

## The VVitch

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# **The VVitch**

by [Bavitz II \(Bavitz\)](#)

## Summary

Sabrina is 35 years old and lacks meaningful relationships. Psychic powers have made her a lifelong pariah. Her mind has been closed off and she wonders where her future is heading, or if she has one at all.

After a routine meeting with the other Kanto gym leaders, she winds up having a one night stand. But will it bring her any satisfaction?

I see myself. Faint creases at the corners of my eyes. Lines on my forehead that remain when I relax my face. And there, a single shining strand of gray in my bangs. I'm 35.

My name is Sabrina. You may have heard of me; I'm the gym leader of Saffron City.

I have started to feel a sense that the end is near. I cannot tell if this is a manifestation of my (always unreliable) precognitive abilities or simply psychological, psychosomatic. A week ago, at my monthly examination, the League scientist who reported the results paused after the marginally lowered measurements for telekinesis and teleportation and asked:

"Have you considered reproducing?"

I said no, I had no such plans at the moment.

"Fertility in women starts to decline at your age." And his mind said, with no attempts to block my telepathy (though I know they have ways), *A shame if her genes aren't passed on.*

Of course, I know these scientists, who have prodded and swabbed and sampled every facet of my body since I was 10, are insured against my future barrenness via oocyte cryopreservation. In test tubes, they may produce any number of my children without the cumbersome need of my body, or they may simply clone me altogether. That they haven't already is a testament to our society's respect for human rights and dignity. That I am allowed to live some semblance of a normal life at all is testament, even if they keep me on leash here in Saffron, within walking distance of their headquarters. In earlier eras, they may have harvested my brain lobe by lobe, or even earlier, burned me at the stake as a witch. I am grateful to live in a time and place where I may be allowed to live long enough to become a hag.

Yet, the sense of doom remains. Perhaps it is simply acknowledgment of my biological clock; I have always been more attuned to the inner processes of my body than most. Or perhaps it is because my migraines have become (according to my feeling, and against the reassurances of the researchers) stronger and more frequent. Sometimes it feels as though a tumor is pressing behind my eyeball, while other times the delicate muscles of my eyelid twitch uncontrollably. And as there is no scientific precedent for one such as myself, I can only guess that I am at greater risk of Alzheimer's Disease or other forms of neurological decay; every forgotten moment strikes a sharp fear in my heart.

I hope it's psychosomatic. The doctors tell me it is. I wish I could trust them, but their minds are always cloudy. Will I die? Will I lose myself? Or will I simply go barren, living out this life the same way, unchanged, but now without hope of change? There was a sense of resignation in that scientist's mental voice when he expressed regret for my genes: that I myself had expended all my usefulness to modern science, that after 25 years enduring their tests they continued now as simple formality; that only by producing some future stock might I still prove a valuable contribution to their field.

Some, I suppose, might find solace in the loosening of their yoke. For me the thought is strangely saddening.

I no longer see myself. I leave the mirrored panel in the League headquarters lobby where I was ostensibly making myself presentable prior to the quarterly Leader's Meeting. Janine and Surge have arrived. Surge is thinking: *Here's the witch*. He moves with stiff military rigor and gives me a straightforward greeting. Janine, comically tiny beside him, is thinking: *Live in the shadows. Confound and destroy. Confusion, sleep, poison. Live in the shadows. Confound and destroy...* It is the same thing she thinks every time I see her. At first I believed this mantra a form of ninja mental training. Only once, when her guard dropped briefly, did I realize it was something she only thought around me.

Of my psychic abilities, telepathy is the strongest. Or rather, because of the very nature of telepathy, it seems the strongest. I am telekinetic, but can exert force barely stronger than one of my arms; I may teleport, but only a few feet; and I possess precognition, but spottily and with great imprecision. My telepathy is likewise limited. I may not delve into memories, or the subconscious, or anything beyond the absolute surface of thought. Even so, this is a potent power. Many are wary around me. Few, in my life, have ever gotten close to me.

Or perhaps that's a convenient excuse; perhaps I have never gotten close to anyone.

Janine mentions the others should arrive soon, so we decide to wait in the lobby, amid the fountains and glasswork art. Surge, who doesn't respect Janine despite his professional demeanor toward her, inquires about her father. Janine says Koga is well. They talk shop. The tournament up on the Indigo Plateau, favorites and interesting recent results. I actually have no interest in battling, despite my profession (a profession given to me, rather than one I sought), and can supply nothing to this conversation.

Misty shows up next, and looks around the lobby, surprised she isn't late. She actually is late, but for some reason the others are even later. She doesn't want to be here. Her mind rages. She got dumped two nights earlier by her latest boyfriend. She lacks Surge's professionalism or Janine's self control and her smile is clearly strained as she joins the group. "Can you believe Red is still competing at the Plateau," she spits, as though it's offensive someone better hasn't come around yet to usurp his perennial success. She thinks: *Men are so cruel. Absolutely, disgustingly cruel*. She wears an athletic swimsuit top and shorts and I can't help but feel that, although she is only a few years younger than me, a gulf of time divides us. She doesn't look at me once, and not through conscious effort.

When Brock and Erika arrive, it's clear what provoked their uncharacteristic lateness. Each holds one of Blaine's arms as he slowly shifts arthritic legs one after another through the sliding door. Blaine was old when I became a gym leader; now he is ancient. As soon as he's inside he bellows: "Hah! Miss me, kids?" Even at 90 his mind remains sharp, something he attributes to a lifetime dedicated to research. But his thoughts tell a story different from his attitude: *It hurts. Oh, it hurts. My fool pride. Had to prove you're still spry, did you now?*

He plans to announce his overdue retirement today. Most people, looking at him, think the same thing: *I hope he announces he's retiring today*. There's pity and sadness.

I think, looking at him, what an amazing man. What an amazing life he's led. A long life. A full life, a meaningful life.

Surge takes a brief headcount. "One short."

Brock, still holding Blaine's arm, indicates the elevator. "Let's get him upstairs where he can sit. We don't need to wait for everyone."

Surge nods in agreement and takes Blaine's other arm from Erika, who seems surprised to see Surge appear beside her and wilts away from him. With her traditional kimono and proper posture, most take Erika's spaciness as modest refinement, a misinterpretation she is more than happy to allow, a misrepresentation she believes herself. I, unfortunately, know the truth. Her mind whirrs with an almost dizzying array of neurotic thoughts. She doesn't seem to be aware she was helping Blaine walk here at all, certainly isn't thinking about his potential retirement. She has an announcement of her own to make and my stomach sags to hear her contort her brain into a pretzel as she rehearses the words for it, again and again. A betrothal. She's engaged to be married. Brock was married two years prior and it put pressure on her self-conception as an elegant, traditional lady. She, too, has started to hear the tick of time, though it isn't scientists urging her to reproduce; it's society, or at least her vision of it. Half the frenetic thoughts pulsing in her mind are attempts to convince herself she truly loves the man she's agreed to wed. She doesn't. She is, though she will pursue any possible mental thread to deny it, utterly homosexual.

To avoid crowding Blaine in the elevator, the men go up first, leaving the women in the lobby. On remarkable autopilot, Erika recites polite greetings to Janine, then Misty, deftly avoiding looking at Misty's bare skin for more than a moment.

Then she turns to me. Her face shows nothing but serene calm, but disgust enters her mind. She gives the greeting demanded by etiquette and turns away. More than any of the others, even Janine (whose mantra cannot fully conceal her emotions), Erika loathes and fears me.

Why shouldn't she? Why shouldn't they all? If nothing else, people can trust the sanctuary of their own minds. Even the most persecuted criminal is allowed that safe haven. I violate what should be inviolable. I cannot even consciously avoid doing it; my telepathy is a sixth sense, something I experience like a sound or smell. Their voices, in my mind. Even those at peace with their own secrets, like Surge (who does not already know or suspect what he has done?), avoid spending undue time around me.

Plus, I have been told I constantly wear a very severe expression. Some have described it as "scary."

I want to reach out. Say something, something that will reassure. I'm not a witch. I have formulated speeches in my mind, things that begin like so: "In actuality, every human has psychic powers. They simply don't realize it. Love... isn't the ability to feel love, to form an empathic connection with another creature, a kind of psychic ability?" But even this line of argument thwarts me. Have *I* ever felt love?

In the awkward silence as we wait for the elevator to return, Misty attempts brief girltalk on the subject of relationships, but nobody present has anything to add. Erika's thoughts go haywire again. The elevator doors open and we step inside and a familiar voice shouts:

"Hold it!"

Janine, lightning quick, stops the doors an inch from closing. They reopen on Blue, who instantly has Janine in a headlock. He grins as he rubs his knuckle on her scalp as though she were still a child. "Ladies!" he says, and releases Janine to sidle up to Misty and Erika. "Miss me? Don't answer. I know ya did."

The elevator is cramped. He moves like it isn't. A few light punches, pulled playfully, to Misty's well-defined abdomen. "Keeping those reps in, huh?" He flicks imaginary dust off the shoulder of his pink polo and compliments Erika's floral print kimono. "Nice threads."

Then he turns to me.

His hand shoots out, hovers in air. He squints and trembles. One finger goes to his temple. He's pretending to exert psychic pressure against me. This is the kind of joke I endure regularly, from passerby, challengers, whoever finds me more curiosity than object of unease. My modus operandi is to meet their mockery with stoicism.

Today, though, I find something so lively in Blue. Something fluid and excited to exist. My stare remains level, as I have practiced, but I slowly exert the force of my telekinesis on myself, pushing myself back an inch or two into the elevator wall. Blue, egoist as he is, for a moment believes he has somehow manifested this change himself, that—through what? latent inborn talent, as he possesses in all other arenas?—he has moved me.

When he realizes the truth his smile reaffirms, livelier than before. He says, as he usually does, exactly what he thinks: "So the witch's got a sense of humor after all."

"Blue! Don't call her that," says Misty, who has thought worse.

Blue snakes an arm around her shoulder and pulls her close. "What's that? Jealous? There's enough of me to go around, ya know!"

She thinks, *Asshole. Douchebag*. Not as aggressively as she says it, however. Blue and Misty have had sex before.

Returned to my typical place outside their attention, I place a hand to my chest, where the feeling of my telekinetic push lingers. I cannot account for my actions.

In the penthouse boardroom, the quarterly Leader's Meeting goes as we have all come to expect. As gym leaders, we are expected to be community spokesmen and the League's main point of outreach to trainers and non-trainers alike, on top of proctoring standardized tests to assess trainer fitness. My seven colleagues are all excellent at their jobs, which is why there has been no turnover since Koga was promoted. Their cities love them. They have the trust of local law enforcement and public services; they are known to everyone.

It's a position that has never suited me. I have made attempts, followed recommendations from on high. I have done publicity shoots and filmed educational videos. I have attempted to communicate. Always something has sabotaged me; perhaps, on some extrasensory level, I have sabotaged myself. It started with the fighting dojo. Its leader was the previous Saffron City gym leader, until his sudden demotion. The League cited a failure to meet certain performance metrics, but the main reason was their desire to place me in his position. He

took this poorly. For those first months I encountered picket lines outside my gym. Somehow the story twisted until the public understanding was that I personally expelled him from his gym by force. I was 15 at the time and far more talkative than I am now. "He was inadequate," I said to the picketers, trying to explain the matter of performance metrics. In the news they played only those three words, "He was inadequate," delivered in a way that, when I watched it replayed over and over, shocked even myself with its cruel tone. None of my subsequent explanations made it into the soundbite, and that was the city's first impression of me.

Then they gradually learned of my psychic abilities. At first I tried to conceal them. I did not understand at the time that the entire reason the League was so eager to make me a leader was to render my abilities public. They required control, and if in our enlightened humanistic society they could not vivisect my brain or keep me confined indefinitely, then they would at least ensure the narrative unfolded the way they wished. I'm certain it was League itself that started the rumors, which in conjunction with my preestablished unpopularity spread like wildfire. Soon people claimed I stole the souls of trainers who failed my test and placed them in dolls to play with. League officials came to me with an offer: a public demonstration of my powers, delivered under their direction, to set the matter straight.

The "demonstration" was the League's masterstroke. Filmed before a live audience, I stood on a stage and pushed small objects with my mind or told audience members what number they were thinking of. It looked identical to a cheap stage magician's performance, without even the benefit of sleight of hand. Though those who wanted to believe continued to believe, those who believed instead in a predictable order of the world came away with the exact impression the League wanted: I was a fraud.

Those close to me, such as my seven colleagues, know the truth. But in the public mind, truth is distorted. There are arguments one way and another, and as such no clear answer can ever be reached. I have become ambiguous, and in ambiguity, safely defused from disrupting known reality.

I understand it is the only way someone such as myself can be allowed to exist. But how do I move among people who aren't even sure of my shape?

It doesn't matter. The reason they put me in Saffron is because the League is headquartered here, so their front offices can perform many of the functions a gym leader is typically expected to perform. It's why, as the presenters of the quarterly meeting regale us with their graphs and slideshows, my metrics stand up there right beside the popular, sociable, and/or civic-minded Brock, Misty, and Erika.

The presentation ends with a request for vigilance in regards to public safety as the championship final nears. A reminder to expect extra tourism and plan community events accordingly, et cetera. Blue, leaned back in his chair with his arms behind his head, yawns dramatically, and despite the glare he receives from the bureaucrat doing the presentation, his comment sends a shock of restlessness among the leaders. The meeting is over.

Almost. Erika has been engaged with herself the entire time as to the best moment to announce her betrothal; her placid eyes suggest now is the time, yet she hesitates, as though it

is the announcement that would make her betrothal real, not whatever promise she has already given this man of hers.

The pause gives Blaine chance to tap his knuckle on the tabletop. (He wants to smack it, but is worried he'll hurt himself.) "That's it for me," he says. "I've decided. This season's my last. This old quizmaster's hanging up his hat—officially."

Most of them think, *Finally*. Aloud, they broach the topic with more respect:

"I can't believe it!" says Misty. "You're retiring?"

"If anyone deserves it, it's you," says Brock.

"You've served Cinnabar well," says Surge.

Erika retreats into the renewed chaos of her mind. "We'll miss you."

"You can be certain the wisdom you've given us will live on," says Janine.

It seems I must say something as well. "You can be certain," I begin, then realize I'm repeating Janine, having briefly confused her words for my thoughts. Eyes turn toward me. "You can be certain... we'll miss you..." I glare into the table.

"Geez! Thought you'd keel over before you ever retired, geezer," Blue blurts, saving me from prolonged embarrassment. Misty hisses at him not to be a jerk, or maybe she only thinks it, I'm not sure.

Either way, Blaine laughs. "Hah! You kids. You kids!"

Blue snaps his chair down on four legs and slaps the table the way Blaine wanted to. "Well, this calls for drinks. On me."

That's Blue's easy way of smoothing things over. The way he always has. He gets himself in trouble and gets out with a smile. Though everyone thinks he's a jerk, nobody can hate him. I can read his mind, but I can't understand how he does it. His thoughts are the least illuminating of anyone's. He plans nothing. He simply is what he is.

Below, in the downtown bar picked for its proximity, he holds aloft a cup. "End of an era!" One swift quaff and he's downed it, looses a sharp contented sigh as the others join in on his toast. The atmosphere of this establishment is amber, the windows blacked to form a smoky isolated interior, intimate like the inside of a mind. Chatter, reminiscence, Blaine seated in the honorable center, and me off to a fringe.

The entirety of his life is recapped via anecdotes. After the war some 70 years ago, he was one of the original Kanto gym leaders. He tells us what it was like in those early days, the luxuries he lacked that are now commonplace, the struggles. Gym leading wasn't a full time job back then; he doubled as a scientist. One by one his colleagues retired, a second and third generation of leaders, and yet he remained. Too much passion. That's a fire type specialist for you: inner flame ever burning. Even now, the passion remains. Only his body has failed him; the mind still craves. The anecdotes, both those he gives and those the other leaders give of

him, bring him to tears, the shamefaced tears of an old man who feels, in crying them, he has finally abandoned his manhood.

They console him, hands outstretched. Blue holds him by the shoulder and effortlessly says something to turn any pitying looks toward Blaine to sharp ones toward him.

I, too, have an anecdote about Blaine. I cannot share it. I wouldn't even know how to begin, if forced to speak it aloud.

Blaine was the researcher who spearheaded the project to examine and understand my psychic abilities, before he stepped away from science shortly afterward to focus on gym leader duties full time. I hated him. For a long time I hated him. He was the face of my misfortune, the cause—in my young mind—behind the endless tests I was forced to endure. Only gradually, as I aged, did I come to understand what he did for me, piecing it together from thoughts gleaned here and there. A recent widower, with daughters of his own, Blaine was the one who fought for my right to be a human being. Over months, in hour-long shouting matches with his peers, he said it again and again: *We're scientists, not jailers. Not butchers. Study her, yes. But we must let her live freely. I won't allow otherwise...*

When his bleary gaze turns toward me behind his black glasses, I imagine an apology, for squandering that life he gave me.

Fueled by drink, the celebration devolves. Blaine cycles out of the widening gyre's center. Janine and Surge get into a drinking competition, and despite the obvious differences in build and weight, Janine's experience with poisons gives her the clear edge by the time Surge, wobbling, taps out. A red-faced Brock starts up a rendition of "For he's a jolly good fellow," which the others join and drop out of intermittently. Blue and Misty, both drunk, gravitate toward each other, glances growing keen, intentions obvious even without the aid of telepathy. Erika watches them with disgust and jealousy she cannot untangle, does not want to untangle, because untangling would mean admitting to herself which of the pair she is actually jealous of.

And me. I drink, therefore I am. The fact that I am there, none of the others would deny. Surrounded by all seven, I feel lonelier than I do alone.

Blaine feels his joints ache and wishes he could go to bed already, a wish any of them would grant, if only he spoke it.

Maybe I can speak up on his behalf. I work up the nerve to try, when Misty suddenly lets out a sigh and flops onto her back. Blue, who'd been in the middle of some dirty and/or flirtatious joke toward her, stares in bafflement.

When Misty doesn't get back up, Janine checks her out. "Alright," she says. "Misty's done for the night." She gets an arm under a shoulder and lifts; Misty's head lolls as she mumbles to herself, beet red.

"I'll help," Blue says, but Janine cuts him off.

"Erika, get her other arm. We're taking her back to the hotel room."

Erika's thoughts, once Misty's slight and scantily-clad body is pressed against her, are a hive of panicked activity, all hidden behind a perfect dissembling of ladylike calm. As she and Janine carry Misty past, her eyes catch mine. I look away quickly, but the shard of hate I feel her feel hits me anyway; the one person who, no matter how flawlessly she hides a secret, will always find it.

The disruption gives Blaine an out. "That's it for me too, boys. Time to hit the hay."

He tries to rise alone, but Brock and Surge, instantly sober, are beside him. Another three-person clump shambles slowly out the bar.

The bar is now quiet.

Blue leans against the wall and stares up at the light, then down at the bill some employee has surreptitiously left. He sighs. *Misty's such a lightweight*, he thinks.

I leave quietly. It's so late even Saffron's downtown streets are sparse of humanity. The League put the other leaders in a local hotel for the night, but I live in a modest house on the more suburban north side of the city, near my gym. I head that way now.

Lost in thoughts about myself, my age, the future and how much of one I have, I don't notice the person following me until they're only a few steps behind. I turn, more startled than afraid; then my eyes narrow.

"What the hell? You're *walking* home?" Blue says. Hands in pockets, he quickens his step until he's beside me. "Our resident psychic's not gonna teleport?"

His intentions read clear. Put out over Misty, he's pegged me as his next best option. I'm not sure whether to be insulted or impressed he doesn't even try to conceal these thoughts.

"It's... a nice night," I say.

"Or maybe you hoped some cool guy would escort you." His hand comes out his pocket to flick a strand of his hair with two fingers. "Looks like your lucky night."

I glare. But he's immune.

It's not as though I've never been approached in such a way before. There are men, it seems, willing to ignore any character flaw so long as they like the way a woman looks. I even had a stalker, when I was a teenager. I think. It's sometimes difficult to parse intention from action. I've spoken to men who undressed me with their mind while holding a perfectly ordinary conversation. Obliviousness is a shield I've never been able to carry, and perhaps it's skewed my view of things. For everyone except me—or self-flagellators like Erika—thoughts are only thoughts.

But Blue's different. Although he obviously wants to have sex with me, nothing in his mind is lurid. He doesn't have to *think* about undressing me, because he intends to actually do it, and fully believes he will. He's a man with no dreams. Not because he lacks ambition—he has a surfeit—but because a dream is only substitute for reality.

When we reach my house he waits until I open the door to ask, "Gonna invite me in?"

I stand there, in the doorway, looking at him. His sly grin seeps certainty and even now I might shut him out same as everyone else, possessed, perhaps, of some notion of wounded pride that to him I'm mere leftovers. Then a flash of something: a fear; a thought of a man who has, in fact, sometimes lost, who has come in second place, and perhaps understands as I stand glaring at him the precariousness of his position.

I imagine my eyes soften. "Yes," I say.

He pushes me against the shelf full of plush dolls in my bedroom, our lips pressing and unpressing, and as a doll bounces off my head with a squeak his hands grope my chest through my thin sweater and I catch a breath in my throat. A shelf digs into the small of my back and one into the nape of my neck. His breath is heavy with alcohol and, I realize, mine is too, I can sense him smelling it. I did not realize I drank so much but now he's searching for the end of the long zipper running up my sweater and finds it at the tip of the tight collar, he pulls, the zipper snags as the collar bends and he can't get it down. You have to hold the collar straight to unzip it and this obvious logical process eludes him, especially as he keeps one hand cupped around my left breast, so my hands rise and try to hold the collar steady for him but it's already snagged and needs to go back up before it can go back down and I can feel his confusion and frustration over the whole thing as he pulls me away from the shelves, turns me around (he's stronger and taller than me, he can manipulate my body with ease), and half tosses, half pushes me onto my narrow twin bed.

The only light is the half moon streaming through the window blinds. I get my hands to my neck before he can screw up the zipper again and quickly get it moving down correctly, and by then he's over me and takes the zipper from me and yanks it so it crests and descends the swell of my breasts in one smooth arc. Because it's autumn I'm wearing another layer underneath, a shirt, but of course I'm flat on the bed now so I'll need to lift up if he wants that off me, but he's still struggling with the unzipped sweater, he's managed to get it down my shoulders but the sleeves are long and tight and the sweater's getting turned inside-out which causes the cuffs to get stuck on my wrists. I laugh, which he interprets as a laugh at him rather than a laugh at the general absurdity, or even a laugh at myself (I've always worn these full-covering clothes), which annoys him enough to give my sweater an even harder yank, which I'm worried will stretch or even tear it, but it finally comes off and he hurls it against the wall with a smack.

I preempt his next move and raise my back as he grips the bottom of the undershirt. It comes off much more fluidly, up and over my head, leaving my hair a mussed mess that half-covers my eyes before I brush it aside. Only a plain black brassiere remains, at least up top, and he leaves it for the time being as he grapples at my waist with my tights. "My shoes," I try to say, but he's already peeling the tights off, I lift my hips to help him as he slides them down my legs and, as I predicted, gets stopped because I'm wearing boots. He considers, grabs a boot with both hands and pulls, but they're laced up. "Let me. Let me—" I start, feeling ridiculous here in a bra and panties (I'm unsure whether it's embarrassing that my white panties don't match the black bra), with a wad of bunched tights tangled around my ankles, but he's figured out the mechanism and tugs at the knots in the laces with fingers and teeth

until they loosen. One after another my boots come off, then the tights, which take one sock with them but leave the other behind.

By now he's panting. Pieces of my outfit lay all over my bedroom, and another doll, dislodged previously, finally tilts and falls to punctuate this moment of stillness. He stands over me and I let him watch as I reach behind my back and unhook my bra, then slide the straps off my shoulders, then carry it by a strap between two pinched fingers and drop it from the side of the bed.

It's funny. Even at this age, I am, in fact, still "pure." But I feel no virginal reticence in letting him eye my bare chest. It's as though my long sexless adult life I've somehow passively gained experience, via age even without activity. Or perhaps it's the fact that I've undergone every imaginable type of medical examination, and my body has been viewed by all sorts of labcoated men (and women) over the years; even by Blaine. Their gazes were detached, professional, scientific; the man standing over me now anything but. It doesn't change a thing. No, actually I like it. I like being seen this way. Perhaps it is only another sort of objectification, but it's one I find infinitely superior to the blasé tone a doctor, peering through a speculum, can think *No abnormalities here*.

Blue thinks, *Bigger tits than Misty*.

Muddled by his recognition that I'm not in as great shape as Misty, that I'm not as slim or sleekly toned (and who would be, she's a triathlete level swimmer), nor, as he hooks his fingers under my panties and deftly removes them with a practiced motion to redeem the undressing fiasco, am I smooth-shaven the way she is. Nor have I had a labiaplasty like her, and by the time he pulls my panties past my raised ankles I'm annoyed enough by this comparison to lash my socked foot at his chest, which impacts with less force than I intend. "Think about *me*," I say, glaring into the bunched sheets at my side.

"Sure thing, princess," he says as he grips my foot by the ankle and peels off the sock to render me fully naked before him.

Still gripping my ankle, he pulls my left leg to the side, kneeling onto the bed before me as his other hand grips the inner part of my right thigh. My skin feels chilly.

He pauses. "Are you not into this or what?"

"I *said* yes," I snap before I read his thoughts and realize what he really meant, and by then his hand has moved from my thigh to my vagina (my word; his the far cruder *pussy*). With two fingers he strokes me, not too fast but steadily self-assured, feeling me out, up and down, all on the surface but with a bit of push. My eyes are riveted to the sheets beside me but he's looking at me. I don't exactly know what to do except lie here with my legs spread, loosing the odd breath in response to certain motions, but I know he wants me to look back at him. I don't. He pushes somewhere and a breath hitches in my throat and my palm tightens against the sheets briefly.

It's both awkward and intimate. My body is angled oddly, my upper back propped by my elbows, one leg held up and bent in his grip, the other splayed. There's a coaxing nature to his fingers, and although he's good at this, making it work faster than I could have done myself,

it feels shameful to need to be coaxed. I'm four years older than him; at this age that gap means virtually nothing, but I still remember a time when I was the stern senior and he the cocky kid challenger. If anything in his mind was mocking, I would be unable to bear it, but for how aggressively he removed my clothes he's strangely patient now, strangely understanding.

And it works. His fingers glide more smoothly, more easily move deeper, until with a gentle press both are inside and a half-formed vocalization escapes me. My fingers grip the sheet tight and my head hangs to the side while he pushes in, then up. In, then up. He knows where to hit. A soft wet sound is the only noise besides my breathing. He thinks, *Now she's into it.*

I know what comes next. Unwelcome and unbidden, that researcher pops into my mind saying *A shame if her genes aren't passed on*; I start to ask him if he has protection (I'm obviously not on birth control), but he's deftly maneuvered his other hand into his pocket to withdraw his wallet. Nimble, one-handed, never losing his rhythm as he fingers me, he opens it, fishes behind his trainer ID with a forefinger, and retrieves a light blue condom before tossing the wallet aside. He tears the edge of the packaging with his teeth and only then do his fingers pull out of me, trailing a strand of sticky clear fluid that he wipes on the side of his khaki trousers.

A jingle as he fiddles with his belt, then his pants unzip and his penis (in his mind, his *cock*) is out, plainly aroused without need of coaxing. The condom slides to the base and he kneels over me, pausing only to consider the position in which he wants to (*fuck*) me.

For me, there's no uncertainty. I'm not like him, so well acquainted with this sort of activity he needs ways to liven it up. I want him on top of me, body to body, my face pressed into his shoulder, our union held by leglock. But he has a different idea, building from a weird semi-buried pang of unease he has over the fact I haven't looked him in the eyes since he got me on the bed, an idea that if he can't make me look at him then he'll make sure I'm not looking at him on his terms.

He seizes my hips and tries to turn me over, onto my stomach, but I don't want to be (*fucked*) with my face on the ground and my (*ass*) in the air, I want... a stronger connection than that, after all this time, I want a sense of intimacy, closeness, togetherness, and maybe then I'll be able to... look at him, the way he wants.

But he can't read my thoughts the way I can his. "No," is all I can mutter by way of explanation, as I try to resist. This ends with me on my side, halfway between how he wants and how I want, one leg still dangling in the air, and he thinks, *Sure, this'll work*, and holds the tip of his penis steady, then pushes.

I utter an unflattering noise as he penetrates me. (He thinks it sounds cute.) The entry is easy and deep as he wraps one arm around my upraised thigh to hold it to his chest, my bent leg rubbing past his shoulder while my other leg slowly writhes under him against the bed. It hurts but not as much as I expected, though my head turns onto the pillow. My eyes squint and when my vision dims I see his vision of me, my body spread out before him, following the focus of his attention from my navel to my breasts as they bounce in response to his second and then third thrust, then at my scrunched face, which he finds adorable: a perfect contrast to my typical austere expression. He finds a sense of masculine pride in seeing my

uptight bitchiness laid low by his own dick, and before I have the time to self-consciously wonder whether I'm really that bitchy he thrusts again, finding a quick rhythm like he had with his fingers, and gripping my thigh as leverage flexes his feet—his *shoes*, he hasn't taken them off!—against the bed to ensure each push penetrates to the maximum depth.

There's a sense one gets, as a 35-year-old virgin who has often substituted the real thing for surreptitiously scanned internet pornography, that a woman during sex loses her mind, melts into a pathetic moaning mass, so it's odd to me that I can still have such clear thoughts, still feel this distance. I reach for his bent knee but before my fingertips touch it he seizes my wrist to stop me, bending forward a little at the same time, pushing my thigh back slowly in the process, and my foot dangling over his shoulder clenches all toes in response. This mess of limbs is both an entanglement and a separation, he still remains perched over me, apart from me, my head seemingly elsewhere and my constant stream of breathy exhalations in response to his cock like someone else's voice. I want him, desperately, to touch me, and he wants me, equally desperately, to look at him, and neither will. Only in our thoughts is the true merging, a level of confusion I have not felt since the very first days when my ability manifested, back when I was 10, before I gained mastery over myself—his thoughts, mine, threading, until I feel as though I am both being fucked and fucking myself, and his frothing desire for my body invades me as though my own desire, my sense of my anatomy becomes confused, I am something hermaphroditic, male and female, selfcestuous.

The feeling is overwhelming and, losing sight of where I end and he begins, my leg lashes out and clips him across the cheek, which makes him pause, panting over me, and my eyes open, and needing to replace this extrasensory dissolution of self with a clear, rational, regular sense, I finally—*finally*—look at him, into his eyes.

That's the connection. It's what he needs: acknowledgment from the one he has mastered. He pulls back, turns me supine. My thighs spread for him and he grips each as he lowers himself onto me, closer until I can reach out and slide my fingertips around his back, digging into the fabric of his polo (he has not removed a single article of clothing), pulling him to me.

His face hovers an inch over mine, our gazes never breaking, as his hips resume their thrusting. I keep my eyes open this time, ensuring the boundary between our consciousnesses remains clear, even as another shudder wracks my body and I cry out. My thighs rise and press into his waist, my legs cross at the ankles behind him. He moves with his hips only, his hands indenting the bed on either side of my face.

He's faster this way, and we're both at the brink. The moment he thinks, *I'm close*, I realize I'm close too. My arms, legs tighten around him.

With one final shove his hips buck and he goes in deep, deep as he can, and I feel him twitch inside me, the same time my head rolls back and, breaking our long eye contact, I cry out some awful, hideous, unladylike shriek. In that instant a long-hidden stony thing in my heart shatters and a wave sweeps over me that I recognize instinctually as that odd word *love*, that thing my entire life I've heard is right and normal for a human to feel, some elevated emotional idea detached from base carnal pleasures, yet only in this absolutely carnal moment has it ever visited me, if this even be it. His cock pumps semen into the condom and I wish it would break, wish the carnality even deeper, until it might plunge into something so

grossly anatomical that all my doctors might nod and think, *No abnormalities here*, as his microscopic spermatozoa wriggles into my (non-cryopreserved) oocyte to kickstart the process by which I reproduce my oh-so-unique genes.

In the strangled seconds of the synchronized orgasm my freakishly clear head imagines my pregnant form, a fetal thing growing in my womb, a child—I imagine it a perfect clone of me, the myself I remember once being—and then, as the final shudder subsides, I wonder how I could possibly raise a child, what child would survive the constant invasion of her thoughts by her own mother?

What partner could, either? Even this five minute bout of fornication took 35 years for me to muster; and that fantasy of motherhood slips away as though beyond a planet-sized gulf.

Blue withdraws from me as my legs loosen. I'm left alone, bare, on the bed, thighs slowly closing, as he turns and fiddles with his penis and the condom out of sight. He's extraordinarily tidy and, I find, every possible thought of me has already left his mind. He's pleased, but with himself. He remembers me only enough to toss me a box of tissues from my nearby desk so that I may clean myself up.

I do so; my breathing slowly returns to normal as I wipe the sticky remnants of my arousal. He leaves the room, the light of the bathroom turns on; water runs.

He exits, in the wake of a toilet flush, telling a story in that easy tone of his. "You know, when I first did the gym circuit." His clothes, hair, everything are back to perfect form; most of them were never even ruffled. "I was a kid at the time, you know how it is. Had a thing for girls, and the girls had a thing for me, even then. But the girls I liked best were Misty, Erika, and you. The strong ones. Little older too of course. I've always liked older girls."

An easy laugh. I remain there, on the bed, without attempting to cover my nude body, as though the nudity might force him to acknowledge me, the way I so obligingly acknowledged him during our act.

"I had pictures of all three of you in my wallet. Normal pictures, not nudes or anything." As if nude photos of me or Erika exist. (They might of Misty.) "But this was before the internet was everywhere, and even if it was, sometimes you're camping out on a mountain or whatever. Man. I beat it to those pictures every fucking day."

Without a shred of doubt, he believes this story to be complimentary.

"I used Misty's picture most often, but that's just cuz she had a bikini. Really, though, you had the attitude I liked best. That picture, sorry I lost it or I'd show you it now, your look—"

He doesn't need to show me, I can see his mental image as he tries to recall it. I actually remember the image myself, even from his murky details, because I loathed it. When I was 15, they made me take a promotional picture to encourage literacy. They dressed me up like a stage magician, in a white tuxedo with purple ruffles. I extended a top hat to the camera, from which confetti fanned to form the word: READ.

"It was the look in your eyes. That smugly superior look, like you were too good for this shit they were making you do, but they got you to do it anyway. I loved that. Misty was showing 95 percent skin and you were still competitive with her, that's how good it was."

I only stare at him. I realize I'm staring at him with the exact same look my 15-year-old self did in the READ picture, which causes my lips to screw up, and a laugh to wrench unbidden out of me. I can't believe it. The idea that anyone, even some pubescent kid, would craft masturbation material out of such a stupid picture—it says READ, it was printed as posters for libraries—it's too much. I laugh, and laughing, realize Blue's gotten away with it again, somehow said the perfect thing to ensure I don't despise him.

"Yeah? Right?" he says, thinking I'm laughing in agreement with him, which doesn't make sense but it's how his mind works. "Just saying. You've always been a babe."

I sober. "So you're not spending the night."

"Your bed's only big enough for one." He stretches, looks down the hall toward the exit, and idly fishes a packet of cigarettes from a pocket.

"Don't smoke that. I'll get cancer."

He snickers at this, then shrugs. "Then I'll go now. Have a nice night." His jaw moves, as though it needs something to stick there.

As he steps toward the door, he stops, then looks back. "Two of three childhood crushes down," he says. "Whaddya think my odds are with Erika?"

It's my turn to smile. "Zero." He thinks I'm lying, lets the comment roll off him like water, and gives his trademark goodbye as he exits. I remain alone on my bed, and after thinking about it for a few minutes, decide I'm glad I did this after all.

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