

INSTANT GRATIFICATION

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Wheezing and coughing in breathless bursts, Olivia imagines the newspaper headline mocking her death, “Woman Chokes to Death on Potato Chip.” The article would come from Branford Kensington, poet, journalist and ex-fiancé, who has a penchant for sensationalizing the macabre. “The woman must have felt the shard—if it’s possible to have a shard of something small as a chip, a potato broken down to its smallest, sharpest, most deadly potential—lodge dryly in the soft center of her throat. If only she had enough Diet Coke left to wash it down, soften the hardened fragment, she may have survived to finish her lunch. But the can beside her limp body lay empty as her own barren womb. What a pity she wasn’t survived by the children she couldn’t have. And Diet? What a pity she didn’t indulge in Coke itself, the *real thing*, on, of all days, that of her untimely death.”

Branford opposed Diet Coke, the most prosaic of all soft drinks. He’d be merciless with the detail, Olivia knew. Throughout their relationship he’d exaggerated the significance of her infertility, escalated it into a horrible tragedy akin to brain cancer or losing a limb. She didn’t want children. Not like he did.

Wheezing, Olivia wonders why think of Branford at a time like this? After three months, she’s over him. She’s moved on. But where to?

She tastes blood as the chip cuts into the soft tissue of her throat. She shouldn’t have shaken the bag’s ruminants into her mouth. Been so greedy. Impatient.

Branford wasn’t impatient. He was meticulously slow. Obsessively slow. He bragged of his golden tongue, that it made poetry of more than just words, proved it by luring her out of bed in the mornings with oral sex. Brought her lavish pastries, the darkest of coffee to drink in tiny sips while watching the sunrise from their apartment window. He’d stare through the window—unwashed for probably a decade—reveling in bug smears, dirt-smudged outlines of raindrops, the intricate whorls

of greasy fingerprint fragments, the same way he rhapsodized about the sun's neon flare slowly filling the horizon. Brighter than the blood filling her throat right now, dripping from her lip to land in droplets on her crumpled white napkin.

It hurts to gasp, to move. Yet when she stops gasping or moving, leans forward so the blood doesn't trickle down her throat, she's not choking, really, as much as being stabbed to death by a tiny chip. If she stops moving, gasping or breathing, she's temporarily fine. Though the not breathing can only last so long.

She tries to lean forward even further, reach her large black purse, lying just beyond her plate on the kitchen table, ready to grab for the rush back to work. Inside is a water bottle. It splashes about when she runs to meetings, sloshes around in the car while she takes corners too fast. One of her problems, Branford explained, was cutting corners. Cutting it too close to movies, appointments, restaurant reservations. So he'd force her to slow down even though they'd be even later. "Feel the soles of your shoes," he urged. "Listen to how your hair moves."

Being a poet—or maybe just being Branford—seemed kind of like being on drugs.

That's one of the things she loved about him. And hated. The day they broke up he quoted startling, moving lines of poetry, and she drove off to a McDonald's, ate a Big Mac in her car while listening to Howard Stern on the radio. Just to balance things out. Unlike the day of their first date, a picnic of wine, Brie and crackers, when she couldn't get enough of Branford describing an ant carrying a crumb. He sounded like a highly metaphorical sports announcer detailing the progress of a miniature long distance relay marathoner. A mammoth undertaking, carrying that crumb of multigrain cracker from across the picnic blanket. A life's ambition. Five minutes, five hours, five days? A lifetime.

Olivia moves her arm and coughs too much. Forces herself to stop breathing long enough to stop coughing in order to stretch her hand forward just enough to snag her purse. Her vision darkening around the edges, she plunges her hand in, grabs the bottle. A miracle she didn't bother zipping her bag. Cutting corners isn't so bad, she thinks, trying to laugh but lacking the energy.

She pulls the bottle to her lips. Only to feel the impact of her teeth

meeting with the cap, the bottle slipping from her sweating hand.

“Also found beside her dead body, a water bottle with just enough water to wash away encroaching death. But the woman, Olivia Ozarks, of Carlyle, Illinois, was neither swift nor fortunate enough to remove the cap in time. Such was the story of her life. Something always blocking her progress. Perpetually on edge, never quite getting what she wanted. Her life consisted of fragments. Her career as a paralegal only a fraction of the world of law she would have inhabited. Her handful of significant relationships were experienced half-heartedly, fraught with ambivalence, tinged with a cool emotional distance. Even her beauty had a sharp edge. It cut the hearts of those who came close. Like her ex-fiancé, Branford, who survived her. Barely. But when he heard of the broken fragment that ended her life, he knew he must make something out of it. Had to...”

Water bottle clattering on the floor, her arms barely mobile, Olivia’s shaking foot drags the bottle towards her, and, already leaning low, coughing blood, she clutches for it with her fingertips until she finally grasps it. The cap, poorly affixed, finally falls away.

The warm, stagnant liquid tastes like spring water, loosens the shard enough for her to cough it onto the napkin in front of her.

She breathes carefully through her nose, stares at the room around her as if the table’s mahogany were the richest brown she’s ever seen. The linoleum, speckled with blood drops, suggests a still white lake covered with scarlet lily pads. She cleans up slowly with a paper towel, sips tap water like it’s manna from heaven, leaves for work late and not in the least bit worried. Drives patient and rapturous over dazzling red stoplights, grateful for the firm, yellow dividing line in the middle of the road, measured and solid. She’s amazed at the mobility of traffic, the thrill of parallel parking, the click and whir of parking meters, the sudden rush of the high-rise elevator she’s ridden for years.