

Miss Adele Amidst the Corsets

'Well, that's that,' Miss Dee Pendency said, and Miss Adele, looking back over her shoulder, saw that it was. The strip of hooks had separated entirely from the rest of the corset. Dee held up the two halves, her big red slash mouth pulling in opposite directions.

'Least you can say it died in battle. Doing its duty.'

'Bitch, I'm on in ten minutes.'

'*When an irresistible force like your ass . . .*'

'Don't sing.'

'*Meets an old immovable object, like this shitty old corset . . . You can bet as sure as you llllllve!*'

'It's your fault. You pulled too hard.'

'*Something's gotta give, something's gotta give, SOME-THING'S GOTTA GIVE.*'

'You pulled too hard.'

'Pulling's not your problem.' Dee lifted her bony white Midwestern leg up onto the counter, in preparation to put on a thigh-high. With a heel she indicated Miss Adele's mountainous box of chicken and rice: 'Real talk, baby.'

Miss Adele sat down on a grubby velvet stool and greeted her reflection. She was thickening and sagging, in all the same ways, in all the same places, as her father. Plus it was

midwinter, her skin was ashy. She felt like some once-valuable piece of mahogany furniture, lightly dusted with cocaine. This final battle with her corset had set her wig askew. She was forty-six years old.

‘Lend me yours.’

‘Good idea. You can wear it on your arm.’

And tired to death, as the Italians say – tired to *death*. Especially sick of these kids, these ‘Millennials’, or whatever they were calling themselves. Always ‘on’. No backstage to any of them – only front of house. Wouldn’t know a sincere, sisterly friendship if it kicked down the dressing-room door and sat on their faces.

Miss Adele stood up, un-taped, put a furry deerstalker on her head and switched to her comfortable shoes. She removed her cape. Maybe stop with the cape? She had only to catch herself in the mirror at a bad angle, and there was Daddy, in his robes.

‘The thing about undergarments,’ Dee said, ‘is they can only do so much with the cards they’ve been dealt? Like Obama.’

‘Stop talking.’

Miss Adele zipped herself into a cumbersome floor-length padded coat, tested – so the label claimed – by climate scientists in the Arctic.

‘Looking swell, Miss Adele.’

‘Am I trying to impress somebody? Only thing waiting for me at the stage door is mono. Tell Jake I went home.’

‘He’s out front – tell him yourself!’

‘I’m heading this way.’

‘You know what they say about choosing between your ass and your face?’

Miss Adele put her shoulder to the fire door and heaved it open. She caught the punchline in the ice-cold stairwell.

'You should definitely choose one of those at some point.'

Aside from having to work there, Miss Adele tried not to mess much with the East Side. She'd had the same sunny rent-controlled studio apartment on Tenth Avenue and 23rd since '93, and loved the way the West Side communicated with the water and the light, loved the fancy galleries and the big anonymous condos, the High Line funded by bankers and celebrities, the sensation of clarity and wealth.

But down here? Depressing. Even worse in the daylight. Crappy old buildings higgledy-piggledy on top of each other, ugly students, shitty pizza joints, delis, tattoo parlours. Nothing bored Miss Adele more than ancient queens waxing lyrical about the good old bad old days. At least the bankers never tried to rape you at knife-point or sold you bad acid. And then once you got past the Village, everything stopped making sense. Fuck these little streets with their dumbass names! And then the logistics of googling one's location – remove gloves, put on glasses, find the damn phone – were too much to contemplate in the current wind chill. Instead Miss Adele stalked violently up and down Rivington, cutting her eyes at any soul who dared look up. At the kerb she stepped over a frigid pool of yellow fluid, three cardboard plates frozen within it. What a dump! Let the city pull down everything under East 6th, rebuild, number it, make it logical, pack in the fancy hotels – not just one or two but a whole bunch of them. Don't half-gentrify – follow through. Stop preserving all this old shit.

Miss Adele had a right to her opinions. Thirty years in a city gives you the right. And now that she was, at long last, no longer beautiful, her opinions were all she had. They were all she had left to give to people.

Whenever her disappointing twin brother, Devin, deigned to call her from his three-kids-and-a-labradoodle, don't-panic-it's-organic, liberal-negro-wet-dream-of-a-Marin-County fantasy existence, Miss Adele made a point of gathering up all her hard-won opinions and giving them to him good. 'I wish he could've been mayor for ever. FOR-EVAH. I wish he was my boyfriend. I wish he was my *daddy*.' Or: 'They should frack the hell out of this whole state. We'll get rich, secede from the rest of you dope-smoking, debt-ridden assholes. You the ones dragging us all down.' Her brother accused Miss Adele of turning rightwards in old age. It would be more accurate to say that she was done with all forms of drama – politics included. That's what she liked about gentrification, in fact: gets rid of all the drama.

And who was left, anyway, to get dramatic about? Every pretty boy she'd ever cared about had already moved to Brooklyn, Jersey, Fire Island, Provincetown, San Francisco or the grave. This simplified matters. Work, pay cheque, apartment, the various lifestyle sections of *The Times*, Turner Classic Movies, Nancy Grace, bed. Boom. Maybe an old *Golden Girls* re-run. A little *Downton*. That was her routine and disruptions to it – like having to haul ass across town during a polar vortex to buy a new corset – were rare. Sweet Jesus, this cold! Unable to feel her toes, she stopped a shivering young couple in the street. British tourists, as it turned out; clueless, nudging each other and beaming up at her Adam's apple with delight, like she was

in their guidebook, right next to the Magnolia Bakery and the Naked Cowboy. They had a map, but without her glasses it was useless. They had no idea where they were. 'Sorry! Stay warm!' they cried, and hurried off, giggling into their North Face jackets. Miss Adele tried to remember that her new thing was that she positively liked all the tourists and missed Bloomberg and loved Midtown and the Central Park nags and all the Prada stores and *The Lion King* and lining up for cupcakes wherever they happened to be located. Sure, why not, she was crazy about all that shit. So give those British kids your most winning smile. Sashay round the corner in your fur-cuffed Chelsea boots with the discreet heel. Once out of sight, though, it all fell apart; the smile, the straightness of her spine, everything. Even if you don't mess with it – even when it's not seven below – it's a tough city. Takes a certain wilfulness to keep your shit in a straight line. When did the effort start outweighing the pleasure? Part of the pleasure used to be precisely this: the buying of things. She used to *love* buying things! Lived for it! Now if she never bought another damn thing again she wouldn't even –

Clinton Corset Emporium. No awning, just a piece of cardboard stuck in the window. As Miss Adele entered, a bell tinkled overhead – an actual bell, on a catch wire – and she found herself in a long narrow room – a hallway really – with a counter down the left-hand side and a curtained-off cubicle at the far end, for privacy. Clearly it lacked many of the things a girl expects from an emporium – background music, hangers, shelves, mirrors, lights, price tags, et cetera. Bras and corsets were everywhere, piled on top of each other in anonymous white cardboard boxes, towering up to the ceiling. They seemed to form the very walls of the place.

'Good afternoon,' said Miss Adele, daintily removing her gloves, finger by finger. 'I am looking for a corset. Could somebody help me?'

A radio was on; talk radio — incredibly loud. Some AM channel bringing the latest from a distant land, where the people talk from the back of their throats. One of those Easterny, Rus-siany places? Miss Adele was no linguist, and no geographer. She unzipped her coat, made a noise in the back of her own throat, and looked pointedly at the presumed owner of the place. He sat slumped behind the counter, listening to this radio with a tragic twist to his face, like one of those sad-sack cab drivers you see hunched over the wheel, permanently tuned in to the bad news from back home. And what the point of *that* was, Miss Adele would never understand. Turn that shit down! Keep your eyes on the road! Leave the place you left where you left it! Lord knows, the day Miss Adele stepped out of the god-forsaken state of Florida was pretty much the last day that shithole ever crossed her mind.

Could he even see her? He was angled away, his head resting in one hand. Looked to be about Miss Adele's age, but further gone: bloated face, about sixty pounds overweight, bearded, religious type, wholly absorbed by the radio. Meanwhile, somewhere back there, behind the curtain, Miss Adele could make out two women talking:

'She just turned fourteen. Why you don't speak to the nice lady? She's trying to help you. She just turned fourteen.'

'So she's still growing. We gotta consider that. Wendy — can you grab me a Brava 32 B?'

A scrap of an Asian girl appeared from behind the curtain, proceeded straight to the counter and vanished below it.

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Miss Adele turned back to the owner. He had his fists stacked like hot potatoes – upon which he rested his chin – and his head tilted in apparent appreciation of what Miss Adele would later describe as ‘the ranting’, for did it not penetrate every corner of that space? And was it not quite impossible to ignore? She felt she had not so much entered a shop as some stranger’s spittle-filled mouth. RAGE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS, cried this radio – in whatever words it used – RIGHTEOUSNESS AND RAGE. Miss Adele crossed her arms in front of her chest, like a shield. Not this voice – not today. Not any day – not for Miss Adele. By the time she’d hit New York, thirty years earlier, she already knew how to avoid being turned into a pillar of salt, and was not in the least bit surprised to find herself spending forty days – or four years – in the wilderness (of Avenue A). And though she had learned, over two decades, that there was nowhere on earth entirely safe from the voices of rage and righteousness – not even the new New York – still Miss Adele had taken great care to organize her life in such a way that her encounters with them were as few as possible. (On Sundays, she did her groceries in a cut-off T-shirt that read THOU SHALT.) She may have been fully immersed, dunked in the local water, with her daddy’s hand on the back of her head and his blessing in her ear, but she’d leapt out of that shallow channel of water the first moment she was able. Was she to be ambushed, now, in a corset emporium?

‘A corset,’ she repeated, and raised her spectacular eyebrows. ‘Could do with a little help here?’

‘WENDY,’ yelled the voice behind the curtain, ‘could you see to our customer?’

The shop girl sprung puppet-like, up from below, clutching a stepladder to her chest.

'Looking for Brava!' shouted the girl, turned her back on Miss Adele, opened the stepladder and began to climb it. Meanwhile, the owner shouted something at the woman behind the curtain, and the woman, adopting his tongue, shouted something back. The radio voice worked itself up into what sounded like apoplexy.

'It is customary, in retail —' Miss Adele began.

'Sorry — one minute,' said the girl, came down with a box under her arm, dashed right past Miss Adele and disappeared once more behind the curtain.

Miss Adele took a deep breath. She stepped back from the counter, pulled her deerstalker off her head and tucked a purple bang behind her ear. Sweat prickled her face for the first time in weeks. She was considering turning on her heel and making that little bell shake till it fell off its damn string when the curtain opened and a mousy girl emerged, with her mother's arm around her. They were neither of them great beauties. The girl had a pissy look on her face, and moved with an angry slouch, like a prisoner, whereas you could see the mother was at least doing her best to keep things on an even keel. The mother looked beat — and too young to have a teenager. Or maybe she was the exact right age. Devin's kids were teenagers now. And Miss Adele was almost as old as the President. None of it made any sense, and yet you were still expected to accept it, and carry on, as if it were the most natural process in the world.

'Because they're not like hands and feet,' a warm and lively voice explained, behind the curtain, 'they grow independently.'

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the mother, the way you talk to a priest through a screen. 'The trouble is this thickness here. All the women in our family got it, unfortunately. Curved ribcage.'

'But actually, you know – it's inneresting – it's a totally different curve from you to her. Did you realize that?'

The curtain opened. The speaker was revealed to be a lanky, wasp-waisted woman in her early fifties, with a long, humane face – dimpled, self-amused – and an impressive mass of thick chestnut hair.

'Two birds, two stones. That's the way we do it here. Everybody needs something different. That's what the big stores won't do for you. Individual attention. Mrs Berman, can I give you a tip?' The young mother looked up at the long-necked Mrs Alexander, a duck admiring a swan. 'Keep it on all the time. Listen to me, I know of what I speak. I'm wearing mine right now, I wear it every day. In my day they gave it to you when you walked out the hospital!'

'Well, you look amazing.'

'Smoke and mirrors. Now, all *you* need is to make sure the straps are fixed right like I showed you.' She turned to the sulky daughter and put a fingertip on each of the child's misaligned shoulders. 'You're a lady now, a beautiful young lady, you –' But here again she was interrupted from behind the counter, a sharp exchange of brutal and mysterious phrases, in which – to Miss Adele's satisfaction – the wife appeared to get the final word. Mrs Alexander took a cleansing breath and continued: 'So you gotta hold yourself like a lady. Right?' She lifted the child's chin and placed her hand for a moment on her cheek. 'Right?' The child straightened up, despite herself. See, some people are trying to ease your passage through this world – so

ran Miss Adele's opinion — while others just want to block you at every damn turn. Think of poor Mamma, cupping her hand around a table's sharp corner, to protect the skull of one of her passing toddlers. That kind of instinctive, unthinking care. Now that Miss Adele had grown into the clothes of a middle-aged woman, she began to notice this new feeling of affinity toward them, far deeper than she had ever felt for young women, back when she could still fit into the hot-pants of a showgirl. She walked through the city struck by these strange partnerships of the soft and the hard. In shops, in restaurants, in line at the CVS. She always had the same question. Why in God's name are you *still* married to this asshole? Lady, your children are grown. You have your own credit cards. You're the one with life force. Can't you see he's just a piece of the furniture? It's not 1850. This is New York. Run, baby, run!

'Who's waiting? How can I help you?'

Mother and daughter duck followed the shop girl to the counter, to settle up. The radio, after a brief pause, made its way afresh up the scale of outrage. And Miss Adele? Miss Adele turned like a flower to the sun.

'Well, I need a new corset. A strong one.'

Mrs Alexander beamed: 'Come right this way.'

Together, they stepped into the changing area. But as Miss Adele reached to pull the curtain closed behind them both — separating the ladies from the assholes — a look passed between wife and husband and Mrs Alexander caught the shabby red velvet swathe in her hand, a little higher up than Miss Adele had, and held it open.

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She had a way about her. Her face expressed emotion in layers: elevated, ironic eyebrows, mournful violet eyes and sly, elastic mouth. She looked like one of the old movie stars. But which one?

'You're a funny lady,' said Miss Adele.

'A life like mine, you have to laugh – Marcus, *please*, one minute –' For he was barking at her – really going for it – practically insisting that she *stop talking to that schwarze*, which prompted Mrs Alexander to lean out of the changing room to say something like: *What is wrong with you? Can't you see I'm busy here?* before turning back with a strained smile to her new friend and confidante, Miss Adele. 'Is it okay if I don't measure you personally? Wendy can do it in a moment. I've just got to deal with – but listen, if you're in a hurry, don't panic, our eyes, they're like hands.'

'Can I just show you what I had?'

'Please.'

Miss Adele unzipped her handbag and pulled out the ruin.

'Oh! You're breaking my heart! From here?'

'I don't remember. It's possible. But maybe ten years ago.'

'Makes sense, we don't sell these any more. Ten years is ten years. Time for a change. What's it to go under? Strapless? Short? Long?'

'Everything. I'm trying to hide some of this.'

'You and the rest of the world. Well, that's my job.' She leaned over and put her lips just a little shy of Miss Adele's ear: 'Now I'm going to whisper. What you got up there? You can tell me. Flesh or feathers?'

'Not the former.'

'Got it. WENDY! I need a Futura and a Queen Bee, corsets, front fastening, forty-six. Bring a forty-eight, too. Marcus – please. One minute, okay? And bring the Paramount in, too! The crossover! Some people, you ask them these questions, they get offended. Everything offends them. Personally, I don't believe in "political correctness",' she said, articulating the phrase carefully, with great sincerity, as if she had recently coined it. 'My mouth's too big. I gotta say what's on my mind! Now, when Wendy comes, take off everything to here and try each corset on at its tightest setting. If you want a defined middle, frankly it's going to hurt. But I'm guessing you know that already.'

'Loretta Young,' called Miss Adele to Mrs Alexander's back, as she approached the counter. 'You look like Loretta Young. Know who that is?'

'Do I know who Loretta Young is? Excuse me one minute, will you?'

Mrs Alexander lifted her arms and said something to her husband, the only parts of which Miss Adele could fully comprehend were the triple repetition of the phrase 'Loretta Young'. In response, the husband made a noise somewhere between a sigh and a grunt.

'Do me a favour,' said Mrs Alexander, turning back to Miss Adele. 'Put it in writing, put it in the mail – then he can read it over and over. He's a reader.'

The curtain closed. But not entirely. An inch hung open and through it Miss Adele watched a silent movie – silent only in the sense that the gestures were everything. It was a marital drama,

conducted in another language, but otherwise identical to those she and Devin had watched as children, through a crack in the door of their parents' bedroom. Appalled, fascinated, she watched the husband, making his noxious point, whatever it was (*You bring shame upon this family?*), and Mrs Alexander, apparently objecting (*I've given my life to this family?*); she watched as he became belligerent (*You should be ashamed?*) and she grew sarcastic (*Right, because you're such a good man?*), their voices competing with the radio (*THOU SHALT NOT?*), and reaching an unreasonable level of drama. Miss Adele strained to separate the sounds into words she might google later. If only there was an app that translated the arguments of strangers! A lot of people would buy that app. Miss Adele had read in *The Times* that a person could make eight hundred grand off such an app – just for having the *idea* for the app. (And Miss Adele had always considered herself a person of many ideas, really a very creative person who happened never to have quite found her medium; a person who, in more recent years, had often wondered whether finally the world and technology had caught up with precisely the kind of creative talents she had long possessed, although they had been serially and tragically neglected, first by her parents – who had wanted twin boy preachers – and later by her teachers, who saw her only as an isolated black child in Bible college, a sole Egyptian among the Israelites; and finally in New York, where her gifts had taken second place to her cheekbones and her ass.) You want to know what Miss Adele would do with eight hundred grand? She'd buy a studio down in Battery Park, and do nothing all day but watch the helicopters fly over the water. (And if

you think Miss Adele couldn't find a studio in Battery Park for eight hundred grand you're crazy. If she had any genius at all, it was for real estate.)

Sweating with effort and anxiety, Miss Adele got stuck at her middle section, which had become, somehow, Devin's middle section. Her fingers fumbled with the heavy-duty eyes and hooks. She found she was breathing heavily. ABOMINATION, yelled the radio. *Get it out of my store!* cried the man, in all likelihood. *Have mercy!* pleaded the woman, basically. That thirty per cent of extra Devin-schlub had replicated itself exactly around her own once-lovely waist. No matter how she pulled she simply could not contain it. So much effort! She could hear herself making odd noises, grunts almost.

'Hey, you okay in there?'

'First doesn't work. Trying the second.'

'No, don't do that. Wait. Wendy, get in there.'

In a second the girl was in front of her, and as close as anybody had been to Miss Adele's bare body in a long time. Without a word, a little hand reached out for the corset, took hold of one side of it and, with surprising strength, pulled it towards the other end until both sides met. The girl nodded, and this was Miss Adele's cue to hook the thing together while the girl squatted like a weightlifter and took a series of short, fierce breaths. Outside of the curtain, the argument had resumed.

'Breathe,' said the girl.

'They always talk to each other like that?' asked Miss Adele. The girl looked up, uncomprehending.

'Okay now?'

'Sure. Thanks.'

The girl ducked out. Miss Adele examined her new

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silhouette. It was as good as it was going to get. She turned to the side and frowned at three days of chest stubble. In winter certain grooming habits became hard to keep up. She pulled her shirt over her head to see the clothed effect from the opposite angle and, in the transition, got a fresh view of the husband, still berating Mrs Alexander, though now in a violent whisper. At the same moment, he seemed to become aware of being observed and looked up at Miss Adele – not as far as her eyes, but tracing, from the neck down, the contours of her body. **RIGHTEOUSNESS**, cried the radio, **RIGHTEOUSNESS AND RAGE!** Miss Adele felt like a nail being hammered into the floor. She grabbed the curtain and yanked it shut. She heard the husband end the conversation abruptly – as had been her own father's way – not with reason or persuasion, but sheer volume. Above the door to the emporium, the little bell rang.

'Molly! So good to see you! How're the kids? I'm just with a customer!' Mrs Alexander's long pale fingers curled round the hem of the velvet. 'May I?'

Miss Adele opened the curtain.

'Oh, it's good! See, you got shape now.'

Miss Adele shrugged, dangerously close to tears: 'It works.'

'Good. Marcus said it would work. He can spot a corset size at forty paces, believe me. He's good for that at least. So, if that works, the other will work. Why not take both? Then you don't have to come back for another twenty years! It's a bargain. Molly, I'm right with you.'

In the store there had appeared a gaggle of children, small and large, and two motherly-looking women, who were greeting the husband and being greeted warmly in turn, smiled at, kissed on both cheeks, et cetera. Miss Adele picked up her

enormous coat and began the process of re-weatherizing herself. She observed Mrs Alexander's husband reaching over the counter to joke with two young children, ruffling their hair, while his wife – whom she watched even more intently – stood over this phoney operation, smiling, as if all that had passed between him and her were nothing at all, only a little domestic incident, some silly wrangle about the accounts, or whatnot. Oh, Loretta Young. Whatever you need to tell yourself. Family first! A phrase that sounded, to Miss Adele, so broad, so empty; one of those convenient pits into which folk will throw any and every thing they can't deal with alone. A hole for cowards to hide in. So you could have your hands round your wife's throat, you could have your terrified little boys cowering in a corner – but when the bell rings, it's time for tea and 'Family First!', with the congregants as your audience, and Mamma's cakes, and smiles all round. *These are my sons, Devin and Darren.* Two shows a day for seventeen years. Once you've seen behind the curtain, you can never look at it the same way again.

Miss Adele stared-down a teenage girl leaning on the counter, who now remembered her manners, looked away and closed her mouth. 'Can I ask you a question?' she asked Mrs Alexander as she approached, carrying two corsets packed back into their boxes. 'You got kids?'

'Five!'

Miss Adele felt exhausted. She had read in *The Times* that by 2050 most of the city would be single-occupant households. Which was meant to be bad news somehow.

'Jesus Christ,' she said.

'No,' said Mrs Alexander, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. 'He was definitely not involved. I'll be with you in one minute,

Sarah! It's been so —' She broke off to snap violently at her husband, and to be snapped at in return, before seamlessly returning to her sentence. 'Long. So long! And look at these girls! They're really tall now!'

Miss Adele took the corsets and reached for her wallet.

'Sorry, but am I causing you some kind of issue? I mean, between you and your . . .'

Both women looked over at the husband, who did not look up, for he was busy fussing with the radio's antenna as the shouting sputtered into static.

'You?' said Mrs Alexander, and with so innocent a face Miss Adele was tempted to award her the Oscar right there and then, though it was only February. 'How do you mean, issue?'

Miss Adele smiled.

'You should be on the stage. You could be my warm-up act.'

'Oh, I doubt you need much warming — even in these temperatures. No, you don't pay me, you pay him.' A small child ran by Mrs Alexander with a pink bra on his head. Without a word she lifted it, folded it in half and tucked the straps neatly within the cups. 'You got kids?'

Miss Adele was so surprised, so utterly wrong-footed by this question, she found herself speaking the truth.

'My twin — he does. He has kids. We're identical twins. I guess I feel like his kids are mine, too.'

Mrs Alexander put her hands on her tiny waist and shook her head.

'Now, that is *fascinating*. You know, I never thought of that before. Genetics is an amazing thing — amazing! If I wasn't in the corset business, I'm telling you, that would have been my line. Better luck next time, right?' She laughed sadly, and

looked over at the counter. 'He listens to his lectures all day, he's educated. I missed out on all that. Okay, so — are we happy?'

Are *you* happy? Are you really happy, Loretta Young? Would you tell me if you weren't, Loretta Young, the Bishop's Wife? Oh, Loretta Young, Loretta Young! Would you tell anybody?

'Molly, don't say another word — I know exactly what you need. Nice meeting you,' said Mrs Alexander to Miss Adele, over her shoulder, as she took her new customer behind the curtain. 'If you go over to my husband, you can settle up with him. Have a good day.'

Miss Adele approached the counter and placed her corsets upon it. She looked hard at the side of Mrs Alexander's husband's head. He picked up the first box. He looked at it as if he'd never seen a corset box before. Slowly he wrote something down in a notepad in front of him. He picked up the second and repeated the procedure, but with even less haste. Then, without looking up, he pushed both boxes to his left, until they reached the hands of the shop girl, Wendy.

'Forty-six fifty,' said Wendy, though she didn't sound very sure. 'Um . . . Mr Alexander — is there discount on Paramount?'

He was in his own world, staring straight ahead. Wendy let a finger brush the boss's sleeve; it seemed to waken him from his stupor. Suddenly he sat very tall on his stool and thumped a fist upon the counter — just like Daddy casting out the Devil over breakfast — and started right back up shouting at his wife, it was some form of stinging question, which he repeated over and over, in that relentless way these men always have. Miss Adele strained to understand it. Something like: *You happy*

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now? Or: *Is this what you want?* Or: *See what you've done?* *See what you've done?* *See what you've done?*

'Hey, you,' said Miss Adele, 'yes, you, sir. If I'm so disgusting to you? If I'm so beneath your contempt? Why're you taking my money? Huh? You're going to take my money? *My* money? Then, please: look me in the eye. Do me that favour, okay? Look me in the eye.'

Very slowly a pair of blue eyes rose to meet Miss Adele's own green contacts. The blue was unexpected, like the inner markings of some otherwise unremarkable butterfly, and the black lashes were wet and long and trembling. His voice too, was the opposite of his wife's, slow and deliberate, as if each word had been weighed against eternity before being chosen for use.

'You are speaking to me?'

'Yes, I'm speaking to you. I'm talking about customer service. Customer service. Ever hear of it? I am your customer. And I don't appreciate being treated like something you picked up on your damn shoe!'

The husband sighed and rubbed at his left eye.

'I don't understand – I say something to you? My wife, she say something to you?'

Miss Adele shifted her weight to her other hip and very briefly considered a retreat. It did sometimes happen, after all – she knew from experience – that is, when you spent a good amount of time alone – it did sometimes come to pass – when trying to decipher the signals of others – that sometimes you mistook –

'Listen, your wife is friendly – she's civilized, I'm not talking about your wife. I'm talking about *you*. Listening to your . . . I don't know what – your *hate speech* – blasting through this

store. You may not think I'm godly, brother, and maybe I'm not, but I am in your store with good old-fashioned American money and I ask that you respect that and you respect me.'

He began on his other eye, same routine.

'I see,' he said, eventually.

'Excuse me?'

'You understand what is being said, on this radio?'

'What?'

'You speak this language that you hear on the radio?'

'I don't *need* to speak it to understand it. And why you got it turned up to eleven? I'm a customer – whatever's being said, I don't want to listen to that shit. I don't need a translation – I can hear the *tone*. And don't think I don't see the way you're looking at me. You want to tell your wife about that? When you were peeping at me through that curtain?'

'First you say I'm not looking at you. Now I'm looking at you?'

'Is there a problem?' said Mrs Alexander. Her head came out from behind the curtain.

'I'm not an idiot,' said Miss Adele. She flicked the radio's casing with a finger. 'I got radar for this shit. And you and I both know there's a way of not looking at somebody that is looking at them.'

The husband brought his hands together, somewhere between prayer and exasperation, and shook them at his wife as he spoke to her, over Miss Adele's head, and around her comprehension.

'Hey – talk in English. English! Don't disrespect me! Speak in English!'

'Let me translate for you: I am asking my wife what she did to upset you.'

Miss Adele turned and saw Mrs Alexander, clinging to herself and swaying, less like Loretta now, more like Vivien Leigh swearing on the red earth of Tara.

'I'm not talking about her!'

'Sir, was I not polite and friendly to you? Sir?'

'First up, I ain't no sir – you live in this city, use the right words for the right shit, okay?'

There was Miss Adele's temper, bad as ever. She'd always had it. Even before she was Miss Adele, when she was still little Darren Bailey, it had been a problem. Had a tendency to go off whenever she was on uncertain ground, like a poorly set firework, exploding in odd, unpredictable directions, hurting innocent bystanders – often women, for some reason. How many women had stood opposite Miss Adele with the exact same look on their faces as Mrs Alexander wore right now? Starting with her mother and stretching way out to the horizon. The only Judgement Day that had ever made sense to Miss Adele was the one where all the hurt and disappointed ladies form a line – a chorus line of hurt feelings – and one by one, give you your pedigree, over and over, for all eternity.

'Was I rude to you?' asked Mrs Alexander, the colour rising in her face. 'No, I was not. I live, I let live.'

Miss Adele looked around at her audience. Everybody in the store had stopped what they were doing and fallen silent.

'I'm not talking to you. I'm trying to talk to this gentleman here. Could you turn off that radio so I can talk to you, please?'

'Okay, so maybe you leave now,' he said.

'Second of all,' said Miss Adele, counting it out on her hand, though there was nothing to follow in the list. 'Contrary to appearances, and just as a point of information, I am not an Arab.'

Oh, I know I look like an Arab. Long nose. Pale. People always getting that shit twisted. So you can hate me, fine – but you should know who you're hating and hate me for the right reasons. Because right now? You're hating in the wrong direction – you and your radio are wasting your hate. If you want to hate me, file it under N-word. As in African-American. Yeah.'

The husband frowned and held his beard in his hand.

'You are a very confused person. The truth is I don't care what you are. All such conversations are very boring to me, in fact.'

As if he *knew* boredom was the purest form of aggression to Miss Adele! She who had always been so beautiful and so fascinating – she who had never known ambivalence!

'Oh, I'm *boring* you?'

'Honestly, yes. And you are also being quite rude. So now I ask politely: leave, please.'

'I am out that door, believe me. I can't fucking *wait* to stop listening to that noise. But I am *not* leaving without my mother-fucking corset.'

The husband slipped off his stool, finally, and stood up.

'You leave now, please.'

'Who's gonna make me? You can't touch me, right? That's one of your laws, right? I'm unclean, right? So who's gonna touch me? Miss Tiny Exploited Migrant Worker over here?'

'Hey, fuck you, racist asshole! I'm international student! NYU!'

Et tu, Wendy? Miss Adele looked sadly at her would-be ally. Wendy was a whole foot taller now, thanks to the stepladder, and she was using the opportunity to point a finger in Miss Adele's face. Tired to death.

'Just give me my damn corset.'

'Sir, I'm sorry but you really have to leave now,' said Mrs Alexander, walking towards Miss Adele, her elegant arms wrapped around her itty-bitty waist. 'There are minors in here, and your language is not appropriate.'

'Y'all call me "sir" one more time,' said Miss Adele, speaking to Mrs Alexander, but still looking at the husband, 'I'm gonna throw that radio right out that fucking window. And don't you be thinking I'm an anti-Semite or some shit . . .' Miss Adele faded. She had the out-of-body sense that she was watching herself on the big screen, at one of those Chelsea screenings she used to attend, with a beloved boy, long dead, who'd adored shouting at the screen, back when that was even a thing. When young people still went to see old movies in a cinema. Oh, if that boy were alive! If he could see Miss Adele up on that screen right now! Wouldn't he be shouting at her performance – wouldn't he groan and cover his eyes! The way he did at Hedy or Ava as they made their terrible life choices, all of them unalterable, no matter how loudly you shouted. The boy was not alive. He couldn't shout or put his head on Miss Adele's shoulder, and no one had, or ever could, replace him, and these new boys you met found the old movies 'camp' and 'embarrassing', and Devin had his own life – his kids, his wife – and there was no home any more beyond 10th Street.

'It's a question,' stated Miss Adele, 'of simple politeness. Po-lite-ness.'

The husband shook his shaggy head and laughed, softly.

'You're being polite? Is this polite?'

'But I didn't start this –'

'Incorrect. You started it.'

'You're trying to act like I'm crazy, but from the moment I stepped up in here, you been trying to make me feel like you don't want someone like me up in here – why you even denying it? You can't even look at me now! I know you hate black people. I know you hate homosexual people. You think I don't know that? I can look at you and know that.'

'But you're wrong!' cried the wife.

'No, Eleanor, maybe she's right,' said the husband, putting out a hand to stop the wife continuing. 'Maybe she sees into the hearts of men.'

'You know what? It's obvious this lady can't speak for herself when you're around. I don't even want to talk about this another second. My money's on the counter. This is twenty-first-century New York. This is America. And I've paid for my goods. Give me my goods.'

'Take your money and leave. I ask you politely. Before I call the police.'

'I'm sure he'll go peacefully,' predicted Mrs Alexander, tearing the nail of her index finger between her teeth, but, instead, one more thing went wrong in Miss Adele's mind, and she grabbed that corset right out of Mrs Alexander's husband's hands, kicked the door of Clinton Corset Emporium wide open and high-tailed it down the freezing street, slipped on some ice and went down pretty much face first. After which, well, she had some regrets, sure, but there wasn't much else to do at that point but pick herself up and run, with a big, bleeding dramatic gash all along her left cheek, wig askew, surely looking to everyone she passed exactly like some Bellevue psychotic, a hot crazy mess, an old-school deviant from the fabled city of the

past – exc
Adele. Th
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past — except, every soul on these streets was a stranger to Miss Adele. They didn't have the context, didn't know a damn thing about where she was coming from, nor that she'd paid for her goods in full, in dirty green American dollars, and was only taking what was rightfully hers.

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