

A BLUE SKY LIKE THIS

By

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And now it's your birthday on top of everything else. You've been dreading it. That's what you've been texting friends for days now: I'm dreading it. Adding a pained emoji face. Xs for eyes, open mouth like an O. Making fun of yourself and your silly dread. But the dread is real. That's why you're here in spite of everything. A place you found on the dark web. Open despite the lockdown. A penthouse suite downtown. The dark womb of a treatment room heavy with steam and eucalyptus. The light is so dim and kind. You're lying naked on a heated table. A woman is kneading your face with some sort of goat placenta. You can feel

her knuckles digging deeply into your cheek,
draining you of lymphatic fluid. Lots of draining to
be done, she says softly. "I'm sure," you whisper.
"Drain away."

The woman looked ageless in her black suit, her
hair pulled back in a tight bun.

Three deep breaths, there you go, she said. I'll
take them with you. Shall I take them with you?

She rubbed her hands with essential oil and held
them suspended over your nose and mouth. Don't
worry, she said, perhaps sensing your fear, your
hesitation. We take every precaution. Well, all right.
You breathed deeply together. You felt your chests
rise and fall.



There, she said. That's better, isn't it?

You heard a water fountain in the distance.
Soft music composed of no instruments you
recognized. Like the endless gong of some
terrible bell. But beautiful.

Now she says: "I'm just going to turn on the light so I can assess your skin. It's a bright light, so I'll be covering your eyes." She presses a damp cotton pad over each of your closed eyelids. You think of pennies on the eyes of the dead. The light's so bright you can feel it through the cotton. Flaming red. Hot on your face. And the fact of her eyes. Looking at you.

"Well," you say at last, because you can't take any more of her silence. "What's the verdict?"

"You've had a difficult year, haven't you?"

You picture yourself alone and afraid in your apartment. Shivering on your island of couch. Body on fire. Breathing as if you were drowning as

'First, I have to ask you:
How attached are you to
your memories?'

the tears gushed from your eyes.

“Haven’t we all?” you say quietly.

She’s silent. The eucalyptus scent is becoming oppressive.

“It’s all here, I’m afraid,” she says at last. Her finger pads trace your forehead furrows, the deep creases between your brows. The veins around your nose, the folds around your mouth. *Nasolabial* folds you found out they were called. Laugh lines that weren’t even born from laughing. She touches it all so tenderly that a tear leaks from your eyes. She lifts the cotton pads from your lids and holds a mirror over your face.

“Memory and skin go hand in hand,” she says.

“Good memories, good skin. Unhappy memories —” and here she trails off. Because the mirror speaks for itself, doesn’t it?

“How about we do something about it?” she says in a voice like a caress.

And you say, “What?”

And she says, “First, I have to ask you: How attached are you to your memories?”

You look into the mirror. Your life’s miseries imprinted there on your skin. Your pores gaping open at you like silently screaming mouths. The toll of the past year alone casts a grayness that might never be lifted.

And you say to your own reflection: “Not

attached. Not attached at all.”

Now here you are in the bright light of the late summer afternoon. The sun’s still high in the sky, so lovely and golden. There’s a bounce to your step as you skip out of the building. You’re skipping, why not? It’s your birthday after all, isn’t it? Haven’t forgotten that. You wonder what you *have* forgotten. You think of the woman rubbing those sleek black discs all over your face — those discs attached to electric cables, hooked up to a machine with dials. The woman turned the dials up like volume knobs, and you tasted metal deep in your teeth. It’s funny now to think about

how you screamed when you felt electricity crackle along your cranium.

The shop in the building’s lobby is closed. More than closed, the front window is shattered as if someone had hurled a brick at the glass. Inside, a bald white mannequin stands naked. A glittering swan purse dangles from her wrist as if she’s about to go to a party wearing nothing at all. She stares at you with shining eyes. Red lips in a slight smile. A darkness fills your gut. Dread spreads through your limbs. But then you see yourself reflected in the shattered glass. Glowing. Lifted. *Eradicated*. That’s the word that comes most strongly to

mind: eradicated. Which is odd. Doesn't eradicate mean destroy? Your face looks the opposite of destroyed. So what if you're wearing a sad black sack? Your face has all the lightness and life and color you need. To add more color would be almost too much. A slap in someone else's face.

In the taxi home, you smile at yourself in the window, in the rearview mirror, at the cabby, though he doesn't smile back.

"Busy day today?" you ask.

"No," he says as if you're insane. Is he glaring at you? He's wearing a scarf tied over his mouth and nose so it's hard to tell. Maybe he's sick? *With what*,

what, you wonder. You wish him well, the poor man. You try to communicate this good will with your face. He just stares at you coldly in the mirror until you look away, out the window. The city looks surprisingly empty and dirty. In your lap, your phone buzzes. A text from someone called the Lord of Darkness.

Fine, he says, *I'll meet you*.

It's your b-day after all.

Park at 6. Bench by the swans.

You scroll up to see earlier texts. *I need to see you*, you apparently texted the Lord of Darkness only two hours ago. *Please*. Three times you pleaded. Interesting.

Well, can he really be so terrible if you wanted to see him? Needed to, no less? And he knows you well enough to know that it's your birthday, so. ...

Why don't we meet at a wine bar? You text back.

Wine bar?! he says. Yeah, right. See you at park.

A date with the Lord of Darkness. It's frightening but also thrilling, isn't it? You look at your face in the partition. You instantly feel calm at the sight of yourself. You picture a sun shining out from behind a mass of gray clouds. You're standing in that wonderful light of the mind, and it's beautiful and it's blinding.

At the park, you try to hand the cabby cash, but he shakes his head violently. He doesn't want your fucking cash. Pay by card only, please. As you stand there watching him screech down the empty street, you notice the sidewalks are empty. In the park, the grass seems to have grown shaggier, wilder, since the last time you were here. There's one couple walking quickly along the path by the pond, their heads bent low.

You see a man in a black hoodie sitting alone on a park bench by the swans. The Lord of Darkness, has to be. Sure, you're afraid.

Mostly excited. An adventure! You're so up for that right now. As you skip along the gravel path, you pass the couple. You feel relief at the sight of them up close — people! But as you approach, smiling, about to say, *Hello! Quiet today, isn't it? Well at least we have the park all to ourselves, hahahaha!* they drift off the path onto the shaggy grass; they walk all the way around a weeping willow to avoid you. And while they do this, they glare at you. You're about to say, *What the fuck?* when you hear your name.

You look over. It's Ben, your ex-husband. Sitting there on the very edge of the bench staring at you with sad eyes. He's got a flask in his hand.

He looks terrible. Puffy and gaunt at the same time.

"Ben?" you say. "Is that really you?" Of course it's him. You just can't believe the Lord of Darkness is Ben. Probably a little joke you were playing to amuse yourself one night. You got drunk and came up with silly names for your contacts. Too funny. When was the last time you saw him? You try to search your mind, but there's nothing. A stone wall.

"Julia," he says. "It's good to see you."

But he doesn't look like it's good. He's looking at you and frowning. Which is weird considering how amazing you look. You

couldn't have picked a better day to meet your ex, frankly.

"It's good to see you too," you tell Ben. He doesn't smile.

"I picked this bench because it was the longest," he says. "So we could sit on either end." He gestures along the length of the bench. You see that he has placed a bottle of screw-top wine and a small white box on the opposite end. "For your birthday," he says. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," you say and immediately remember how weird Ben was. Still is, apparently.

"Don't worry," he says. "I wiped the bottle down. The bench too." He smiles, warily. You

notice a face mask dangling from his neck. It's made of a floral-patterned fabric. It looks as if he made it himself with a sewing machine and fabric ripped from a tablecloth. Possibly your old tablecloth.

Looking at the mask sparks something — a coldness — but then it's gone. So his germophobia is getting worse. People get weirder as they get older. Sad, really. It makes you feel tenderness toward him.

You join Ben on the bench. Sip the wine and open the white box. There's a Hostess cupcake inside, which he assures you no one has touched. Great, you say. You smile and wait for

him to be devastated by you. But he just keeps looking around as if he's afraid.

"Look, I really can't stay long," he says.

"That's fine." It is fine, you realize. Completely. It's a little empowering to realize this. You take a bite of the cupcake. Ben visibly relaxes. So much so that you feel as if you just agreed to something awful.

You smile at Ben. "What's this about?"

He looks at you, dead serious. "You invited me, remember?"

I need to see you. Please.

"Oh, yes. Well. I thought it might be nice to catch up." Sure. That sounds like you.

Ben looks at you as if you're nuts. He sighs heavily. "Look, Julia, you know I care for you."

"I care for you too, Ben." It's nice to say it back. It feels true.

"But there have to be boundaries," he adds quickly. He looks at you meaningfully from the other side of the bench.

"Absolutely," you agree. "Boundaries are great." What the fuck is he talking about?

"I'm in a relationship, you know that."

He needs a haircut, you notice now. His hair is shaggy and long like the grass.

"Sure," you nod. "Congratulations."

He looks appalled. "Is that all you're going

to say?”

His eyes suddenly strike you as strange. Didn't they used to be blue? Now they're just this watery gray, the whites full of red veins.

“What do you want me to say?”

“Look, Julia, that was fucked up the other night, OK? I fucked up, too, I'll admit it. But when you call me up crying like that, what am I supposed to do? I mean, what choice did I have?”

You search your memory for *other night*. No night to be found anywhere. You try to picture yourself calling Ben. Tears pouring out of your eyes as you dialed. Just blue sky all around, the most pleasant shade.

“I just came to bring you groceries,” he says. “I *told* you I was just coming to bring groceries. I would do that for any friend who was sick.”

He says the word like a slap. *Sick?* That word seems so wrong for you, for how you feel right now. In spite of Ben. Look at him trying to get under your skin like this. *He's* the one who's sick. He looks about a thousand years old.

“I was just going to leave them outside the door and walk away,” Ben says sadly. “But then that *sound*.” Now he closes his eyes. He looks so pained it's ridiculous.

“What sound?” You think of that terrible, beautiful bell in the treatment room. Its endless

gong filling your head even now.

“You,” Ben says. “Crying. Sobbing. Gasping through the door. All alone. Begging and begging me to come in.”

You watch him shake his head. “It still haunts me, if I’m honest,” Ben says, looking at you. Waiting, it seems, for you to be devastated. By the shame of your apparent desperation on this night. This night where your grief made a sound he will never forget and apparently couldn’t resist. And that’s when you know you and Ben must have fucked. Definitely you fucked the Lord of Darkness. Perhaps this is why he’s the Lord of Darkness.

“We were *reckless*,” Ben cries. “*I* was reckless.”

And his voice is like a brick. Trying to shatter you as if you’re so breakable. Maybe you were once. You observe this as though you are observing a sad fact from very, very far away. But you can’t be shattered now. Even with that cold creeping in, you have the red lips of the mannequin — you feel them curved right now in her slight smile. You look at Ben with shining eyes. Ben turns away to stare at the swans.

“Probably just hay fever, thank God,” he says. “You always get it at this time of year, and you always forget and think it’s something

more sinister. You always think you're *dying*, Julia. Even before. Even before all this." And here he waves a hand around at the world. The swans, the sky, the weeping trees and the shaggy park, a group of people walking by, all masked, you notice now, homemade masks like Ben or scarves like the cabby. They stop in their tracks and turn toward you. Glaring at your bare, glowing face. Because whatever *all this* is, you've forgotten it. It's been eradicated. Lifted away by the woman in the black suit.

Suddenly you want to take Ben's hand and press it to your face. His hand was callused in places, soft in others, and it was always warm and

dry as it held yours. You remember that now. You reach your hand across the long expanse of bench. Ben's face darkens. He looks at your hand as if it's a snake before mumbling that he has to go. You wave goodbye to him as he gets up and then you wave hello at the staring people because you might as well, you're already waving. They gape at you in horror. Which is just so tragic. What is there to be afraid of on a day like this? Under a blue sky like this? Such a beautiful day. Your birthday.