

Sally's Second Chance

A Story from Jesus of Detroit

by

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When Mary Met Sally

"I like your hat," Sally says to the handsome customer on the other side of the counter.

With the classy mustache and the stylish straw hat, he looks more like a hot movie star in disguise. He wears his black, titanium ring on the index finger, which means he is available.

So is Sally. It is great not to be attached. With so many hot guys swarming around, who in their right mind would want to be stuck with one?

Following up on her flirtatious comment, the customer detaches his gaze from his wallet and looks up at Sally standing behind the counter.

The moment their gazes meet, Sally wiggles her eyebrows and flashes an inviting smile, two flirting techniques that she has mastered thanks to the many hours of practice before her bathroom mirror.

"Yeah, thanks," the hot guy responds, his tone dismissive and his face blank. Dropping his head, he gets back to looking into his wallet, going back and forth between a gold and a red credit card.

Sally knows well what this is. This is called snubbing when a guy pretends he is not interested in a girl in order to seduce her. Dating 101. A lot of guys have attempted to pull off this trick on her, recently more than before. *Alright, good looking*, Sally thinks and sneers. *You wanna play? Let's play. I too know the game.*

"Is that made of straw?" Sally asks, gently touching his hand and flashing a smile of hers that has been known to be irresistible.

Pulling his hand back, he says, "Yeah, how much was it again?" not bothering to even look up at Sally.

Like a campfire extinguished by a bucket of cold water, in a matter of a second Sally loses all the heat that was keeping her alive. *What an arrogant douchebag! I hate men. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them.* Here we go again. Yet another rejection from someone she doesn't even like. *I hate men.* It must be because she is just a cashier. It *sucks* to be a cashier. She *hates* her job. And she hates *men*.

As she slowly retracts her hand back to her space, Sally looks at her reflection on the glass pad covering the cashier's desk. *Or, could it be because of my face?* she wonders, her confidence sinking to a new low. She hates her face. Although she has barely completed 36 years, she looks more like 45 or even 46. The light that reflects off her cheek gives away how much face cream she has put on. She would have aged better if this freaking life had taken it easier on her. She hates her life.

Sally comes back to attention when the guy snaps his fingers near her face. "How much?" he asks again.

A gorgeous Asian girl cuts into the line, throws a box of BareSkin condoms on the counter—as if Her Majesty owns the place—and stands awfully close to the hot guy, almost pushing him aside. The saucy girl looks only 20 years old, or more, or less. Sally could never guess the age of Asian people, especially their women. Those sons-of-bitches, they never age.

As the cashier, it is Sally's judicial duty to put that bitch in her place, and Sally will take joy in doing that. "Ma'am," she says as if she addresses an elderly woman, "please go back—"

"Look what we almost forgot?" the Asian girl tells the hot guy, obviously cutting Sally off on purpose.

"Thank God, you were here, babe," the hot guy says, puckers his lips, leans in, and gives his...girlfriend—apparently—a noisy kiss on the lips. Without looking at his wallet, he brings out a credit card, which turns out to be the gold one, and waves it before Sally's face. "Excu-u-use me-e-e," he says, almost singing as if he is still drunk from the kiss.

Feeling dizzy, Sally blinks. The image of the credit card waving before her face gets blurry. She blinks a couple of more times and opens her eyes wide to get them focused again.

The pretty Asian girl slightly wrinkles her nose, giving Sally a condescending look. The bitch must've overheard Sally's comment about her boyfriend's hat. There is no coming back from that.

"The box too," the boyfriend orders Sally while tapping the condom box with his credit card, and then he holds it up again.

Sally would spit on his face and yell, 'I'm not your servant!' if she were not too goddamn tired of everything. Everything. Every...thing. There is no fight left in her, nor any light for that matter. She looks away from the happy couple, picks up the BareSkin condom box, which feels as heavy as 100 pounds, and scans its barcode. "Forty-six dollars and three cents," she says without looking up at any of them.

How did this happen to me? Sally asks herself. How did I end up here in this shithole, pathetic and desperate? I don't deserve this. Or do I? No, I don't. What happened to me? What went wrong? Maybe if that asshole didn't crap into my heart like I am a piece of... How could he do that to me? I hate him. I hate him. I hate him. Where are the pills? I need my pills.

Frantically opening the drawer, Sally snatches the bottle of Valium, unscrews the lid, and pops one of the large capsules into her mouth. It hurts to swallow it without water, but that is not comparable to the resurfaced pain that is crawling into every neuron of her brain. Closing her eyes, she takes a couple of deep breaths. Wouldn't it be nice if she did not have to open her eyes to this damned world ever again?

What if that asshole storms in through the door now? What if he sprints toward Sally, gets down to his knees, and apologizes for all he has done to her? And then he would beg Sally to take him back. What would Sally do? Sally would smirk and spit in his dirty face. She doesn't need an asshole in her life. But, then he would cry his eyes out, tightly hug Sally's hips, and admit he is nothing without her. Then, and only then, Sally might forgive him and absolve him of his sins.

"Excuse me," says the voice of an old lady.

Let's get this shitty day over with, Sally thinks. Taking a deep breath, she opens her eyes with so much difficulty though if her eyelids are glued together.

The hot guy and his young-looking bitch are already gone. They didn't even wait for the receipt. In their place, is an old Black woman who has given up fighting the expansion of gray hairs. She looks even more screwed-up than Sally.

Sally crumbles the receipt and squeezes it hard into nothing. “How can I help you today?” she asks reluctantly, throwing the receipt into the garbage can, where it belongs—along with the memory of her latest rejection

“You can help me get my son back,” Ms. Freeman says with tearful eyes.

“Oh, Ms. Freeman!” Sally recognizes her ex’s mother. It’s been about 10 years now since the last time they met on Thanksgiving. Ms. Freeman, who has always been a source of inspiration, brings color to Sally’s despairing day, quickly replacing that initial surprise with the feeling of excitement and—knock on wood—optimism.

“I can’t,” Sally tells Ms. Freeman and takes another drag on her cigarette. The threshold she is standing on is still partly covered with red paint from last week’s incident. Leaning against the wall, she pretends to watch the cars on the highway to avoid awkward eye contact with Ms. Freeman while turning her down. “Sorry, but not sorry.”

“Why?” Ms. Freeman asks, her voice trembling. Facing Sally, she leans in so that their gazes meet.

“I just can’t. It’s been too long, OK? It’s over between us—”

“Not for him,” Ms. Freeman snaps and then lowers her voice. “He’s...ah...he’s not over it yet.” She gulps.

“With all due respect,” Sally sneers and takes another drag, “how would you know?”

Ms. Freeman turns her confused gaze from the cigarette back to Sally. She stands before Sally, her eyes squinted. Biting her lips, she touches the cross necklace on her chest and takes a deep breath. And then another. “He told me so,” she says in one breath.

“Jesus told you that?!”

“Yeah,” Ms. Freeman responds, squeezing the cross necklace in her fist.

“When?”

“When?”

“Yeah, when?”

“Ah...y-y—yesterday. Yeah, yesterday. He called me. First, he apologized, of course, for...ah...for...ah”—Ms. Freeman’s gaze darts between Sally and her cigarette—“since when do you smoke, my dear?”

Sally watches the motherly look in Ms. Freeman’s eyes. It has been a long time since anybody worried about her. She likes the feeling. Tears prick in the corner of her eyes. “It’s good for me,” she says and breaks the gaze. “It calms my nerves—” Sally interrupts herself with multiple coughs. The last cough is barely settled when she puts the butt back into her mouth and takes another drag on the cigarette.

“Sally.”

“Yeah.”

“Look at me, my dear,” Ms. Freeman says, her voice trembling, and touches Sally on the arm.

The cigarette is reaching her lips for another drag when Sally glances at Ms. Freeman, who is staring at her with tearful eyes. Touched by Ms. Freeman’s pain, Sally impulsively drops the I-don’t-care act. Lowering her hand, she skips the next drag and turns all the way to Ms. Freeman. She gulps to swallow the tears that clog her throat.

“This is a mother begging you,” Ms. Maria Freeman says while a single tear escapes her eye. “Jesus was a good boy. He’s getting worse and worse ever since he lost you.” When her eyes are no longer able to contain the tears, she bursts out crying. “If only he can see you again, that’s all it takes.”

Touched by the sincerity of the moment, Sally drops the cigarette and pulls Maria into a hug before bursting into a sob herself.

“He can heal,” Maria says through tears. “I know it. Jesus can heal. Jesus can heal.”

It Is On

She has three...four...five new gray hairs on her temples. Yesterday, she had only two.

Where's that pretty girl now? Sally thinks when regretfully looking at the reflection of the lonely woman in the mirror of her tiny bathroom. Any other morning, she would rush to apply makeup; the lengthy routine that has become like a holy ritual of her nameless, homegrown, organically developed religion. But not today. This is the day that Sally will save Jesus. Today, Sally is the heroine, and she demands to be respected as such. Today, she has enough confidence to face this uninvited guest that has camped in her mirrors and won't ever leave; see what her problem is.

The face of the woman in the mirror is slimmer and more angular than Sally's. She has unwelcomed brown patches scattered on her forehead and a bit on her left cheek. Cancer would be more tolerable than this damned melasma. Her upper lip is retracted downward and the stupid nose has followed, eager to sink into her mouth.

There is no trace of the once seemingly eternal glow on her skin. Every day it is getting thinner and drier, showing more pronounced lines. Sally tries to stretch the wrinkled skin under her eyes, to remind herself of the good, old days. The aged skin wrinkles again the moment she removes her fingers. The harsh reality hits her with all its gravity: beautiful Sally is one sagging jowl away from the look of a grandma. Soon the rebellious gray hairs will take over her head and howl to the whole world the beginning of their dynasty and the end of Sally's love life.

Her vision gradually gets blurry. Sally is losing the fight with the tears that are welling up in her eyes. Her sobs are about to follow when she hastily opens the door to the medicine cabinet behind the mirror, which is filled with medicine containers of different sizes and colors. The toothbrush and toothpaste seem irrelevant among those many drugs.

A couple of containers fall over into the sink when her shaky hand searches through them until she reaches the red bottle of Valium with the word 'Caution' printed on it in large black letters. To her, however, the emphasis is more of an invitation to be incautious.

She hurriedly unscrews the lid and pops one of the large capsules into her mouth. It hurts to swallow it without water; it always does. But the pain goes untraceable among all the suppressed agony that once again is erupting through her eyes, its drops of lava burning the skin cells behind as they flow on her face.

Closing her eyes, Sally takes a deep breath and lets it out. And another one. And one more. What if she could open her eyes to a world without mirrors? That is not a practical wish, though. She is grown-up enough to know that. What if she wouldn't have to open her eyes ever again? Well, there are ways to make that wish come true. She is old enough to know a few.

Sally reminds herself that today is not like any other day. Today, she is on a mission to save a troubled soul. Today, life has a purpose.

Sally opens her eyes but has no rush to face herself in that mirror again. *Who wants to see that miserable face anyway?* she thinks. *Jesus does, that's who.* This is the response that gives her the strength to confront herself again. When Sally closes the door of the medicine cabinet, in the mirror, she sees her face conquered by tears.

While staring at herself, with her palm, Sally wipes the tears off her face; first from the left cheek and then the right. She takes a deep sniffle and makes it the last one.

No, this is not the time to feel sorry for yourself. This is the time to go out there and actually do something. You've been looking for a reason to live, and now you've got it. Yes, Sally. You are the one. Jesus is sick, and you are the cure. You are the heroine, the savior of Jesus. Go, girl. You still got it.

Rejuvenated by the noble purpose and reunited with her once-estranged confidence, Sally brings out her spacious makeup bag from the tiny vanity under the sink and takes out the Super Lustrous Lipstick that she has saved for special occasions. She tears the plastic cover and rotates the bottom until the shimmering lipstick erects from the case. *Hello, my little friend.* Sally smiles and applies it to her lips. It is as red as blood.

Carousel

Due to medical emergencies, the Messiah Show is canceled for today.

It says that on the handwritten board attached to the podium where Jesus supposedly performs his popular show. Jesus on a podium?! That doesn't sound like Jesus at all. Sally wouldn't believe that until she sees it with her own eyes. The humble Jesus that she knows would instead sit down on the grass, below everyone else, and ramble random thoughts about love, life, and children. Although Sally would soon tune out his blah-blah, she could not stop watching him speak with such passion. She would join Jesus, sitting next to him on the grass. She would intently look into his eyes as if she is listening, and let him enjoy delivering his sermon to his one-person audience. When she would eventually get too bored, she would halt his sermon with a kiss that he could never refuse.

Sally would give everything to recreate that moment and the memory of the best and the only true relationship she's ever had; the closest she's ever come to experiencing love. *Why did we break up anyway?* She wonders and wishes she could go back in time and tell the teenage Sally how lucky she is. And tell her that the love she is longing for is nothing but what she already has right in front of her; that brief kiss of hers that means the world to the shy lips of an innocent teen. *Jesus' narrow lips were always soft and supple as rose petals,* Sally remembers. That is true love. Pure, honest, and fragile. She just needs to take care of it and nurture it to grow bigger and stronger. *Or was that Vikram's lips? Yeah, those of Jesus were more plump and somewhat succulent.* Worldly-wise Sally would warn teenage Sally that the world is full of jerks. Instead of chasing a nonexistent idea, she should hold onto what she already has with Jesus. Sigh! If only Sally knew better back then. *Come to think of it, Vikram's lips were firm and steadfast. Definitely not soft and supple. Who was I thinking of then?*

The past is the past, and the future belongs to those who want it more badly than anyone else. And God knows that Sally does. And God knows that Sally needs the change. Everybody deserves a last chance, and today Sally has come to claim hers. And she has come prepared, having honed her dating skills through numerous experiences. She has mustered all that was left of her faith to gather the pieces of her shattered heart and stitch them together. Holding it in her palms, she's come here to offer it to Jesus. To tilt the odds in her favor, she even wears her navy Victoria's Secret slip, the color that Jesus used to love on her. *Why did we ever break up?*

Sally sighs, filled with disappointment, and takes another glance at the handwritten board that says the show is canceled for today. What luck! Nevertheless, her heart beats slower now that Jesus is not here. In an odd way, she's kind of relieved that she doesn't have to face the awkward encounter that part of her wants to avoid. As much as she's excited to meet Jesus again, she is also frightened by how she might be received. After all, it has been many years since the last time the two met. As her memory faded over the years, she struggled to recall the specifics of when or what took place, except for the lingering feeling that it didn't end on good terms.

What if Jesus is in love with someone else now? But, Ms. Freeman assured Sally this is not the case. What if Jesus has forgotten all about the love that they once shared? But, Ms.

Freeman assured Sally this is not the case. What if Jesus doesn't return her love? Yet another rejection, this time from Jesus, her first love. She doesn't know if her stitched-up heart would have the strength to hold up through such pressure. If it were not for Ms. Freeman's begging, it'd be impossible for Sally to take such a risk. But now, here she is, taking a leap of faith, facing her chances. She has her pills in her purse just in case another anxiety attack kicks in.

"Excuse me. Sir," Sally calls out to the operator passing by in the yellow vest of the Eden Adventure Park.

"Yeah."

"Do you know where I can find Jesus Freeman?"

"The show is canceled. Can't you read?" he says, pointing to the handwritten board.

"Yeah, but I'm not here for the show. It's a personal matter."

The operator looks dressed-up Sally up and down, and he sneers, "Are you sure you're not here to meet Paul?"

"No," Sally snaps. "Never. No. Jesus. I'm here for Jesus."

"Alright, alright. He's hanging over there, at the kids' section."

"Where exactly?"

"You'll find him. He'd be the only guy with a bandage on his head," the operator says while leaving.

"Bandage?!" Sally mutters and worries.

The carousel ride is still there, at the same spot. Sally might forget many things about her past but never the carousel. Although it is disguised under fresh paint, Sally could easily recognize it by the dashing rounding board on the top and the plastic unicorns that would fly her to the sky, above the clouds. Life was much more beautiful when she was a kid; when dreams had no limits.

The sign at the beginning of the carousel's empty line says that it is under maintenance. Well, of course, it is. The poor machine must be as old as Sally's father. The very fact that it is still functional after those many years is surprising—if not miraculous. Even back in the day, it would go out of order every other month.

Two technicians, i.e., miracle workers, approach the carousel. What more do they want from that poor old timer? Why don't they let the good old, rusty carousel retire and rest in peace, like Sally's father? Before entering the operator booth, the technicians greet the only guy in the carousel with an unacknowledged 'hi'. Seated silently on one of the plastic unicorns, the bearded guy blends seamlessly with the carousel, making him hard to spot. Hugging the grab bar as if it is a person, he wears a white bandage on his head. Is he Sally's Jesus?

Sally's heart beats faster. What if she doesn't look her best? Having butterflies in her stomach, she swiftly brings out the compact kit from her purse and checks her makeup in the compact's mirror; her shaped and filled eyebrows, thickened eyelashes, smooth and flushed cheeks, and finally the sexy red on her lips. She takes out Super Lustrous Lipstick and applies more of it on her lips, making them irresistible for a kiss. Now, she is ready to face destiny.

Accompanied by the suspenseful soundtrack of her fast heartbeats, Sally approaches the carousel, her eyes locked on Jesus. As she steps closer, she notices the burns on his hand and face. That explains the bandage wrapped over his temple. *Did he have a cooking accident?* Sally wonders and worries.

The unfamiliar, twisted expression on Jesus' face distracts Sally from his wounds. Although his furrowed brow and intense gaze speaks of an ongoing rage, his tilted head and downturned mouth remind Sally of Friday evenings when she gets depressed for no obvious reason. Perhaps this is perfect timing. *He would cheer up by seeing me*, Sally wishfully thinks and tries to open the gate, only to find the damn thing locked. Jesus must have the key. To meet his gaze, Sally walks along the circular fence that keeps her away from Jesus, with each step hearing the loud click of her high-heel shoes on the wooden surface.

While still hugging the grip bar, Jesus turns to face Sally.

Sally offers a big smile and waits for her charm to catch onto Jesus and transform him to be as cheerful and happy as a child.

Jesus turns away, the twisted expression on his face unchanged. As if Sally is not even there. Worse. As if Sally is nothing but an inanimate object. One of the many plastic unicorns on the carousel, embellished with shiny colors, that people ride for a few minutes and then move on with their lives. No. No. That cannot be. Jesus would never do that. Not to Sally. He must have hit his head hard against a brick wall and lost all his memory. He must have. That's the only plausible explanation.

"It's me. Sally."

"I know," Jesus says under his sigh, staring off into the distance.

"Then," Sally squeaks at the underwhelming reaction. "Why... I've come a long—" A lump the size of her fist develops in her throat. She wants to tell Jesus that she's come a long way to see him, for his own sake but then decides it's too early. She'd better begin with charming compliments. Duh! Dating 101. A rookie mistake from a maestra like Sally! She takes a deep breath and fakes a smile. "I've heard your words. I think they're cool."

"Everybody does. Have you seen the size of my following?" Jesus says, the unfamiliar, piercing arrogance in his tone cutting deep and painful. He doesn't even bother to look Sally in the eye when saying the hurtful words.

Sally swallows hard against the lump in her throat. She takes a few deep breaths to keep herself together. *There must be a story behind Jesus' injuries. He might even be loaded with sedatives, not realizing the sting in his words.* "Oh, my gosh! What is the bandage for?" she asks as if she has just noticed it. "Poor baby! What happened to your head?"

"Since when do *you* care?"

Sally's eyelids begin twitching, alerting her to an upcoming anxiety attack. She fumbles in her purse, ensuring the pills are still there. Coming here was a bad idea. She should go back before it gets worse. There is a limit to how much a girl can take, no matter how thick-skinned she has grown.

As Sally turns to leave, memories of riding the carousel with Jesus come rushing back. They flew on the unicorns, happy and carefree just to be with each other, as if that bliss was going to last forever. Sally took it all for granted. She would give everything to live those moments again. Willing to risk it all, she says over her shoulder, "You know what," and turns back to Jesus. "It's a...ah...it's a funny coincidence that I meet you here, on this

carousel. It brings lots of good memories.” She chuckles. “Oh, gosh! Do you remember our first kiss here?”

“Oh, how can I ever forget?” Jesus says with a trembling voice.

Sally smiles.

Jesus continues, “I remember how you spit, right in my face, after I kneeled and said I would die without you, and begged you not to leave.”

Upon hearing the word ‘spit,’ Sally reflexively slaps her palm over her lips, possibly smearing her once perfect lipstick. Suddenly, she vividly remembers how their relationship ended. Lowering her gaze, her chin drops to her chest.

“Listen,” she squeaks, “that’s actually why I’m here,” she promises smoothly. “I’ve made terrible...you know,” Sally falters, the promise becoming a plea. “But the past is the past, right? I... I... I wanted to see if...you...our relationship, I mean, if you want to pick it up again and—”

“I forgave you a long time ago. You, your mistakes, and your wrongdoings. I’m over it. There is nothing left to pick up,” Jesus says, his voice empty of compassion.

With tears welling up, Sally rushes for the pills in her purse. The response she received mirrored her worst fears, yet it surpassed them with a level of harshness and bitterness she had never imagined possible. The Jesus that she remembers was never mean. “You don’t mean that,” she cries, unscrewing the lid on the bottle of Valium. “I know you. These feelings never can completely go away—”

“But you surely can,” Jesus says, crossing the line from meanness to cruelty.

Every synapse in her brain trembles with pain, each resonating with a profound, deep sound akin to the striking of a mallet against a resounding gong. She covers her ears but the symphony of piercing noises doesn’t stop. Sally swallows the pill before it’s too late. A tear escapes her left eye and flows down her cheek. This was no Jesus talking. Neither the lovable Jesus that she once knew, nor the merciful Jesus she hears of from people. *Where’s this much cruelty coming from?* Sally wonders. *What’s changed in him?*

“I’ve forgiven you,” Jesus continues as if he hasn’t said enough. “I don’t have any feelings for you. And you know what?” Jesus turns to Sally. “I don’t think I ever really did.”

“But you said you loved me,” Sally says with a sob of despair.

The music begins. The technicians must have fixed the carousel’s rusty engine. Jesus smiles like a happy child, opens his arms, and starts riding away on the plastic unicorn.

As the plastic unicorn takes Jesus up to the skies, he hears Sally shouting through her sob, “It was right here. You said you love me. What’s changed?”

“The many guys you fucked,” Jesus whispers so that no one hears. “The many dicks you sucked.”

“It wasn’t that many,” Sally says, her trembling voice barely audible.

“One is too many,” Jesus mutters while a tear escapes his eye. “One is too many.”

Unforgiven

Although his wounds are not completely healed yet, Jesus has removed the bandage to look better for the show. He also wears the gray shirt that Paul bought for him, which, according to Paul, brings out the color in Jesus' eyes and gives him a holy look. "The art of pulling in an audience is half about the words and half about the appearance," Paul always says. Thanks to his mentorship and Jesus' mastery of the art, today's performance of the Messiah Show drew an audience larger than ever. Most of the crowd has dispersed already, taking part in other activities at the amusement park. Jesus, however, sticks around for a bit as has become a tradition of his. A group of his most loyal followers circles around him, asking questions and requesting blessings.

"Lord, what would be your ten commandments?" a fan with long curly hair asks, recording Jesus with his phone.

"I have only one commandment and...ah...and...ah—" Jesus turns to the left where the wheezing and clicking sounds come from.

The crowd parts, giving way to an old man with a hunchback and a cane who slowly shuffles through.

Where do I know that face from? Jesus wonders.

HONKING HORNS.

A vivid vision of Sally flashes before Jesus' eyes, leaving him wondering about the meaning behind such visions. Are they merely random fragments from the past? Or do they hold the power to foretell a future predetermined in the past? Or perhaps they're nothing more than hallucinations of a lonely mind. Standing at the edge of an overpass, Sally overlooks the bustling freeway beneath her feet. One after another, the cars pass by as fast as bullets. Sally's eyes are red. She is not crying now, but the black traces of the melted mascara on her cheeks suggest that she has. A lot. Sally steps over the fence.

"Psst," Paul hisses. "Jesus, people are waiting."

"What?" Jesus asks, snapping out of the vision.

"Your commandment."

"Yes," he says and turns his gaze from the old man to the fan with curly hair. "I have only one commandment. Forgive. That is the essence of all commandments. Everything starts with forgiveness," Jesus says as if he reads from a teleprompter. He finishes that with a big PR smile, not sure why.

The old man's slow march finally ends behind the girl with a dragon tattoo on her face. She moves aside to give him more space. The old man takes the last step to become only one foot away from Jesus. The poor man must have come here to ask for a blessing. After taking a few labored breaths, he lifts his head as much as possible to meet Jesus' gaze.

Jesus offers him a gracious smile.

The old man spits in Jesus' face.

"He's the devil," someone shouts.

Paul jumps in, raising his fist to punch the old man.

Jesus grabs the fist in mid-air. Shaking his head, Jesus motions Paul to stand aside.

Struggling to keep his head up, the old man says, "Forgive this if you can, asshole."

“He’s the devil, I’m telling ya,” someone says, his voice hysterical.

Jesus wipes the spit off his face and takes a close look at it.

In the spit, he sees the vision of a tear running down Sally’s face. Standing at the edge of the overpass, Sally steps over the fence. She takes a medicine container out of her purse and tosses a pill into her mouth. Her face twists in pain when she swallows it. She lets out a nervous chuckle and takes a few more pills. She swallows them and smiles as if they have worked immediately. Taking a deep breath, she throws the pill container over her shoulder on the sidewalk and follows that with her purse. The peaceful smile gives way to a sudden eruption of nervous laughter, tinged with a mischievous undertone.

Jesus turns his gaze back to the old man who spat on his face. “Your daughter did the same to me a long time ago—I guess it runs in the family,” Jesus tells Sally’s elderly father, who must be in his 80s now. “And that was the highest pain ever inflicted upon me. And I did it. I finally managed to forgive her. Forgiving you is not even a challenge by—”

“She’s dead, you bastard,” Sally’s dad shouts with a trembling voice. “Do you understand? She’s dead. I swear to God, I’ll never forgive you for what you did to my daughter. Never.”

“Sally?” Jesus mutters and finds himself standing on the same overpass as if his body is teleported there. Sally turns to her right, where Jesus stands. Her eyes are filled with tears. Jesus is not sure if Sally can see him or not. Sally’s mad laughter stops. A tear escapes her eye. “I love you,” she says, and while facing Jesus, jumps onto the freeway. Jesus tries to grab her, but his hand passes through her body as if he were a ghost. His gaze is still attached to hers but gazes cannot fight gravity. “No-o-o-o-o-o.” Jesus’ scream accompanies her slow-motion fall onto the running cars.

Jesus snaps back to attention, finding himself back in the adventure park.

Sally’s dad is slowly walking away.

“I didn’t do anything,” Jesus screams, his voice squeaky.

Sally’s father stops and partially looks over his shoulder. “Yeah, you didn’t, you bastard. You didn’t do anything.” He turns before bursting out crying. “That’s why my daughter’s dead.”

As if struck by thunder, Jesus hears the shrill honk of a car horn resounding in his head. Holding his head in his hands, he falls to his knees. From the bottom of his heart, he calls God and makes one wish, that his mission on earth would terminate here and now.

Ascension

A light, refreshing breeze blows and brings life back to Jesus' corpse.

Eden Adventure Park is as empty as a plague-ridden city. Resembling the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Helter Skelter looks like a Roman ruin, teetering on the edge of collapse. *What year is this?* Jesus wonders. The pendulum ride has already fallen. The pirate ship ride is split in half. Most of the roller coaster's structure lies in ruins, its cars having plummeted off the rails and now entangled within the remnants of the wreckage.

Some might call it an Apocalypse, some total annihilation of earthly life; all of it: the humans we've reproduced, the architectures they've built up, and the cultures they've made up. The Messiah Show, along with all its glory, is gone as if it has never existed. The grass field that once hosted thousands of enthusiastic followers of Jesus is now a barren desert, cracked at every corner.

Jesus himself, the star of the show, is crucified at the center, where he used to preach forgiveness and compassion to his flock of followers. The hardcore fans who once loved him to death are all dead now, leaving Jesus alone as well as forlorn. There is nothing left on earth to live for.

The breeze that resurrected Jesus dislodges the cross from the earth and carries it up to the sky. As he ascends, Jesus smiles and takes a last look at the earth that once housed his body. Below him, Eden Adventure Park becomes smaller and smaller. *Goodbye, Eden, forever.* Above him is a big, puffy cloud, through which the cross ascends.

As he flies through, he can feel the warmth of the sun reaching his skin. The mass of vapors in the cloud becomes brighter and brighter until Jesus reaches the very top, to the kingdom of the sun. He tightly shuts his eyes in response to the abrupt change in light intensity, yet he can still sense the powerful sunlight seeping through his closed eyelids.

Jesus opens his eyes when he feels the cross is not ascending further. It must be having a layover on the cloud before taking Jesus up to the sun, where he will be reunited with his father.

Everything glows under the sheer uncensored sunshine above the cloud. The glittering droplets of the fog that surrounds Jesus gradually disappear, revealing an old, rusty carousel, similar to the one they once had in the park. *That's my favorite kind of heaven,* Jesus thinks and smiles.

The unmoving carousel already has a rider, a young Black man with a bandage on his head. Sitting on a plastic unicorn, he hugs the grab bar so tightly as if he's embracing his sweetheart. Traces of multiple burns mar the back of his neck. *Could he really be me?!* Jesus wonders.

"But I'm here to make it up to you," Jesus hears from behind. While still crucified on the cross, he turns from the man sitting on the unicorn to the female voice, and with him, the cross turns as well.

That is Sally in her navy blue dress. Jesus loves this color on Sally. Her face screws up in an expression that Jesus doesn't recognize. Shame perhaps? In the reflection of her watery eyes, Jesus catches a glimpse of himself and his cross. Her twitching eyelids crave a beam of

hope. “I...,” she continues, “I... I wanted to see if...you...our relationship, I mean, if you want to pick it up again and—”

As Jesus hears the inaudible response of the guy sitting on the unicorn, Sally’s face gets bigger and bigger—or Jesus gets smaller, one of the two. Tears well up in Sally’s eyes. Apparently, the response was good for nothing but burning hearts and irrigating eyes. Jesus begins taking a dislike to the guy sitting on the unicorn. By now, Sally’s face has become as tall as Jesus’ cross.

As the blood drains from her face, Sally’s breathing becomes heavier through her nose. She shudders and hurriedly fishes out a medicine container from her purse. “You don’t mean that,” she cries, unscrewing the lid on the container. “I know you. These feelings never can completely go away—”

“But you surely can,” Jesus hears from the guy on the carousel. *What?! What the hell is the matter with this guy?* He must be terribly wrong in the head; that explains the bandage. Hurting people with words is no less of a crime than stabbing them with a knife. Worse. What sin is more hideous than wounding a heart? *Where do I know this guy from?* Jesus wonders but doesn’t bother to turn back and see his face.

Tears spill over and trickle down Sally’s face. The pain of the world wavers in her wet eyes. Jesus cannot bear that. Although he wants to reach over and wipe the tears off her face, his hands are tied, nailed to the cross. He hears the indistinct voice of the guy on the carousel saying something to Sally—as if he hasn’t said enough already. *Just shut up already, would you?*

Whatever he said this time, it is tearing Sally apart. Jesus should caress her cheeks with the tip of his fingers; the gesture that used to do magic, soothing her in an instant. Jesus exerts all his strength, wrenching his nailed hands in an attempt to free himself from the cross. As the nails quiver, fresh blood trickles down from them, but his unwavering focus remains solely on the pain etched on Sally’s face.

“But you said you loved me,” Sally says as she bursts out crying.

The scratchy music begins.

Jesus turns back to the carousel that resumes its aimless circling. With an oblivious smile on his face, the guy on the carousel opens his arms and rides away on the plastic unicorn. *That asshole was me*, Jesus recognizes himself and wishes he didn’t.

Sally shouts through her sob, “It was right here. You said you love me. What’s changed?” Her wishful eyes yearn for a response softened with a touch of mercy. The inaudible words of Jesus riding on the carousel, however, sounds empty of that.

“Forgive me,” Jesus mutters while struggling to get his hands free from the cross.

“Forgive me,” he repeats louder this time.

The nails desperately cling.

“Forgive me,” he shouts.

The nails start to loosen.

“Forgive me,” he screams.

“It wasn’t that many,” Sally says, her trembling voice carried over a bass of despair. She bows her head, chin tucked into her chest.

Jesus finally detaches himself from the holy cross. Before his outstretched hand can reach Sally’s face, however, gravity reaches out to him, pulling Jesus down from the sky with unyielding force.

“Forgi-i-i-i-ive me-e-e-e-e,” Jesus screams while falling to earth at a frightening speed. In no time, he can see Eden Adventure Park. *Oh, no. Not that goddamn park again.* Shortly after, he passes the zip line cable, plunging into the bottom of the valley where Vincent’s body has exploded into countless pieces.

There Will Be Blood

HONKING HORN.

The cars on the freeway move at a dizzying speed. Standing on the sidewalk of the overpass, Jesus grips the fence that Sally once crossed, for what would be the first and last time in her life. And it was all Jesus' fault: words that he shouldn't have said and deeds that he should've done but he didn't. The weight of his sins hangs heavily upon him. It's time for Jesus to pay the price for his mistakes. After taking a deep breath, he lifts one leg over the fence, unsure of what awaits him on the other side.

From the far end of the overpass, Annie—Sally's best friend—comes running, her screams lost among the deafening noise of the freeway.

Dismissing Annie's plea, Jesus swings his other leg over the fence, teetering on the edge as he clings to the railing. His shaking knees beg him not to go further. The cars zoom down the freeway at a deadly speed, daring anyone who attempts to cross it. And Sally dared to jump. Would Jesus too?

Annie keeps shouting as she gets closer.

"Sally," Jesus mutters and blinks, and in an instant, as if on cue the sunny sky turns cloudy. A deep and overwhelming desolation engulfs the entire freeway, leaving an unsettling sense of estrangement; the sense of being rejected by the world. Although Jesus can still hear muffled echoes of Annie's shouts, he can no longer see her anywhere on the overpass. The cold breeze brings the haunting scent of Sally instead, accompanied by the melancholic melody of a crow's symphony of death. A mad, hollow laughter from his left only intensifies the already gloomy and dismal ambiance.

Sally stands on his left, looking directly into Jesus' eyes. Surges of regret wash over the despair in her tearful eyes.

Jesus has been transported through time, arriving at the pivotal moments just before Sally's tragic suicide. He stretches out his hand to caress her cheeks with the tip of his fingers; the gesture that used to do magic, soothing her in an instant—a deed that Jesus should've done much earlier.

A tear escapes her eye. "I love you," Sally says, and facing Jesus, jumps on the freeway.

Jesus reaches out and rushes to grab her, but his hand passes through her body as if she is a ghost. With the cry of anguish stifled in his throat, Jesus remains fixated on her gaze, but even the most intense gaze cannot fight gravity.

"No-o-o-o-o-o!" Jesus' scream escapes and echoes through the freeway as he watches Sally's slow-motion fall onto the moving cars below.

HONK.

Jesus snaps back to attention, consumed by the immense sorrow of Sally's last moment.

As Annie's indistinct voice gradually becomes audible, Jesus struggles to make out the words 'sick', 'pills', and 'depression.' Turning to her in disbelief, Jesus strains his ears to hear more clearly. The shocking story that unfolds shifts the blame of Sally's death onto someone else: another man who has done to Sally what Jesus could never do.

Annie arrives, panting and out of breath, her black funeral dress fluttering in the wind. She clutches to Jesus's gray shirt before collapsing to her knees.

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