn’t. Fuck. She hit the lottery, and here I am daydreaming. Maybe I’m a bit obsessed.

“Dude.”

“Hey Thomas.” He slid in next to me at the lunch table. I was doodling.

“No.” He said. I glanced up at Thomas. “Dude.” He shrugged. What the hell. I glanced down at the notebook. Oh. That.

“Hey, I can dream can’t I?” Doll’s face was scattered across the notebook. In some of my doodles she smiled. Those were the worst. She rarely smiled. I don’t know the details. In the rest of the doodles she was stern. It worked better that way.

I sighed; I’d worry about the smile later. “What was it that you wanted to show me?”

He didn’t get to reply. An orange the size of a grapefruit struck him in the side of the head. It exploded, juice and pulp flying everywhere. The force brought his head down to the table. I looked down and saw a huge amount of red squirt out from his neck. What the fuck.

Thomas jumped to his feet. For someone with a gaping wound, he recovered quickly.

“Fuck you guys! I’ll fucking kill you!” He shouted his threat, his body shaking as he contracted every muscle.

Looking for his attacker, I saw Jeff. He and his friends barely contained their laughter. “You’ll have to,” he paused, “Ketchup!” Oh. That’s what the red stuff was.

Thomas bolted after them. Jeff and his friends were jocks. Thomas wasn’t going to catch them. They’d run, giggling like schoolgirls, then Thomas would get tired. He’d be in a sour mood for the rest of the week.

I looked back to my notebook. Doll’s face was covered in ketchup and orange guts. I tried to wipe it away. The ink smudged.

Last period. I couldn’t wait to leave. I didn’t understand the material, probably wasn’t going to pass, and Cassy was in the class. She hated my guts, I hated hers. Worse, the teacher loved her. Cassy would answer questions and always get them right. Except she wasn’t right.

“Now class, if a 1 kg weight is dropped off the Sears’ tower...” He drew the diagram. “How fast is the weight going after 2 seconds? Cassy?”

“10 meters per second squared.” Confident. Wrong. She didn’t even get the unit right.

“Very good Cassy, and how did you get the answer?” Come on.

“That’s what gravity is, and gravity is constant.” She said, waving her pen around idly.

“Absolutely. Good job Cassy.” See what I mean? He’s got to be fucking her. How can anyone learn in an environment like this? Fuck it. I don’t even care.

I glanced at Cassy. She was smiling. She lifted a hand, tucking her hair back behind her ear. Physics might not be teaching me much, but Chemistry had taught me that spontaneous combustion is impossible. Spontaneous vomiting, however, is a different matter.

“Adam, do you need to go to the nurse?”

“Ya.” Fuck. I got it on my shoes too. Fuck.

I sloshed down to the nurse’s office. When I opened the door, there she was. Doll. It’s like my entire life revolved around this girl.

“Hello.” Nurse Alcott greeted me. “Is this an emergency? Or can I finish up with Ms. Cartwright before I see you?”

“Uhh...” Sound came out of my mouth. Doll looked impassively at me. I felt like I didn’t even exist. She was looking through me. “No. That’s fine.”

I stepped back out of the office, closing the door behind me.

I slid down the wall. The closer I got to the floor, the more I smelled the vomit.

What the fuck, Adam. Just because the girl you hate does the thing you like doesn’t mean that you can just vomit all over yourself. That’s not right.

A few minutes passed before the door opened. Doll stepped out. She didn’t go far.

“Do you need help?” She said. The sound carried through the halls. Hearing it made me forget about the vomit for a moment. I was lost in the musical tones. She was a symphony playing for an audience of one.

I glanced up. I felt like a little piece of chicken on a kebab. Her eyes were focused on me. Her gaze was the kebab, and I was the chicken.

She held a hand out to me. This made the vomiting thing worth it. I took her hand. She pulled, I stood. “Thank you.”

She was already walking away. A casual wave over her shoulder was all I got.

I stepped into the nurse’s office, shut the door, screamed, and put my fist through a wall.

It hurt. The wall was a lot less hard than I had thought it would be. The wooden beam inside, however, felt about right.

“Oh my.” The nurse said under her breath. “Teenage hormones never cease to amaze me.” Thanks, Nurse Alcott.

“You gonna come over?” Thomas crackled over the phone.

“Sorry, man.” I answered. “I kind of want a quiet night.”

“Come-on man. I got something to show you.”

“Can’t you just bring it to school? Show me tomorrow?”

He sighed, then went quiet for a moment. “Fine. You want me to bring it to school? I’ll bring it to school.” He was raising his voice. “See you tomorrow!”

I was in no mood for his shit. I still had vomit in my shoe for goodness sakes. Nurse Alcott had tried to help me wash up but I kept finding pieces of puke anyways. She sent me home early because it was last period and everything, and I just wanted to calm down. Fortunately she had not reported me for the hole in her wall. She was a good person.

I flicked through my phone. Maybe I would see a movie. The nice theater didn't have anything good. Maybe the cheap theater would have something better. "The Beast of Blorgach Seven?" That sounded awful. Maybe the theater would be empty. I'll see that. Well, after a shower.

You know how theaters tend to have this giant glowing sign out front that advertised what was playing? The cheap theater had a sign like that, but only 1 in 3 bulbs worked and the strobe effect left the sign in darkness half the time.

The theater was virtually empty. In the back seat sat a single patron. I took a seat up front.

I was never too interested in old movies. This was an old movie. Actually, it was probably a *B-Movie*. I had heard a little about these. They were made badly on purpose to make all the other movies look good. Or something.

The beast itself was a guy in a paper mache mask. It looked like he had rubber gloves and a track suit on. I couldn't quite tell. You never really got a good look at the guy. That was probably on purpose. Maybe it was even supposed to make it scary. I couldn't tell.

The acting sucked. It felt like they got middle schoolers to act everything out. There were times the actors forgot their lines. At least, I hoped that's what it was. Otherwise they were pausing long enough that even Kirk would feel awkward.

Whatever, I didn't have to think to watch the movie. Once I stopped trying to figure it out, I actually kind of liked it.

I waited until the end of the credits. When the house lights came back on, I turned to leave. I tripped over myself. The other patron had also stayed. In fact, she was only standing just now. It was Doll.

I tried to hurry out before she saw me, but it was too late. "Adam." She said.

I stopped and turned back to look at her. "Hello, Felicity."

"People never come to these movies." I was once again stuck in place by her eyes. It was like she had me on a dissection table and was about to take me apart, see what made me tick.

"I needed to get away. I didn't have the best day." I should just leave.

She didn't let me. "You can be a creep sometimes." Whoa. Thomas's earlier statement came back to me like a flood: Harsh, man. Harsh.

What the hell. She's the one who talked to me here. "I know." I said. I found myself just hoping to hear her speak more.

"Why?"

"It's like," brain-dead, "what if you had class with Adonis?"

"The greek?"

"Yeah?"

She cocked her head to the side, as if she was thinking. Slowly, she raised a hand to her ear, pulling her hair back and over. Fuck. I turned away.

"Ok." Wait. What?

I turned back, "Ok?"

She nodded, "Ok." And then she left.

"What the fuck?" I think I said it aloud. I might not have, but I put quotes around it because I think I might have. It doesn't really matter.

I lay in bed. It was pretty early, but I didn't really care. I stared at the ceiling and thought of what all had happened today. It wasn't helping, I still had no idea how to feel. Doll was unattainable. Should I even care that she had talked to me?

And then there was the hair thing. I know, I know. You're sick of hearing about the hair thing. But it's my thing. So sexy. And she knew. She knew that the hair thing was my thing. Otherwise, why would she tease me with it in the theater? I know how hair works, people don't just constantly put it over their ears.

Damn it. If she knows, then Cassy might know. I don't really know why that bugs me so much. She's an asshole, why do I care so much what she thinks? Do I like her? Oh god no. Thank goodness. Intrusive thoughts, you know?

But seriously, how does Doll know about the hair thing? Maybe she doesn't. Maybe girls like her just do stuff like that, and *that's* why I like stuff like that. No. People don't do the hair thing all that often. Or maybe they do, and I just notice it in the girls that I like? Or those that I don't like. Man, fuck Cassy.

I flipped over onto my side. I didn't trust my stomach at this point in time, so I wanted it pointed off of my bed. Speaking of that: what the fuck? Who just vomits when the girl they hate does the hair thing?

God damn it. I got up and started pacing. Maybe I'm over-thinking this. Then again, if I'm actually under-thinking it, would that be worse? Would it be worse to think I'm over-thinking this but actually be under-thinking this, or to think I'm under-thinking this but actually be over-thinking this? Fuck! Now I'm *sure* that I'm over-thinking this.

Let's examine the facts:

Fact 1: She does the hair thing.

Fact 2: She helped you up at the nurse's.

Fact 3: She approached you in the theater.

I'm kind of liking these fact things.

Fact 4: She told you that you're a creep. ...

Fact 5: She didn't laugh at your joke this morning.

Ok, new approach. The fact thing didn't work out. Next time I see her, I'll just ask. I'm dumb, she's not, she'll set me straight. But what am I even asking? *Doll, do you secretly like me?* Not fucking likely. The next time I would see her would be in class tomorrow. There was no way that I was going to ask *that* question in front of everybody. If she said yes it would ruin her pristine reputation, and if she said no she'd crush my heart. It didn't even matter what the truth was.

"Honey, are you OK?" My mom poked her head into my room.

"Yes, Mom."

"You were screaming."

I threw my pillow at her. "Leave me alone!"

I sat in my chair at the back of the class. Thomas hadn't come in today. Cassy was trying not to get called on. Mrs. Mathers didn't humor her like my physics teacher did. I told myself that this was because Mrs. Mathers wasn't fucking her. I needed the reassurance for a variety of reasons, not least of which was to vanquish the image that my brain had conjured of Mrs. Mathers in a gimp suit.

Anyways, Doll was just sitting there like it was any other day. For her, it probably was. For me, it felt like I had been abandoned at the altar. Fuck you, I know I'm a creep, OK?

Mrs. Mathers stopped talking. Her phone buzzed. The lights went out. The rest of the students started murmuring.

"Everybody, against the wall by the door." Her voice was trembling. "Get into the corner. Now!"

We all started moving. Most of us were as confused as I was. Most of us were stupid like I was. The smart ones figured it out faster than I did.

"Grab your cell phones. Put them on silent. Turn off vibration. Don't make a sound." I had never seen a teacher afraid before.

"Mrs. Mathers." Cassy said, pointing at the desk. Mrs. Mathers had forgotten her own cell phone.

"Oh my god." She grabbed it, fumbling through the menu to turn it off. "Thank you Cassy."

I was at the back of the classroom. I could see the entire class in front of me. Mrs. Mathers was in the front. She would be the first thing an attacker would see if they barged into the classroom.

I heard shots in the distance. Any illusion that this was not real was quickly dispelled. It sounded different than I had expected. It wasn't at all like it was in video games. I clenched my eyes closed. I could hear screaming now. It was vitally important that I stayed silent. I wasn't going to be the reason that we all died today.

Footsteps. The guy was coming this way.

The door swung open.

The guy walked in.

Mrs. Mathers was gasping for air.

The guy walked in front of us all, looking at each of us one by one. Piss hissed out of someone. The sound was soon drowned out by sobbing.

"Looking for volunteers?" Doll's voice. I opened my eyes. Doll took a step towards the guy. The guy had two shotguns on his back, and one more in his hands. He had a fanny pack in front of him, possibly full of shells. He had a mask on, but I knew who it was; it was Thomas. "Kill me first, then you can do whatever you want to the others." No. Doll. Stop.

She grabbed for the gun barrel but he pulled it out of reach. As he tried to aim at other students, she stepped in front of the gun.

"Don't make me kill you." He said. "I'm not here for you."

“Make you?” She laughed. The laugh was unearthly beautiful, and unbearably sad. “I’m asking you to.” She lunged for him again. This time, she caught the gun barrel. She held it against her forehead. “I’ll make it easy for you. Pull the trigger.”

I didn’t know what was happening. Was she suicidal? Was this some trick? Was I in some kind of perverted reality show?

The sound of a shotgun at 15 feet in an enclosed classroom is not a sound that I had ever heard before. The back of Doll’s head opened and blood and brain flew out towards the rest of the students. A clump of hair passed by my eyes. My heart dropped in time with her body.

I could die here. That was not OK. Somehow, seeing Doll murdered in front of my eyes was less OK. I screamed. Anger, not fear.

He trained the gun on another student, not me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something move on the ground. “Did you misunderstand me?” Doll said, standing in front of the gun. “You’ve got to—” He pulled the trigger.

Her body caught the shotgun pellets at close range. The sides and back of her blouse went from white to red. I think I knew why.

She slumped to the ground. Then she started to stand. Thomas started shooting. Every shot was trained on Doll’s prone figure. Every shot sprayed blood, cloth, flesh, and bone into the air. His gun clicked as he found himself without ammo.

In super hero stories, they say things like *her flesh knit back together with surprising speed*. That didn’t happen. I saw Doll dead on the ground, and she never stopped being dead. And then she had the gun barrel in her hands. Her clothes were ripped to shreds and she was covered in blood. It was her own blood. I don’t think that made things better.

I can’t tell you how she healed. I clearly remember her getting up off the floor. Every time a part of her hid itself from my view it was completely healed when I saw it again. It was like some perverted magic trick.

She pulled on the gun and he let her have it. Thomas fell over onto his back. The fanny pack spilled open, ammo rolled towards me, and the two shotguns on his back clanged loudly against the floor. I could see a dark spot on his crotch.

I screamed again and ran forward. Doll shouldered into me, knocking me off balance. “Stop it.” It was an empty gesture that her tone was more forgiving with me than she had been with Thomas. “The police will be here soon. Let them handle it.”

I was not about to disobey her now. Instead, I started crying. My vision distorted. She was looking down at me and at Thomas, almost as if I had also tried to shoot up the school. In one hand she still held his shotgun by the barrel. In the other, she held a cell phone. Even now, her hair was perfect. Her clothes were shot to shreds and her chest was exposed. Her clothes had literally been shot off of her, she was covered in gallons of her own blood, and her hair was perfect.

Barely a minute passed before the police barged in. They wore body armor and some had riot shields. They handcuffed Thomas. They weren't gentle. Fuck him. They escorted us all out of the building and they started interviewing us.

We all told them what had happened. Doll had saved us. She was shot seven times and subdued the shooter. Every single one of us said the same thing. They didn't believe us. We insisted. They let us go. At some point Doll had slipped away. None of the police had seen her.

I walked home. My mother hugged me tight. She was saying words, but I didn't hear them. She probably told me how events had happened from her position, and that she was so happy that I was alive. That's probably what I would have done if my child was the victim of a school shooting. Then again, she could have been telling me about the lottery tickets she had bought today. Like I said, I wasn't listening.

I went up to the shower instead. I looked at myself in the mirror. I was covered in blood. Doll's blood. I started to cry. As I took off my clothes for the shower, I found a little sliver of her skull. I set it on the sink. I was going to burn the clothes.

I turned the water on to full heat and slumped down under it. I wailed like a banshee. I deserved it.

I sat in the back of the class. Mrs. Mathers droned on about something or other. Thomas was gone. Everyone knew why. Cassy had her head on her desk. I didn't blame her. Doll sat in the front row as if nothing had happened.

The bell rang, and everyone filed out. Everyone except for me, Mrs. Mathers, and Doll.

Mrs. Mathers said something to me but my eyes were on Doll.

“Adam.” Doll said. “Come here.” She stood next to Mrs. Mathers.

Mrs. Mathers fell silent, then closed and locked the door. I approached the front.

“I requested that you keep it.” She said. I could hear a smile behind her words, but I didn’t see one on her face. Mrs. Mathers had her head down.

“Keep what?”

“The memory.” She answered.

“What?”

“No one else remembers what happened in this classroom. They know that Thomas killed Jeff and Kyle, then the police arrived and disarmed him.”

“But I saw you die.”

“Adam, I’ve been trying to die for almost a hundred years. If I look for death, it doesn’t come.” I met her gaze. It was a mistake. I felt naked before her.

“Why?” I said.

“Why what?”

“Why me?”

She nodded. “A little something creepy for the little creep.” She said, grinning.

I think she likes me.

I’m not so sure that I like her.