

Trading Candy

By Rachel Kolman

Greg's hand still throbs as he pushes open the screen door and walks onto the porch. There's a woman sitting on the top step, her slim shoulders curving towards her body. He tucks his throbbing hand into his hoodie pocket and walks to the left corner of the porch, deciding to avoid small talk. He exhales heavily, thinks briefly of how Alexis is probably icing Eric's cheek in the kitchen, and looks back at the woman on the steps.

She's already looking at him. "Is this bothering you?" she asks, waving her cigarette between her two fingers like a baton. A wispy smoke could floats above her head. Her hair hangs in heavy clumps down her back, slick with oil or hair gel, he can't tell. It doesn't make her any less attractive.

He quickly shakes his head, fighting to keep his expression casual. Then he turns his eyes to the street, where there's plenty to distract him: the hum of bass speakers as cars crawl down the road, the fast chatter of preteens as they sling their half-full pillowcases around. He looks down at his white t-shirt, stained with red punch, trickling into the hem until the double stitched fabric soaked up the rest. He thinks of how he can use this to his advantage. Now he's not just Greg, in a white t-shirt and a blue hoodie. Now he's a stab victim, something out of Freddy Krueger.

His hoodie pocket lights up and a thrumming bass line hits the air. Greg takes his phone out and sees Mark's name on the screen. He's going to want to talk about what just happened, but Greg feels self-conscious having this conversation with the woman on the porch. He thumbs the red end call button and slips the phone back into the hoodie pocket.

"Avoiding someone?"

He turns his head, and they make eye contact. She's smiling, resting her elbow on her knee, her right ear against her palm. Her cigarette, almost smoked down to the filter, hangs limp from her left hand.

"Yeah." He laughs a little. He doesn't know why, maybe her pointing it out warrants a light-hearted laugh. He exhales, the cold air turning his breath into a visible cloud.

"Sorry about the cigarette." She sucks on the last bit of it and flicks it on the front lawn, still in her limp position. Her shoulders shift slightly, but she doesn't get up. A song leaks from the window behind him, and it's got to be something Weezy, because he can hear a verse starting in his nasally voice.

"You look like you're thinking deep about something."

She's still watching him. He doesn't want to admit he's concentrating on which rap song this is so he can think about something other than the way his fist felt when it connected with Eric's chin. Eric's awkward stumbling back and eventual fall on the kitchen tile, blood starting to leak from his lip. Alexis' drink hitting him square in the chest.

"No, not really, just wanting to avoid certain people," he says.

"Well, lucky you came to a party, which is just the place to avoid people."

He smiles. Now, he's looked over at her enough times to notice more details than her clumpy blonde hair and skinny shoulders. She's wearing an army vest over a white tank top, red cutoff shorts and combat boots. He can't decide if it's a costume or her regular clothes.

"So, are you supposed to be dressed up like someone?" he asks, taking a few shimmying steps towards where she is sitting.

"Yeah, Tank Girl."

He's relieved that he didn't just offend her, and then pleased that she came as the comic heroine. "You don't have the shaved hair, though. Or an Army helmet. So you can't be Tank Girl."

"How about I am because I say I am?" She grins, lightness in her voice. He's jealous that she's a natural at this. Maybe it's a smoker thing; small talk must come easy to two people sharing butts.

"And are you anyone?" She's not leaning against her elbow anymore. She's sitting up, shoulders not as curved, knees tilted towards him.

"Well, clearly you can see this awesome red stain on my shirt. I'm going with it and saying I'm a stab victim. Krueger got the best of me, or something like that."

"Looks more like the Hunch Punch got the best of you," Tank Girl says.

"Or I can admit something like a girl just ripped out my heart and left a Hunch Punch stain in her wake, but I don't know how to make it sound clever and charming."

"I think you just did, Hunch Punch."

"So that's my name?"

"It's better than Stab Victim, or Ripped-Out Heart and Punch Stain in Wake."

"That can be my Native American name."

She laughs. She leans over her knees a little, her head tilting and coming back up. He chuckles a little too, seeing her reaction to his joke. It's enough of a boost in confidence to say, "Or you can just call me Greg." A few more shuffling steps towards her.

She puts a finger to her lips. "Hmm, no, I like Hunch Punch better."

"And you're just Tank Girl?"

"Through and through."

Their lingering smiles fade into a silence. He's about to end their small exchange with nice to meet you, Tank Girl, when she says first, "So you're out here avoiding the girl that threw the drink on you."

"Uh, something like that." He flips his phone over and over in his pocket. He doesn't want to talk about Alexis. "Are you, um, avoiding someone too?" The moment after, he wishes he hadn't said it. He's not good at this, like Tank Girl. He thinks he's lost some of the spark of their conversation.

"No, I was just having a smoke," she says.

"Yeah, right, the – the cigarette."

She's looking down at her nails, picking at the bits of nail polish stuck to them. He rubs his nose, feeling the coldness already creeping in the tip.

"Are you cold? Want my jacket?" he asks.

"No, I'm fine. But thank you." She looks back to him, where's he's hovering on the porch. "Sit down, will you? You're creeping me out, standing behind me."

"Sorry." He takes four steps to cross the distance between them and eases next to her on the worn wooden step, keeping five or six inches between their parallel thighs. A girl wearing a blonde wig and clutching a plastic microphone runs up the driveway across the street, a younger boy following her. He immediately guesses that she's Hannah Montana, and then hates the fact that he knows that. He should mention that to Tank Girl jokingly. No – he should not mention that he can spot a Hannah Montana costume anywhere.

Instead, she starts talking with, "Oh man, do you remember filling your pillowcase with so much candy and then just gorging for hours back at home? You bring your stash to school on Monday to trade with your friends, but all they have are Sugar Daddies and Tootsie Rolls, when all you want is some damn Skittles?"

"Ha, yeah." He can't think of anything else to say. She's visibly shivering, so he unzips his hoodie. "Here, take it, please." Before she can refuse, he slips the worn cotton over her shoulders. He brushes the skin behind her neck. She feels like the cool plastic inside the freezer door.

"Thanks." She flips the hoodie up over her head, but doesn't slide her arms into the sleeves.

The Monster Mash starts behind them. Voices cheer and holler, sing along.

"Sounds like a fun party," Tank Girl says.

"Want to head in?" Mark and Eric and Alexis don't seem as terrifying with Tank Girl next to him.

"Nah, I'm fine." She knocks her knees back and forth. He watches the rhythm of them bumping each other, keeping with the beat of the music. "Why don't you just talk to this heart-ripping girl?"

"She threw her drink at me. She doesn't want to talk."

"That's only one con. Now tell me a pro. Like, you're a gentlemen that always offers a lady his jacket."

"I punched her ex-boyfriend."

"Pro: you stood up for her."

"But she's not my girlfriend. Not even close."

"Pro: you're passionate."

"Her ex-boyfriend used to be one of my best friends."

"Pro: you...you wear Hunch Punch well."

He laughs. "See, it's complicated."

His hoodie pocket lights up and the same bass line ringtone starts playing. She lifts her eyebrows and fishes into the pocket hanging over her right knee, away from him. She shoos away his hands that are grabbing for the phone and reads the text out loud. "From Mark: yo where'd you go? Eric and Alexis are pissed. She's still talking about it."

Immediately, she starts thumbing out a reply message. "What're you writing?" He reaches again for his phone, but she wiggles away, her body hunched over and protective. She slides the phone closed and hands it back to him, grinning.

He doesn't want her to see how upset he really is. "Oh man, what did you do?" he says, trying to keep his tone lighthearted, and looks through his sent messages: Pro - at least she's thinking about me.

"Huh? Right?" She jabs his side with her elbow.

He can't stop his lips from curling in a smile. "Yeah, I guess." He puts his phone on silent and slips it into his left jean pocket. That can wait until later. He doesn't know how much longer he has with Tank Girl on this porch. He wants to think that he's been getting signals from her, that he's not just misunderstanding conversation between strangers at a party. Pro: she initiated most of the conversation. Con: he initially avoided her. Pro: she invited him to sit. Con: she refused his jacket until he placed it on her. Pro: she's still here.

“So tell me what makes this chick worth throwing a punch for,” Tank Girl says.

Greg’s sure that mentioning his past obsession with Alexis will steer the conversation towards the Con column. He decides to dismiss the situation by saying, “She’s just a friend. I was more pissed at him, really.”

“What, ‘bros before hoes,’ right?”

“Something like that.”

“And now you’re avoiding them both.”

“I just wanted some fresh air. And to let my shirt dry.”

She looks at him, the corner of her mouth tilting up. “You’re a horrible liar. There’s something about you I have to figure out.” Pro.

“About me? You won’t even tell me your first name.” Con.

“For your own good. You’re too nice of a guy.”

Pro. It’s the deciding vote. Make your move. She smells of something sweet underneath the lingering smoke, and already he’s thinking of the way her smell will be in his hoodie for days after.

It’s easy to close the distance between them, until their thighs almost touch. She doesn’t even notice that part. “Does Tank Girl like nice guys?”

You creepy fuck, he thinks. That was horrible. Do something else besides talking because that doesn’t work so well for you. You’re losing time. Hurry up.

She turns her face to look at him, and they’re so close. Her smoke-flavored breath isn’t nearly as bad as he thought it would be. He wants to taste what else is hiding, where that sweetness comes from.

“Greg.” She presses her hand against his shoulder.

At the hardened sound of his name, he retreats a little. He looks up, into her eyes, a light grayish blue in the dim light.

She’s pushing him away. Her face is firm. Then she says, “I’m still just looking for some damn Skittles.”

It takes him a second, but then he feels the heavy weight drop in his gut. “And what, I’m a Sugar Daddy?”

She giggles, and it’s just the wrong thing for her to do. The sound echoes in his ear. He hangs his head down, closing his eyes. “I mean – you referenced the candy earlier, I was just – ”

“I know what you were doing,” she says.

“Something like that.”

Maybe it’s out of pity, but she kisses his cheek before she says, “It’s Lacey, by the way.” She stands up and slips the hoodie from her shoulders. She lets it fall on the step behind her. Con.

“Are you going in?” he asks. He hates how desperate his voice sounds.

“I don’t know whose house this is.” She looks at him over her shoulder for a moment, a curling smile. “Go talk to the girl,” she says as she bounces down the steps, crosses the small lawn to the sidewalk.

Greg wants to follow her, wants to ask where she’s going. Maybe she has more parties to sit out in front of and have a smoke, or maybe she’s off to kick ass ‘cause it’s fucking Tank Girl, but instead he sits still on that front step and watches her place a new cigarette between her lips. She cups her hand around the tip and flicks her lighter on. She doesn’t look back at him as she starts walking down the sidewalk, walking somewhere. Greg knows he should take her advice and head inside to face Mark, face Alexis. Instead, he sits there on the porch and thinks about pros and cons. Thinks about how long it’s been since he carried around his own pillowcase of candy. Thinks about going to a comic book store tomorrow to buy old issues of Tank Girl. He stays thinking on that front porch until there’s nothing left to do but stare at the smoke cloud she left behind, waiting until it blends completely into the cold night air.

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