

Green Eyes

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The green of the trees and grass around the brick house was dulled by the hazy, golden pallor of the afternoon. Occasional bouts of laughter and fireworks in the distance punctuated the steady hum of conversation that hung above the gathering. Blue smoke from a grill drifted across the lawn.

Grant stood alone. If not for his sunglasses, his furrowed brow and deep-set eyes would have lent him a brooding appearance. He'd socialized for a while, but the day was a heavy one. The Fourth of July was ever easy. The bottle rockets and firecrackers around the neighborhood reminded him of a lot, but mostly of the last year's Independence Day. Andrea was there.

He remembered standing behind her and holding her when the concussion from the town's fireworks display shook his insides as much as the roadside bombs of Iraq had. He focused on her and buried his face in her auburn curls to remind himself he was far from the war. But eventually he understood that the war was never far from him, and it was a part of him she couldn't understand. So he pushed her away. Now she was gone, just another bad memory on top of the rest. He exhaled and looked around the party.

He knew many of the thirty or so people from the university's secondary education program, like the host, Trevor, who stood at his grill. His shock of red hair was visible because he towered over the people holding paper plates standing around him. He didn't know the

guy playing cornhole who emitted a hoarse shout upon scoring. His shaggy blonde hair mushroomed out from a flat-billed hat. Sunlight gleamed off his partner's shaved head and his drooping cheeks pulled his face into a grimace despite the congratulations he yelled. Grant wasn't really interested in the new faces except for one.

She stood under the silver maple in the center of the lawn. He noticed her first because she was beautiful, but he couldn't look away because she seemed sad and distracted, like him. Her straight, dark brown hair reached halfway down her slender, tan shoulders. Her long dress fluttered. Sunglasses rested on the high cheekbones of her angular face. She kept staring off, uninvolved with the people around her standing under the tree.

At first they exchanged polite grins, but each glance grew longer. Her lips kept their fullness as her smiles deepened, and a dimple appeared on her right cheek. Grant only returned the smile. Although he wanted to meet her, he didn't think he deserved to.

She said something to the tattooed girl with short blonde hair she was standing beside and walked towards him. Grant took a deep breath and bit his lip. His stomach fluttered as she took delicate steps through the grass, pinching a corner of her long dress to keep the skirt from dragging. She looked down as she walked but her smile was still there. He stood wide-eyed when she stopped a few feet from him.

"Hi there," she said. Her voice was soft. The warmth that had begun to spread through his chest when she walked over intensified at the sound of it.

"Hello," said Grant. He had to look down. She was a head shorter than him.

“I figured I’d come say ‘hi.’ I have this *really* odd feeling I’m way less shy than you,” she said.

“Oh yeah? What makes you say that?” He tilted his head. His voice sounded different to him as it passed through the smile plastered on his face.

“I mean, you *are* standing here all by yourself, silly,” she said.

“Yeah I guess you have a point there.” He saw his sheepish grin reflected in her sunglasses.

“I’m Lucy.” She extended her hand and the silver bracelets on her wrist jingled.

“Grant,” he said. Her hand felt warm and soft in his. It was comfortable to hold and he did not want to let go. “You can insert a ‘Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds’ joke here. I’m sure you’ve never heard it before.” He felt a wince coming on. That was dumb, he thought.

“Only from Beatles fans, and only all the time. It’s cool, I usually like Beatles fans.” She beamed.

“I couldn’t resist,” he said with a laugh.

“So, Mr. Grant who’s shy and likes the Beatles, you know Trevor?”

“Yeah, we’ve had the same classes together for a while. You?”

“In a roundabout way. He dated my friend Jen. She’s the one standing over there with the tattoo sleeve.” She turned and pointed to the short-haired blonde girl looking at them. “Apparently she’s checking on my progress.”

“Right on. I’m surprised we haven’t met before,” he said. She faced him again.

“Well now we have,” she said. Her smile broadened.

“Yeah...” began Grant. The surge of excitement that rose in his throat cut off the rest of the sentence.

“Might not have if I’d have waited on you to introduce yourself.” She cocked her head, her voice taking on a playfully incredulous tone.

“Uh, well...” he stammered. His face burned.

“Relax, I’m teasing,” she said with a laugh. “So, you studying to be a teacher, too?”

“Yeah. History,” he said with a nod.

“Oh, cool. I love reading things people wrote in different times. Well, I love reading anyway, but with that stuff I just get the feeling we’re all kind of the same whenever we lived, you know?”

“Definitely,” he said with an impressed grin. “And, yeah, I love reading, too. Always have. So, what are you going to school for?” said Grant.

“Nursing. My mom...” She paused. Her glow dimmed, and her voice lost its lightness. “I guess I’m following in my mom’s footsteps. She used to tell me how meaningful it was to help people when they were suffering. I could tell she loved it,” she said. She frowned.

“Well...” said Grant. He wondered what to say, sensing the sad note in her voice. “I’m sure she’s proud.”

“Yeah. I think she would be...” she said. “She actually died a couple years ago...”

“Oh,” said Grant. “Wow...I’m sorry. That’s...” he said.

“It’s okay,” she said, cutting him off. “I mean...it’s been a while. It never really goes away, but...I don’t know...”

The rattling pop of firecrackers by the cornhole game pierced the background noises. Grant jumped and felt his jaw tighten and nostrils

flare as a prickly wave passed over his scalp and down his neck. Lucy glanced towards the laughter and cussing around a lingering puff of smoke. Then she turned to Grant.

“Yeah,” he said. “I know exactly what you mean.” He was surprised at the evenness of his voice. His eyes scanned the small crowd looking for the red wrappers of more firecrackers and he listened for burning fuses. He took a deep breath.

“So,” she said. “You and Trevor both going to be seniors?”

“Yeah. Just a year left. Crazy time, a little daunting you know?” he said.

“Yeah. Definitely. I’m in the same boat. So that makes you...twenty-two? You look a little older,” she said, biting her lip. “I mean, no offense. That’s actually a compliment.”

“Oh, uh, thanks. I’m actually twenty-six. I got a bit of a late start in college,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I was in the Army. Four years – close to it – long story,” he said. He scratched his head.

“Oh, wow. Well, hey, happy Fourth of July. And thanks. Not to sound cliché or anything,” she said. She looked at her feet and cleared her throat.

“Nah. I appreciate it,” he said. A passing cloud dimmed the sunlight, and Lucy took off her sunglasses. He propped his on top of his head and looked into her eyes. They were bright green, almost the shade of lime. They were intense, and they were just like Andrea’s. He felt a pang of guilt when he thought of her.

Still, they were different from Andrea's eyes. There was gravity and depth. There was pain.

"So what did you do in the Army? Besides listen to the Beatles?" she said. She grinned.

"I was infantry. You know, the guys running around looking for trouble," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "The dangerous stuff." She hesitated. "Did you go overseas?"

"In Iraq, yeah. Just a year."

"Jeez, I'm being nosy. Sorry." She scrunched her face.

"You're fine," he said. "It's not really being nosy. It's a part of my life just like...college," he said. He stopped himself from saying something about her mother. It was the same, he thought; loss and pain that never went away.

"I'd say it was a lot different than college. I couldn't imagine, honestly. So, thanks. I bet it took a lot," she said.

"Thanks. I got through it," he said. She had gotten through a lot, too, he thought.

For a moment she stared into his eyes. Her thin eyebrows lowered as she focused and her smile broadened slowly.

"You have the prettiest eyes," she said in a quiet, distant voice. "It's like they're two or three different colors."

"Thanks. Yours are beautiful," he said.

"Thank you," she said. Her entire brow lifted when she smiled, and the dimple appeared again. She inhaled sharply then blinked and wheeled her upper body and pointed a thumb toward the house.

"Um, you're about empty. Can I grab you another?" she asked.

“Oh, uh. Yeah, I haven’t been paying any attention,” he said. “I can get it, though.”

“I got it. My pleasure,” she said. “Don’t you dare go anywhere.”

“Oh, I’ll be here,” he said. “Thanks.”

She glided through the grass, turning to look at him once. She stopped by the tree and said something in her friend’s ear before hurrying across the yard and bouncing up the steps. Without Lucy to distract him, his thoughts turned to Andrea.

It was one of his last nights together with Andrea. Earlier in the day he was flipping through channels and caught a glimpse of a burning Humvee on a palm-lined road. He kept watching, enthralled. Those images always invoked memories of the fear and the horror and he felt them soon after. He did what he always did and texted his best friend from the Army, Kevin, who could always relate. Even if he couldn’t help, he always understood, and that was enough.

When he got to Andrea’s he knew she sensed something was wrong. She tried to cheer him up. She made vegetarian lasagna – one of his favorites – wore his hoodie, and kept her hair down because he liked it that way. But while they ate he stared into space and was miserly with his words. After he cleaned up he sat on the couch opposite of Andrea.

“Grant,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said as he typed on his phone.

“Will you cuddle with me?”

“I always get uncomfortable.” He glanced over to see her round face drawn into a frown.

“What’s with you tonight?”

Grant stared at the television as the Twentieth Century Fox intro began.

“My head doesn’t feel so great tonight.” He shrugged. “I’m sorry.”

“Tonight? It’s not just tonight. What’s going on?”

Grant sighed and set down his phone.

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe you should talk to me about it.”

“I mean...I try. I just don’t know how to explain what goes on up there sometimes,” he said.

I don’t know how to explain it to *her*, he thought. She’s never felt any real pain, never even been to a funeral. At first that purity was a comfort. Now it was an impossible rift.

“So how am I supposed to do to help?”

“You do a lot. Really you do.”

“Exactly. And it doesn’t do any good. I don’t make any difference. You’d rather just play on your phone.”

“...I’m talking to Kevin.” he said. His voice had lowered. “He’s like a brother. He gets it without...” He stopped and looked at the floor, shaking his head. He knew it was the wrong thing to say, even if it was right.

Her eyes closed tight. When she opened them they were glossy and brimming.

“Well I’m the girl you love, and I’m clueless.” She stood and tossed the pillow she was holding onto the couch. She held a hand to her face as she hurried to her bedroom.

He stayed on the couch, hesitant to leave that night but not wanting to talk to her anymore. Doing either would only upset her further. He was done upsetting her. All that would really help was leaving her for good.

The shriek of a bottle rocket jolted him.

He glanced around the yard, then to the porch to watch for Lucy. She looked his way when she got outside. She didn't avert her eyes from him as she crossed the lawn.

She's different, he thought as she walked towards him. *She* might understand.

"Here you go," she said as she handed him the cup with a smile.

"Thanks. I feel spoiled," he said.

"Nah, that's just being nice," she said.

They both looked to the ground for a moment.

"So," she said, looking up at him. She furrowed her brow and her face reddened. "I'm leaving in a few minutes, and, well, uh...hm." She took a deep breath. "I'll just come out and say it: there's something about you –"

Grant listened and felt paralyzed. While she spoke his mind raced. "—it would be really nice to hang out with you sometime. I'd like to get to know you better. You just seem...different..." she said.

"Yeah," he blurted. "I'd love to."

Lucy relaxed her shoulders and exhaled. She was quiet and the corner of her mouth curled into her dimple.

"Well," she said. She laughed and ran a hand over her head. "That was nerve-racking hard and easy at the same time."

“Yeah,” he said. Now what, he wondered.

“Here,” she said. She retrieved a pen from her purse. She grabbed his hand and wrote her number on the back of it. “Shoot me a text. It’d be cool to meet up for the fireworks tonight if you want.”

“Yeah. I would. That sounds really good,” he said.

“Okay,” said Lucy. She was beaming. “Okay...I should get going, but I’ll see you soon?” she said.

“Yeah...looking forward to it,” said Grant.

She only smiled and walked away toward the tree. She glanced at him once more before she started talking to Jen.

Grant walked to the house to speak with Trevor. His feet were light and the commotion of the party faded into the background. He was going to the fireworks this year, too.