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# MY DARLING SWEETHEART BABY

SCHULTZ SAT ON HIS FRONT STOOP, waiting for the delinquent spring sun to reach his side of the street. It was early April, and despite the Yankee game blaring from a neighbor's radio, a winter chill hung heavily in the air. A lot had happened since Schultz had thrown out his back at work and taken disability: his neighbor's dog Buddha, had fallen off the roof and thudded onto the pavement with a final high-pitched yelp; the tinsmith who worked out on the sidewalk, sheared off a finger while fitting aluminum for a deli sign; Jimmy Dolan, who Schultz had known since fourth grade, returned from jail and threw a party that lasted till 5 AM. Lately, Jeannie had stopped by to talk.

"Hey, Schultzie. How's about a beer," she'd say.

"Sure thing," he'd say ambling inside to grab two cold ones. "You seen the new drugstore up on Ninth?"

"Naw," she'd say.

"It's got the front of an old bank, with the stone statues underneath the roof pulling faces."

"I guess their mothers didn't tell 'em their faces would stay that way," she laughed.

"It's up at the Duane Reade. I'll show you sometime."

Schultz would sip his beer, looking at Jeannie's long neck, listening to her deep breathing, thinking: This is the good life. This is what I missed all those years slowly breaking my back for a lousy paycheck.

Her eyes could kill you they were so blue. Her buttery brown hair reached halfway down her back. There were times Schultz had wanted to grab a handful, breathe in Jeannie's scent, and stay there all day.

But Jeannie never hung around too long, she was always off somewhere in a hurry.

The dark shadows began to ebb and the asphalt at the far edge of the street flamed as an eighteen wheeler marked **LIBERTY OIL** rolled past, and blasted its horn for the garage down the block to open its gate.

The buds were late arriving, and the thin ailanthus trees stood bare along the length of the street. Schultz shivered in his shirt sleeves.

Sometimes Jeannie was off with some guy from another street, or another neighborhood. Sometimes, Schultz thought, they were men from the City. He knew Jeannie could take care of herself, had seen her punch a Puerto Rican in the nose when she was a coltish high schooler at Saint Savior, made him bleed like a mother. But sometimes, Schultz felt the urge to cover her tender shoulders with a jacket as she rounded the corner, pulled along by her date.

Schultz caught sight of himself in the smeared glass of his apartment's front door. Thirty-eight years old. He had been called handsome, but not in a long time. His skin was sickly winter white, and hung loosely around his jaw. He needed a shave, though he'd already shaved that morning. His eyes looked sleepy and everything he saw through those eyes seemed frayed at the edges. His nose was strong and straight — his best feature — but what can you get for a nose? His hair was coming out in the shower, but his scalp was still covered with a mat of spiny graying hair. His body was a wreck. Before he pulled his back at work he could bench 300 pounds.

The Yankees scored and the cheering crowds brought Schultz back to the street.

Maybe today the check would come.

Schultz had been waiting every day since January for his settlement check to arrive. He knew the postman by name and sat out every morning looking for him to wheel his heavy bag down the street. Schultz felt something close to butterflies in his stomach every time he called out, "Manny, tell me the truth. You gonna make me rich?"

"Not today," Manny'd say, laughing as he stuffed the other five mailboxes of number two-eight-four.

"Why don't you go back to work and get rich?"

"My back's gone. I ain't liftin' another finger," he said, tilting a can of beer to his mouth.

"You're charmed, Schultzie. You know that?"

"Gimme a break," Schultz replied.

On days Jeannie didn't come, his heart felt like the half-choked remnants of last night's dinner. An overwhelming sadness filled him. Lethargy filled him like lead.

He saw tattered flags drooping damply from window boxes across the street, the stars and stripes faded to a filmy gauze; graffiti, sprayed haphazardly on the walls of an empty brownstone reading: COLDASS MARY BITE'S THE BIG ONE. He heard the long low moan of a tug crawling up the canal.

He had kissed Jeannie once in a rainstorm. She had taken off her heels and was splashing in puddles, kicking water around, singing some show tune Schultz remembered his mother playing on her stereo

when he was a child. It was a quick snap of a kiss, but long enough for Schultz to feel her breath enter him and knock around inside. He felt full of her all day. And when he slept, she was still with him.

Recently Schultz had asked Jeannie about the kiss.

"We kissed once," Schultz said.

"Did we?" Jeannie said.

"C'mon."

"Really," she said, smiling. "I'm not sure."

"Don't crack my nuts, Jeannie. We kissed."

"Yeah. Where?"

"On the mouth."

"Was it that time in the rain?"

"Yeah. It was that time in the rain."

"Aw, I was drunk, Schultzie."

"But we kissed."

"Yeah, we kissed."

"So, it counts, right?"

"Yeah, it counts."

"Get outta here, ya bum," a voice shouted and a heavy door slammed shut to Schultz's right.

"You get outta here."

"Clean yerself up, junkie," the voice responded.

"No, you clean yerself up. You clean yerself up."

Hank Polniaszeki's kid Hank Jr. bounded down the steps of the neighboring apartment house. He was a couple years younger than Schultz and like Schultz he lived in a one bedroom apartment, two floors above his parents and his childhood home. He wore his hair cropped short so his scalp showed through. He ground his jaw incessantly.

"How ya doin'?", he called across to Schultz, "How ya doin'?"

The sun was finally bleeding onto their side of the street and Schultz could see Hank Jr.'s golden crucifix gleaming against his bare chest. He wore an open jean jacket to match his jeans and a pair of worn cowboy boots.

"Still waitin'."

"He ain't comin' no faster," Hank Jr. said, holding out his crucifix. "wit' you sittin' there like a stoop."

"Aw, c'mon."

"You seen Jeannie meenie miney moe?"

"No, why?" Schultz said, feeling defensive.

"I seen her," Hank said, stepping close, his hand tapping on the low wrought iron fence that fronted their two apartments. "Jeannie's out of her bottle." Schultz noticed for the first time that Hank's teeth were short and sharp like jagged bottle glass.

"I seen her whoring out on Third Avenue."

"Come off it. Take that back Hank."

"It's the Godshonest truth."

"Yer fulla shit. Enough already."

"Ya know she's a whore."

"And I know yer a fuckin' crackhead."

"And yer a loser, Jew, cripple. So basically we's all fucked."

"Say that again," Schultz said, moving to stand. But his back locked up on him and he shot back down onto the cold cement stairs.

"I mean it. I'm tryin' to help you. Forget about her. Ya wanna get crabs, the clap, AIDS, huh?"

"She ain't no whore."

"That's right. She's yer darling sweetheart baby. She whispers sweet nothin's in yer ear, bring you slippers at night, tucks you into bed and kisses yer forehead. She's the most beautiful woman in the freakin world."

"Shuddup. You just want her."

Hank moved his face as close to Schultz as he could and laughed, "I've had her," he said spreading his arms wide, "everybody's had her."

"Why don't you go walk yer dog," Schultz said, cracking his knuckles.

"Leave Buddha and the whore alone, God rest his soul. See ya round." Hank stalked down the street, then turned and added. "Ya dumb fuck."

A jaundiced yellow light filled the street. Schoolkids played ball on the road, dodging cars, cursing as they passed. Schultz was on his fourth beer – the empty cans stood sentry along the low wall to his right, taking sunlight on their dented flanks. Schultz had determined that he loved Jeannie through and through, and that he was going to tell her the truth once and for all, but he needed that check first, as protection, as armor against potential defeat. Schultz didn't win very often, but the thought of the check made him feel like less of a schmuck for once, filled him with hope and promise of a new beginning. He tried to whistle a cheery, springlike tune, but someone called out for him to shuddup. A car alarm buzzed and honked ecstatically for several minutes.

The mailman started his slow descent down the slope of the street. Schultz slid forward on the step and trained his head towards the distant mailbag. The bag sat unattended for several minutes on the sidewalk in front of the six story apartment building.

Schultz felt vaguely deflated when he realized the figure moving towards him wasn't Manny, who walked with a confident, upright swagger, his broad face open for conversation. The impostor inched down the street, face hidden, shoulders drawn in, never once looking

left or right.

Schultz wanted to call out "You gonna make me rich today?" But stopped short when he saw the mailman had thick padded headphones pressed to his ears. He stepped past Schultz as if he were a trash bin, opened the door and filed the mail into its slots.

"Prick," Schultz said, but the mailman didn't hear as he moved on down the street.

Schultz fumbled for the key to his mailbox, the tiny flat key slipping through his fingers to the ground. Schultz felt his insides congeal; a tight band of fire squeeze around his head. He inserted the key and opened the box. A single white cellophane-windowed envelope dropped out.

The check!

He tore open the envelope. Schultz held the check out in front of him at full arm's length with an astonished awe, holding it by the edges alone as if it were a bomb about to explode.

Nobody's going to jerk me around now, he thought, inspecting the check.

This is the real thing.

Schultz's mother brought him a jacket to wear and a tuna fish sandwich for dinner. He ate it on the stoop as the street lights came on, casting their murky glow onto the parked cars and the street below. Church bells rang out a few blocks away, clanging their dissonant tune for a long time. *CLANG-CLANG*, they went. *Christ the King is coming, CLANG-CLANG*. With the check neatly folded in his back pocket, Schultz felt on the verge of bursting with anticipation. He had never seen so many zeroes on a check before. He couldn't wait to tell Jeannie about it. She's probably on the train back from the city now, Schultz thought, though he had had the same thought four times already throughout the day.

Then he saw her turn the corner from the R train, wearing a short leather skirt and high-heeled shoes. He waved to her, but she didn't see as she bent to tighten a strap on her shoe. When she straightened, Schultz was sure he saw her untwist her underwear beneath her skirt. Schultz felt a sudden sense of wonder, sharing this private moment with Jeannie, like watching her do her business on the toilet. It seemed so natural and comfortable that Schultz wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her, like he had that night in the rain. Another kiss like that would last him the rest of his life.

"How you doin' doll?" Schultz called out.

"Don't doll me. It's been a long day."

Schultz could see Jeannie's face set hard. With her thick makeup newly applied, she looked to Schultz like a porcelain doll.

"What happened?"

"Don't ask," she said lighting a cigarette. She sat on the stoop

next to Schultz. She smelled sweet, like some kind of flowers.

"C' mon, that'll kill you," Schultz said. "Put it out."

"What the fuck do I care I die?"

"Naw Jeannie, naw," Schultz said softly. "Things'll be okay."

"Yeah," she said laughing. "Right."

They could hear Hank Sr. and his wife Cele shouting next-door and a TV blaring across the street.

"Hey, Jeannie. I got good news."

"Yeah?" she said, through a cloud of smoke.

"Come upstairs."

"Naw Schultzie. Not tonight."

"Yeah tonight. I'll make nice. Promise," Schultz said, "I got beer."

"Yeah, okay," she said after a long moment. She flicked her cigarette into the street in a high burning arc.

Schultz's apartment smelled of solitude; of empty pizza boxes stacked up by the front door, of unclean laundry and mildewy shower tiles. Jeannie had been up about three or four times since Schultz had stopped work and always commented on the posters tacked up in the hall. She especially liked the one with the blue water, sandy beach and Greek ruins in the background. She said it was romantic. Schultz flicked on an overhead florescent light. She followed him to the livingroom.

"Close your eyes," Schultz said.

"Naw. C' mon."

"Close 'em. It's a surprise."

"Really? It really is?" Jeannie said, putting her hands over her eyes dramatically.

With the check in his sweating hand, Schultz felt his muscles relax. He felt his heart beating in time for the first time in a long time; it was more than just a throbbing piece of fat after all.

A point of Jeannie's pink tongue jutted out and licked the corner of her mouth. Her nose twitched.

"Can I open my eyes now?"

"Not yet," Schultz said.

He followed the curve of her neck down to the place between her breasts; they were firm and round, though smaller than what Schultz was used to. He didn't mind, though. Her pierced belly was flat and beige from the tanning salon. There was a thin line of blonde down disappearing into the top of her skirt.

"Now?" she said "Can I open 'em now?"

She had never looked so small to Schultz before. Her painted toenails looked like shiny candies.

He snapped the check tight in his hand and held it out at eye level for Jeannie to see.

"Okay."

At first, she looked confused and then saw that he was holding the

check.

"Omygawd," she screamed in a high register. "Jesusfuckingchrist." And she threw herself into Schultz's arms. The check fell to the floor.

He held her tight, feeling the warmth of her body against his. Her hair smelled like a different kind of flower than her neck did.

"What are you gonna buy me?" she said, pulling away and doing a pirouette. "Fur? Jewels?"

Schultz could hear pigeons cooing loudly in the air shaft.

"I thought we'd get away from here," Schultz said in a voice that wasn't his own.

"What do you mean? Like take a trip or somethin'?" Jeannie's smile was starting to sink.

"Jeannie," Schultz said—and the name felt holy on his tongue. "Jeannie. I mean you an' me. Let's get outta here. Move to Jersey, go down the shore. Make a new go of it. What do you say?"

"Schultzie, you're kiddin', right?" Jeannie said. "This is a joke, right? I'm not moving nowhere. This is my home. I'm a Brooklyn girl."

The pigeons cooing in the air shaft seemed to be laughing at Schultz. *Coo-coo-roo, coo-coo-roo*. He stepped closer to Jeannie, feeling a twinge in his back and reached out a hand to touch her. She jumped back, so she was pressed against the wall.

"Don't, Schultzie," she said.

"I don't mean to scare you," Schultz said. "I just wanna say you don't have to do that no more. You don't have to go with those guys an' do that."

"Do what?" Jeannie said, her eyes as hard as Lincoln pennies. "Do what? You callin' me a whore, Schultzie. Huh?"

"Come off it, Jeannie. I ain't callin' you nothin'."

"Bullshit. Say it Schultzie."

"Naw. Nothing Jeannie."

"That's right Schultzie, never say nothin' about nothin'. Well, let me tell you, I ain't no Miss Lonelyhearts waiting for no knight in shining armor to save me. You wanna move out to Jersey, it's your funeral. I'm stayin' put right here."

The flickering light suddenly seemed to be too bright, and Schultz realized he had an enormous erection pushing against the zipper of his jeans. Jeannie's face seemed cracked where her foundation was flaking off. He craned his neck in to kiss her. She turned her cheek and whispered in a voice full of tenderness and frailty, "I'm your friend."

But he wasn't listening. He slipped his hand up under her skirt and felt dampness between her legs. She wants it bad, he thought, sliding his finger inside.

"Stop Schultzie. I don't wanna do this."

"Why not?" he said. "This is what you do, right?"

He cupped her from behind with his free hand and pushed his

finger farther inside.

"Stop," she said again. "No," she said quietly. "No."

This time, Schultz stopped and slid his finger out, but the smell of her briny sex only inflamed him more.

Her breathing was heavy and her chest heaved.

"Listen, Schultzie. Why don't I go home and come back tomorrow?"

"You won't come back."

"I will," she pleaded. "You know I will."

"Jeannie, take it easy. You gotta be somewhere important?"

She shook her head.

He saw the check lying on the floor, half crumpled from the force of her embrace, and bent to pick it up.

"Tell you what. A check is as good as money. If it's okay by you, I give you the whole check, no questions asked. Even-Steven."

A flicker of tears came into her eyes. "Naw. I don't wanna do this. I don't want your money."

"I'm as good as the others. I swear I'm good, Jeannie."

"Don't call me Jeannie, okay?"

He lifted her to the floor, and though she wasn't heavy and didn't kick, his back burned like an electrical fire.

"Keep your shoes on," he said, reaching for a pillow. "How do you like it?"

Jeannie shook her head. "You're not going to rape me."

"No," Schultz said, "I wouldn't do that to you," and pressed the check into her hand as he kissed her pulsing wrist.

He undid his belt, and slid his pants down. He entered her, and as he thrust himself in and out, his back felt torn and shredded down to his very organs. He felt her tense around him, a live human body, warm, weeping, whispering his name, her eyes open, his face reflected in them, and as she breathed out *Schultzie, Schultzie*, he realized that he understood her like no one else, he heard in those words something that the streets had taken from her, a love she could never admit. And as he came and dropped heavily onto her keening body, he felt that he'd never be lonely again.