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Caroline

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Caroline

Michael Perry

Perry: Caroline

Tat, tat, tat, tat.

It was her. And the sound of her footsteps from behind me.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey!” she exclaimed.

“HEY!” she yelled.

I looked over my shoulder.

There she was.

I said, “Yeah, what is it?”

She glanced up at me with probing, doe-like eyes. “Would you like to eat lunch with me today?”

“You ask me this every day . . .”

“I do?” she said as she playfully tugged on my sleeve, her waist-long hair swathing the air about her.

“Yeah. And you know the answer.”

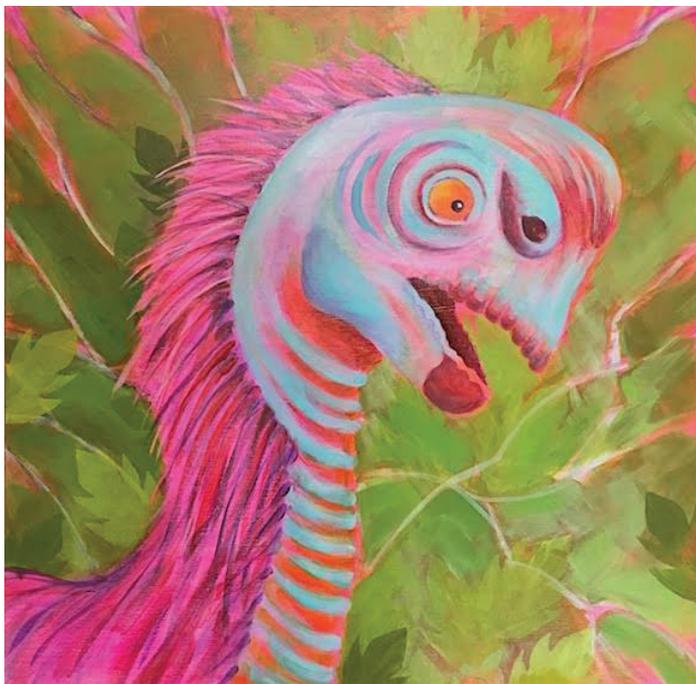
She laughed and hugged me.

Yeah, that was Caroline. Lanky, gawky, doofy and dorky: she was every “y” that

had a perturbing connotation and then some. She was a lot of things, but she was also the best, last, and only self-proclaimed fangirl I ever had.

I remember how whenever her sniper-sight caught me in the halls, it was over — it was time for a production! She’d throw her math/science/history/whatever textbooks at some stranger beside her (who would surprisingly always catch them) and then rush over and by rush, I mean sprint. Yeah, she’d run, and run, slamming little hunched wallflowers aside and jumping over small conclaves of schoolgirls sitting on the floor. She was always there, somewhere near me, running.

If you asked anybody about her, nobody would’ve said she was a knockout. Her braces were always tangled with gristle and her face was sparingly pocketed with red. She was of an average weight but wore



Avian Dinosaur
Acrylic painting on
24" x 24" canvas
Nancy L. Staszak

baggy hoodies on some days and overly cute, petite, specially-manufactured dresses on other days. Those dresses were named something like Lololan or something; they were straight out of China... or was it Japan? I don't remember.

And then there was her hair. (Yeah, I'm not sure what to say about her hair). It was very long and very smooth. Whenever she ran it shot out into the air behind her, like a flowing wave of brown. Sometimes when she'd sprint toward me she'd get too close, and well, crash into me (this happened more often than I'd like to admit). As I'd fall, her hair would slough over me, onto me, enwrap me, and some would even end up in my mouth. Her dark hair would burst in every direction: flowing, bouncing, sliding. And all the while she'd be giggling and laughing and giggling some more, shrieking in a high-pitch, "*Sorrrry!*" Then we'd hit the floor and her giggling would turn into groans of pain.

She had beautiful hair. Everyone knew that. Girls who wouldn't even begin to think about befriending her would compliment her on it. My mother once remarked she could be a hair-model when she got older. Some guys even asked me if I had ever gotten a locket of the stuff, for some reason or another.

So yeah, we had met years ago, but she never failed to always be there beside me (or behind me). Yes, her and the sound of her trampling footsteps: *tat, tat, tat, tat.*

It was Mr. Hockett's fifth period English class, and he had just finished lecturing with his magical monotone voice. Relieved, I got up and shuffled out of class with the other students.

Outside was, of course, the one and only Caroline.

"Hey—" she said.

I began to walk on.

"Hey—," *tat, tat,* "wait—" *tat,* "up!" *tat.*

I kept on walking.

She began muttering to herself, in the quiet and typically curt voice of hers. "So. I just learned something really cool. *Really cool.* I think I'm actually your *yandere lover!*"

"Huh— Um— I'm not your lover. Also I don't speak Chinese."

"*It's Japanese, silly!*"

"Yeah, right."

We ended up walking to the cafeteria. I got in line. I arrived at the beaming buck-toothed cafeteria server who kinda looked inbred. He asked me in an exaggerated tone, "*Are you weak?*" I didn't know how to respond so I just said, "Macaroni, please." He gave me plastic macaroni and cheese. Caroline was waiting for me at our typical eating spot. She didn't get the school lunch; she ate strictly from the vending machines. I had long given up trying to shoo her away, so I had accepted her as a lunch-buddy.

I wasn't unpopular. I had a generally normal crowd of friends, measuring at about six other guys I'd sit with. We'd play *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* after school together on Fridays. They were swell. Then there was Caroline's friend, Edgar.

Edgar had frizzy, poofy hair that fell down to his shoulders, confused eyes that hid behind his glasses, a wide nose with flaring nostrils, and he was tall and fat. He was a big guy in general. Loud voice and big opinions. A lot of people didn't like him (he had some weird habits like carrying around a stockpile of Mountain Dew in his backpack), and to be honest, I don't even know if I was a fan of him.

"Why, if it isn't my pal, Jordan!" Edgar belched.

"Jordan-chan!" cried Caroline.

All the other guys said varying forms of "hi".

Caroline said, "I missed you!"

I said "Well, I guess I'm not surprised, Caroli—"

"Thanks Jordan!"

"Thanks for what?"

"I'm just so happy because *you're you!* And you're the only *you* in the world!"

Edgar roared, "If you weren't such a great couple, I'd be jealous!"

Then from behind Caroline, a hooded guy approached. He took out a can, popped it open and strange yellow paper came out with black specks on it. He then began slathering it on Caroline's hair.

Caroline started screaming.

It only took a few seconds and then the guy was gone.

Caroline got up from her seat and began moving about and tried to shake the flies out of her hair.

She cried and cried and screamed and screamed. Her face became as red as her tear-soaked eyes. At this point the whole cafeteria was quiet and watching her.

She began to pull hard on her hair, as if she was about to rip it out, but she wasn't able to. She shook her head and a few spare flies fell out into some nearby lunch trays. The gooey and ailing flies struggled in the trays for a bit and then lay still, dead.

She pulled and pulled.

And the whole way through, she kept on screaming.

I ended up being sent to the principal's office for questioning about whether I knew who the guy was, why he did it, what was the point of it, etc. I gave no answers. They believed me.

Caroline wasn't at school the next day, or the day after that. Only on the third day did she finally reappear.

The long hair was gone.

It was all gone.

Just a short pixie-cut remained. She had a cheap-looking blue-striped ribbon in her hair, almost like a flag declaring she had conceded defeat to the wasteland that was her head. Her eyes were still red from crying, even after all those days.

That morning, I sat next to her before class started in the cafeteria.

"Hey, Caroline."

"Hey, Jordan."

"What's up?"

She sniffled and raised up her hands, motioning to herself, "*This* is what's up."

"He really did a terrible thing, huh?"

She sniffled harder and hugged me.

I had to tell her.

So I did.

"I did it."

"What?"

She began to hold onto me tighter.

"I . . . got that guy to do that thing to you."

Her grip dug into me.

My mouth became dry and my words felt hollow, but I continued, "I hired him to do that . . . terrible thing to you."

She buried her naked head into my chest. I could feel her shaking.

"*What?*" her voice cracked.

"I'm sorry."

She looked up and stared straight into my eyes, her face frozen in a distorted spasm of pain, and then she said one word, yeah, only one: "*Why?*"

I stopped looking into her eyes, and stared straight ahead, into blank space. "Because I don't like you."

Yet, for some reason, despite all that I had done, I couldn't shake the feeling that what I said was wrong. So there, at that point, I dabbed my vocal pen and wrote out the final words of our relationship into the air, to her, "No . . . it's because *you're you*."

She let go of me. She got up. She walked away.

Again, she wasn't at school the next day, or the day after that. But this time, she didn't return the third day, or the fourth day, or the fifth day. Neither the next week nor the week after that, neither the next

month nor the month after that, led to any appearance of my number-one fan, my pseudo-girlfriend. Soon the school year had ended and she had not returned. I never heard a tat from her again.

And during those days, in those hushed halls, outside of a few offhand remarks, nobody said a word about her. Except for Edgar. He took it the hardest. For a few weeks after her final disappearance he just sat there at our lunch table, hunched over, his face burrowed within his crossed arms. He really liked her. At least I think he did.

And what about me?

How do I feel?

I feel a lot.

And sometimes I wonder about her.



Emerge
Graphite and colored
pencil drawing
Kylie Payne