

ONCE UPON
AN ALTERED
TIME

ONCE UPON AN ALTERED TIME
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Once Upon A Time...

“Yo, check her out.” said Jake to his friend Joey.

They stood on the corner of 15th and Porter street in front of The Pizza Shack, an order out only pizza parlor that also sold packs of cigarettes and sodas out of vending machines for an exorbitant price in the tiny area where you waited for your pie. You could get a slice for a buck that was a thick mass of crust and cheese and a moderate topping of spicy pepperoni. On a breezy day you can smell the dough baking in their brick ovens all the way from Broad street a block down.

After a spicy slice of pepperoni pie you could grab a beer at the Rosewood Pub just one block east on Porter. Others might be inclined to visit Bill’s Variety on the opposite corner for a can of RC cola, America’s top selling soda, or a pack of smokes that are much cheaper than the Pizza Shack’s vending machines that can only ingest quarters. If you had a sweet tooth, you can walk a block south on 15th street to Millie’s Ice Cream Parlor. It wasn’t the land of Dairy Queen, but they would treat you right and you had a dozen flavors of ice cream to choose from to cool your taste buds.

15th and Porter streets were lined with a majority of houses, that were usually single family occupancy with a rare few were split into duplexes. The young woman walked from Millie's towards the two young men on the opposite side passing row homes that were made usually of brick and mortar. At the end of the block was a brownstone that was three stories high, dwarfing the other row homes on the block that were two stories tall. It was a warm afternoon, she took off her black and gray striped hoody and tied it to her waist to let the sun hit her skin.

"Man, you ain't gonna say shit to her you pussy." Joey said shaking his head pitifully.

Jake watched her walk down the street, pretending not to see them. Judging from Joey's words he expected her to be stone cold to them. She absently pushed a lock of curly black hair behind her ear, and Jake felt his heart speed up.

"She looks like she's just got off a work. She's wearin an apron, probably a waitress gettin her ass pinched by ugly mother fuckers like you all day." Joey said with another pitiful head shake.

"Like you know. I bet I can get her digits." he said looking at Joey closely.

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"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. And if I don't, just tell your mom I'll be over at the same time tonight." he said before walking over to her.

"Go suck a dick."

Jake felt he had a good chance at getting her number. He already knew her name and approached her but left plenty of distance between them so as not to come on too strong.

“Hey, Grace.” Jake said.

Her reaction was a small smile but was accompanied by a slight eye roll.

“Do we know each other?” she asked still walking at the same pace.

“Yeah, we’re friends.”

“We are?” she said with a chuckle.

“Yeah, you’re friends with Paul Kenoff right?”

“Yeah.” she said slowing down.

“Well I’m Paul’s friend too. I’ve known him since high school.” he said with a smile.

“And so that makes us friends?” she said giving a head shake similar to Joey’s.

Jake looked back at Joey who just gave him the bird and a smile. Jake brushed him off and continued

brushed him off and continued.

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“OK, we have a mutual friend. I want to be your friend, my name is...”

“Yeah, I know your name, Jake Darrow. The sledgehammer.” she said finally stopping.

“Aw see, I knew you knew me. You’ve seen me fight, too.” Jake said with a smile.

“No, I don’t know you. Paul knows you and he’s mentioned you,” she said pertly.

“he told me you’re an amateur.”

“Yeah, I teach it at the Y too.” he said half heartedly.

Jakes smile shrunk a little, wondering how she might have meant the amateur statement. If a guy had said as much to him he would of dropped him like a bad habit. He could never raise a hand to a woman, especially her, whose sky blue eyes made him sweat nervously. He didn’t notice the smile cross Grace’s lips when he deflated a little. Jake looked away slightly trying to still sound cool despite the burn.

“We can be friends, if you like.” she said trying to catch his eye with hers.

He smiled brighter and nodded his head, he looked into her cool blue eyes and felt his heart floating in them.

“That’d be cool.” he said feeling lighter than air.

“Here.” she said taking his hand and removing a pen from her pants pocket.

“You carry pencils in there too?” Jake asked hoping it would distract Grace from his sweaty palm.

“Shut up, I carry it for work.” she said giving him a gentle elbow in his ribs.

“You work at Millies on Shunk street, right?”

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“Yeah,”

“I never liked the food, the Rocky Road was good though.”

“I’ll tell them you approve.” she said with a laugh as she wrote her number on his palm.

“Go ahead laugh, there’s your tip if you ever serve me.” he said playfully trying to ignore the flutter in his stomach.

“Here, friends talk and get to know each other.” she said with a smile and began walking again.

Jake stood watching her leave. She wore jeans and a T-shirt under her maroon smock, stained slightly from ice cream, but he thought she looked beautiful since he first saw her when still a senior in high school

looked beautiful since he first saw her when still a senior in high school. Her skin was fair which contrasted beautifully with hair that was the deepest black. He quickly walked back over to Joey hand held high.

“Great fuck stick, what do I tell my mother?”

Grace had woken up feeling sick for the last few mornings. Jake was already at work by six every morning and would miss this new routine. They had been living together for nearly two years but she rarely had to get up for work before him, so it was easy to hide. It was after only the second morning she had decided to get the pregnancy test, but she had waited until now, three days later, to take it.

It was a plain white stick with a gray tab you were supposed to pee on. Her nerves were so wracked she almost peed on her hand. She placed it on the bathroom counter and washed her hands while she waited the ten minutes for the results.

She turned on the bedroom TV to kill time. The news was on, President Nixon was speaking about the revolution in California. She would turn away every few seconds from the president and glance over at the bathroom counter. Nixon was going on about what he hoped to succeed before he finished his third term when, she got up to change the channel absent minded thinking of one of those new controllers for TV's that could change the channel from any room in the house.

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The local NBC 3 news was broadcasting. A handsome middle aged man in a dark gray suit was reporting on a fire.

[TV Commentator:...the series of blazes in Cedar Park are believed to have been set intentionally.]

The camera cut from the talking head to an on location shot of the city's Police Commissioner being questioned by a number of TV reporters. He was an older man in his fifties with a smooth handsome face but he had beady hazel eyes and looked nervous as he spoke.

[Commissioner:...it is the opinion of the detectives in charge of the case that the blaze last month that destroyed two dozen row homes in Cedar Park was definitely arson.]

[Reporter: Commissioner, has Move claimed responsibility for the fire?]

[Commissioner:I can't comment on that right now.]

[Reporter:Will you be seeking help from the DUA, if Move is involved?]

[Commissioner: No. We will not require Federal assistance. Thank you.]

She watched absently while the talking head became another talking head that began reviewing tonight's Monday night football game between the Philadelphia Yellow Jackets and division rival Portsmouth Spartans. The Yellow Jackets had no shot at the Super Bowl in her opinion so she changed the channel back and looked at the clock hanging above their bed. Ten minutes.

She quickly walked over to the test still clothed only in a night shirt and pink fuzzy slippers. She picked up the plastic stick with prickly finger tips and saw a blue plus sign in the little round window and felt her stomach lurch in fright. She sat on the toilet holding the test in her hands with

white knuckles.

They wanted to have kids, but they were being careful. They still didn't meet the Federal guidelines for marriage and would receive no support for their baby outside of his bi-weekly checks and her minuscule tips, which they would lose at some point since she was pregnant.

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"I can work until the last month." she said with a nod.

But after she had the baby she wouldn't be able to work again for at least a few months if she could find a sitter, the Federal government wouldn't help her find work but they would allow their child to go to school when old enough. Their baby might starve before it would be old enough to go to school, she thought biting her bottom lip with worry as she looked back at the TV from the toilet. It was a news clip of rioting in southern California, many held up signs showing daisies with rainbow petals which was the symbol for the gay movement.

[Host: The Religious Liberty Accommodations Act specifically states homosexuality and all types of sexual perversion other than a man and a woman as a crime.]

[Senator: You're right and you see here, that's why they're revolting. They have these sick urges, whether with an animal or a child, they get can't get all these urges out. So they say, 'what's keepin me from my what I want? he asks himself and he sees the government and says there ya go. These sickos can only release they're urges on the civilized public, ah uh uh God fearing public.]

[Host: You're right, Senator.]

[Senator:California is in revolt, because they are at the hands of these unnatural sex maniacs, Hollywood, the uh ah home of great debauchery a modern day Sodom. Fagots should be removed from our country, they destroyed Rome and will destroy the fabric of our great land. They're a terrorist group just like those Black Panthers and those flower children, up in Woodstock. They must be ripped from our land.]

Grace got up to turn off the TV, feeling sick for Paul. Seeing such an old man talk that way had unsettled her in every way emotionally. She had heard stories about the Temperance League and the things they did to those in violation of that law.

She forgot about the TL for the moment and thought of her growing child. What would they do? Adoption? She certainly couldn't let the baby grow inside her and give it away like a worn pair of shoes.

Abortion was an option now in Canada, but waiting on a travel list can take two years unless you were very wealthy. But abortion felt like murder to her and she shuddered at the idea, she would
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rather adopt him or her out though that would hurt too. She put on jeans and a bra in front of the full length mirror in their bedroom.

She placed her hands gently on her stomach and began to caress it, feeling nervous and scared. The country seemed so crowded and violent and angry, she didn't want to give up on her baby though. She'd have to tell Jake, he was working only until one o'clock but he would be giving boxing lessons at the Y until five.

Jake had the car and they could barely afford that so Grace took a bus to

North Philly. No matter the time of day the buses were always packed with many people but it was deathly quiet. Grace quietly stood among the passengers, some white, some black. A rain so light it was little more than mist made the day especially chilly.

The Jim Crow bus laws were not usually enforced in this neighborhood. In certain neighborhoods in South Philly many bars and restaurants had signs prohibiting Irish and Blacks. Here though on the number 29 Septa bus Jim Crow didn't fly they all looked as tired and as depressed as Grace had felt and just wanted the day to end. An elderly white man wearing a cheap plaid suit and a musty fedora with eyes that looked like runny eggs sat talking to himself while his seat mate a young black in a loose fitting T shirt and jeans sat looking down at his feet with a deep frown.

Most of the people on the bus had the look of a defeated army after a poorly executed mission, the only sounds were the old man talking and the diesel engine that would pick up and slow down each time the bus made a stop. Grace's heart was beating rapidly as she waited for her stop feeling like she would be packed in this bus like a sardine all day, though she could still see the random ads plastered on the buses insides.

One was an advertising for Camel cigarettes with the a quote from a doctor that stated, nine out of ten doctors agree Camel to be the most relaxing cigarette, with an insert of said doctor a blond haired hunk with a Camel in hand smiling warmly. Another ad was two pictures, one showed a child using a cellular, the other showed an old woman talking on a house phone, underneath the picture was: The NEW TI-Flip2 followed by the famous slogan: Our Technology. Your Vision. The ad beside the cellular chilled her and caused her to put an arm over her womb, it was a PSA for the Temperance League, telling anyone who witnesses immoral or unAmerican activities to notify the TL or the Police followed by a list of phone numbers.

The ad was a drawing of a ghostly looking man wearing a black trench coat standing in an alley looking over his shoulder with the most haunted eyes Grace had ever seen, his simple oval face had a pair of white circles with a deep black spot on each as a pupil staring out of the picture and

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into the eyes of anyone looking. Above the picture of the man were the words: 'The TL is watching.'

The drone of the bus and empty eyes distracted her long enough to almost miss her stop. She quickly pulled on the cord and had to fight her way through a crowd of riders that would hardly move for her to leave.

"Hold on a sec, damn it!" Grace shouted as the doors tried to close her in for the next stop.

The doors abruptly opened as a few riders grumbled. Grace got off and walked across Broad street to the squat one story building of brown bricks. Despite the gray dreariness of the day the red letters of the YMCA still sprang out brightly.

She walked through the double doors and towards the gymnasium where the ring was. Jake was holding his fists and slowly punching the air, a group of boys between the ages of ten to fourteen were mimicking his punches. He looked away quickly at Grace and smiled slightly before returning his attention to the gang of boys.

"OK guys run a few laps." he said waving to his love.

"Hey women weaken the knees." said one of the kids

they women weaken the knees. said one of the kids.

“A foot in the ass is gonna weaken yours, get movin.” Jake said with a laugh. “Hey baby, whats happenin?”

He was light haired and tall, with real muscles as he would sometimes brag. He worked at the Y almost full time and would volunteer to teach boxing to kids or young bucks as he sometimes called them. Grace had never seen him fight, she couldn't imagine him brutalizing another man and was happier never having seen him fight. He always seemed so cool headed it was hard for her to imagine him angry enough to hurt someone even if it was a sport.

“Can we talk somewhere?”

They were in his office with the door closed, there was a poster from one of his fights on the wall close to her. She looked and saw her man, above his name in large black letters:

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JAKE 'THE SLEDGEHAMMER' DARROW

He stood in a fighting pose looking oiled and ready in a pair of black shorts, although he was in black and white on the poster she could see the fire in his eyes, she would see that look in his eyes when they made love. She felt her heart flutter at the thought. Stop it, that's why you're in this mess she told herself, though Jake was elated about the news and had Grace sit down as soon as he heard. She felt apprehension still.

“I'm scared, Jake.”

“Why, baby?” he said kneeling before her. “So we can’t get married yet, we don’t need the feds help. Paul can give the baby any vaccines and...”

“It’s not that, I just feel so depressed. On the news everything looks so bad.”

“Ah, it’s just yellow news. This is the safest country to live in.” Jake said.

He was sure in that fact, as he remembered the stories his father told him serving under the great General Patton in the 3rd Army, marching from western Europe all the way to Red Square. By the wars end more than two thirds of the world was under the control of a half dozen US Generals. His fathers only regret was missing out on Big Macs far east campaign that wiped out the last vestiges of Imperialism and Communism from the world.

“That’s not what I mean,” Grace said as her eyes began to tear. “Rioting in California, I heard people saying it’s happening up in New England when I was waiting for the bus. And the Move group here at home, and the TL.”

Jake took her hands in his and rubbed them gently.

“It’s just because of the...gays and...”

“Oh is that all. I guess Paul should be relieved. What if our baby was gay and...”

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“I wouldn’t love him or her any less.” Jake cut in

I wouldn't love him or her any less... Jake cut in.

"I know that, Jake, but they can lock up anybody they want. What if our baby was born different and they wanted to lock him or her up because of something they decided is unnatural. Do you know what would happen to Paul if the Temperance League found out?" she said as tears slowly dripped down her face.

"Hey now," he said gently stroking the tears away from her face with his thumbs. "our baby is gonna be fine. OK. Paul is gonna be fine. Nobody around here listens to the TL anyway. Just a bunch of old men and women that want everybody to recite Bible verses and wear pantaloons."

He said the last part with a wink and got a snort of laughter from Grace. He felt some of the fear Grace felt, the TL had power. They had members every where, from the mayors office all the

way down to the neighborhood watch members throughout all of the Philadelphia neighborhoods the cops dared to patrol still, he had even trained some kids who had parents in the League. He heard stories, not from Paul but from the grapevine.

About the conversion therapy, the shock therapy, castration. Back in the day when he was a kid, the schools and government were worried about racial mixing, whores and commies. It was the TL that made it illegal to drink in most states and enforced the Jim Crow laws both down south and north, and were recognized by law enforcement, and were allowed to make arrests for crimes and prosecute, whether it be an immoral crime or an unAmerican one.

The TL at some point in time got homosexuals on their radar and equaled them to pedophiles and other sex criminals. The TL took most of their

rules and ethics from the Bible and enforced those rules accordingly.

They were a powerful lobby group in DC and its head was a close friend of President Nixon, Jake had read once in the newspaper. Paul was a homosexual which was a mandatory death sentence.

Jake remembered seeing The Religious Liberty Act become law on TV and wondered what Paul was feeling right that moment. He had known Paul was gay for many years but never had the courage to ask him how he felt about it all. Probably scared to death, he realized suddenly.

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“It’ll be OK, Grace.” Jake said not letting his fear show.

The following May a baby girl was born healthy and happy. They named her Nancy, she had her mothers blue eyes and raven black hair with skin the color of cream.

“Congrats, mom.” Paul said.

Grace kissed her soft head that was already growing hair that was the deepest black.

Jake stood next to his wife's bed while the baby’s gusty cries softened at the sight of her fathers face.

“My little Snow White.” he said in a choked voice kissing her bunched up fingers that reached for him.

“Oh,” Grace said seeing his tears and gave him a kiss.

“If you tell any of the kids at the Y I cried, I’m telling them you fart in your sleep.” he said smiling and kissing her back. Paul had helped deliver her and had indeed helped to get Nancy all of her vaccines.

“Will you get in trouble?” Grace asked on day while in his office.

“Well,” he said with a small sigh “I could. There is an inventory the Feds check once a month to make sure no one’s stealing. It’s a risk but Nurse Susie covers my butt around here, don’t tell anyone she’s a closeted Socialist.”

“My ears are burning, Doctor.” Susie cried out musically from somewhere.

They all laughed before Paul continued.

“I guess since I’m in the closet as well, that makes us a great pair. She knows how to fudge paper

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work to make it look like it’s their fault and we had extra to give. Besides she would rather I help you, Jake and Nancy than some Nazi Christers, as she so eloquently puts it.”

Grace felt relief, but then anger that Paul had to be in the closet. She felt fright grip her as she held on to a fidgety Nancy who like most two years old was still cranky from her shots, fear for Paul and for what the world

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