



The Questions that Make it Interesting

When Scarlet broke up with his stupid self, Jimmy lit his hair on fire.

It was an accident, at first. He was smoking in the car, and brought the cigarette too close to his lacquered coif when he bent to pick up the green M&M he'd dropped. The gel ignited, and Jimmy saw the whole thing in reverse. Waxy, dripping peels of scalp skin. A blue whoosh. The initial spark. Scarlet saying *No, thanks*. Scarlet in bed, saying *Yes! Yes! Yes!* Scarlet at the coffee shop. His own entrance into this world through a waxy, dripping birth canal.

Jimmy saw things in reverse because he caught it all in the rearview mirror. He had time to think: *I need a shave, and What DID Scarlet keep in that silver locket of hers?*

Scarlet, owing nothing to Jimmy but the truth, kept her hair over her eyes. It wasn't personal. She simply didn't need to see the world to know she was more or less still a part of it.

There was an unnatural stench as Jimmy made syllabic shouts. Gross and staccato like a brass trumpet that has been stepped on by a heavy foot. A smell like burning plastic moved out of the open car windows. Oxygen moved in through the same window. Scarlet felt the lurching automobile. She remembered being a child and using a magnifying glass to light a family of ants on fire. She remembered wondering how this whole combustion thing worked.

Instinctually, Scarlet reminded herself that every action in this world has an equal and opposite reaction.

Scarlet's bony hand remained pleasantly on the kneecap of Jimmy. She had the same gift as Tiresias. A beautiful blindness balanced with a beautiful sense of female intuition. She always knew her next move before she made it. For now, her bony hand remained pleasantly on Jimmy's kneecap.

Scarlet guessed she should wash the scarf she always piled around her neck like Jenny's green ribbon, but it had been her grandmother's, and her grandmother had worn it to her casket, and Scarlet had rescued it at the last moment. As such, it was steeped in the half-odors of formaldehyde and double cheeseburgers, which had been her grandmother's favorite food, and Scarlet could not bear the thought of sacrificing those memories for something that smelled like Ocean Breeze.

For the same reasons, she could not use the scarf to smother Jimmy's flaming head. But she did take the opportunity to light her own cigarette from the human Bic. Her cheeks grew rosy in the heat. It was a very becoming look.

Jimmy made no safe assumptions. He could guess Scarlett's hair was over her eyes. It was her trademark emotion. And he could smell the tobacco of her cigarette. But he wasn't going to guess it was hers. Instead, he simply hoped that she would say something. Perhaps a comment on the traffic. Maybe a retelling of a childhood story. Certainly, she had no obligation to say anything. However, she could at least turn on the radio.

At the next red light, a Caprice Classic pulled to a stop. The driver turned his head at the perfect time to notice the blushed cheeks of Scarlet. There was a mystery to the black hair that skirted across the bridge of her nose. Like the cover of a Bible folding open. She reminded him of an awning above a tattoo parlor that was dripping in a rain shower. Letting water slip down and away. She was an onyx stone smoothly rubbed within the palm of a searching hand.

His vision of Scarlet was soon troubled, though, by the curious movement of smoke. Ribbons of which moved past her in fine surgical rhythm. He noticed the smoke was made of millions of threads. Each of a different length and thickness. The threads ran together like licorice or the grooves in a tree trunk. They climbed through the air together. It reminded him of pictures he had seen of burnt offerings. One thing in exchange for another. Or, was it that one thing became another? Regardless, there was no question what the smoke was doing. The smoke was ascending.

Jimmy abruptly loosened his tie. It was harder to breathe now, and he groped for Scarlet's hand like an airplane oxygen mask. When he found it, he thought the hand a stranger's appendage, prematurely old and gnarled. The knuckles swollen with decades of arthritis, and fingers that felt like the ends had been chewed, maybe chomped. Jimmy held Scarlet's right hand with his left one. In the nine hundred-degree heat, his wedding band was bright orange, and it branded the back of Scarlet's hand with a medium-sized crescent moon. She did not flinch at the fusing of their membranes.