

**THIS
IS
PLEASURE**

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M.

I'd known Quin for maybe five years when he told me this story—really not even a story, more like an anecdote—about a woman he'd met on the street. Quin believed that he could perceive people's most essential nature just by looking at them; he also believed that, in the same way, he could know what they most wanted to hear or, rather, what they would most respond to. He was a little conceited about these supposed special abilities, and that was how the story began. He saw a melancholy-looking woman, a "former beauty," as he put it, walking by herself in Central Park, and he said to her, "Aren't you the gentle one!" She replied, "And aren't you the perceptive one for seeing it!" After a few minutes of talk, he invited her to have tea with him. She agreed.

He didn't describe her further, other than to say that she was middle-aged and obviously lonely; she'd never been married, worked in P.R., had no children. Even without a visual description, my sense of her was vivid: her slender forearm and long hand, the outline of her cheek giving off a subtle glow as she leaned slightly forward, into his attention, her mind quickened by this odd and unexpected man. And he would be leaning toward her, too. Quin was someone who *imbibed* people.

They exchanged numbers. I asked him if he'd told her that he was about to get married and he said no, he hadn't. He didn't plan to call her. It was enough to feel the potential between them, stored away like a cell-phone video of something that had already happened. "She would like being hurt, but very slightly. She'd want affection more. You'd spank her with, I don't know, a Ping-Pong paddle? And then touch her clit. *This is pleasure.*" He paused. "*And this is pain.*"

When I repeated this story to my husband, he cracked up. We both did. For years after, apropos of nothing, one of us would croak, "This is pleasure"—my husband would make

a perverted face and pinch the air—“And this is pain!” And both of us would crack up, just laugh our asses off. The whole thing was vaguely sadistic—so vaguely that it was ridiculous; clearly no harm was done.

“It wouldn’t be a good outcome for her,” Quin said. “She’s open-minded but sensitive. I’m engaged to a much younger woman, and there wouldn’t be any good place that it could go for her.”

“She might’ve just wanted the experience,” I said, “if she was lonely.” I’m sorry to report that I said that. But I really thought it might be true.

They did speak on the phone, finally; she called him. He told her then about his engagement. He said that he’d like her to consider him a kind of guardian angel, psychically watching out for her. Which added to the hilarity for my husband and me. Even though it also added to the secret sadism. I laughed, but I wondered: Did the woman know, even dimly, that she was being toyed with? Did she feel that there was something wrong with the encounter, the way you might feel a mysterious hair drawn across your cheek? Why did I think it was so funny?

It seems strange to me when I look back on it now. Because I don't want to laugh. I feel pain. Real heart pain. Subtle. But real.

Q.

Late at night, I went to my office for the last time. I was not allowed to go there during business hours and I didn't want to; it would have been unpleasant. The managing editor had instructed the security guard to let me in and see me out. Boxes had been packed and shipped already; before that, my wife had collected an envelope of emergency cash that I had left in a desk drawer. Even *she* didn't want to set foot in the office; the one sympathetic associate editor agreed to meet her and hand off the envelope at a subway concession stand—a pallid detail that serves only to underscore the level of revulsion Carolina feels about anything associated with my former professional life.

Anyway, I'd come one last time, to collect an orchid that had somehow survived months

of inept watering and to see if any other tiny thing had been left behind. And one had, actually *two* had—though they were not that tiny, nor was I the one who had left them.

The first thing was my nameplate, strangely still affixed to the wall outside my office door, importantly announcing the existence of the now nonexistent Quinlan M. Saunders. It seemed like a nasty joke, and it was the sharp-browed and maybe pretentious “M,” especially, that zinged me as I entered what had once been my office—where the second surprise sat quietly on my desk: a cardboard cigarette box, its original graphic covered by a pasted-on image of a very red apple on a white background and, on the other side, the words “everyday = choices,” positioned like a brand name, in red and pink letters. When one opened the box, one found not cigarettes but five very small scrolls of paper arranged with painstaking symmetry. Unscrolled, they read, in plain black type, “ugliness or beauty,” “truth or lies,” “courage or fear,” “kindness or cruelty,” “love or ____.” The space for the last word on the last scroll was left blank. I didn’t have to look; I remembered it tenderly well—as in when a

doctor presses on your abdomen and asks, “Is it tender there?”

Years ago, I’d made this for a girl who still works in the row of offices opposite mine. A plain girl with short brown hair, bright eyes, and good coloring. Her body was thick-waisted but supple, with a peasant’s grace—confident and humble both—and a quiet poise, greater than that of most beauties. Her eyes took in the world with passive depth and the occasional flash of mortal humor. She was intelligent, more than she realized, and I wanted her to learn how to use her intelligence more actively.

The cigarette box came out of a hallway conversation we’d had about choices and opportunities. I spent several afternoons at my desk, piecing the little delicacy together in odd inactive moments. Strange and touching to remember the care I put into it, the sophistication and childishness, how I thought of it in her hands. I invited her to lunch to give it to her and, yes, I was right: when she saw it, that flash lit up not only her eyes but her entire face, and in that instant I became for her a magician who had given her an enchanted object. As if I *were* a magician, she listened to me tell her about

herself: what she was like, what she needed, what she needed to correct. “We are going on a journey,” I said, and we did. At the end of it, she had awakened to her ambition and learned how to satisfy it. As time went on, there were other girls I liked flirting with more. But for years—almost ten years—I kept our friendship alive with daily compliments and periodic lunches. I still have a handwritten note from her saying that our lunches were the “glory” of her week.

Now she had returned my gift not to me but to an empty room. Now she was one of my accusers.

I dropped the box in a wastebasket on my way out, but then, because I did not want to leave evidence of such bitter feeling behind me, I turned around to retrieve it. I meant to drop it into a trash can on the street. But instead I took it home and put it in a drawer where Carolina would not find it.