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Bundy

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Look, Don't Touch (revised)

It's always quiet. The walls were made that way. Gaps sealed, drywall added, MLV put in and then another layer of drywall. I don't know the couple next door are yelling at each other until I walk out my back door and see them through the window. I try to read their lips for a minute.

"I don't like the scrubby molten on your desk."

"Don't hate roach my tea!"

"You better get your tongue out of my ear."

I give up on lip reading and walk away stepping on crunchy leaves and even crunchier sticks. The wind tries its best to knock me over. I'm already in my heels. Too big to fit in my bag. I find carrying a big bag brings more attention to me than anything else. I can be wearing six-inch pleasers, and they just make me an average height, I get a few looks at my feet, but everyone notices the small boy with a giant tote on his side. When I go home at night, I feel safe. I feel as if nothing can touch me. I could shoot myself in that apartment and I don't think anyone would hear it. I don't think that's the best example of the safety I'm trying to get across but I just mean I'm untouchable. I'm no one's object to gawk at or feel up. I don't have much. I don't need

much. I have a balcony. I watch the birds walk awkwardly across the leaves. I saw some babies hatch the other week. They walked even more awkwardly. I feared they'd get lost in the leaves.

I pass Langston middle everyday on my walk to the train station. Mr. Plemmons was my teacher there. He passed away last year. My dad called me to see if I had heard the news. At least one thing from my childhood stuck with him. That was the longest conversation we've had in the last two years. When my father had nothing to say to me, I'd fill the silence with praise for Mr. Plemmons. 2David Plemmons. He insisted I refer to him as Mister. I wouldn't have survived my mother's decaying mental state and eventual abandonment if it wasn't for him. He towered over my 12 -year old self and would crouch down to talk to me. As the years progressed his green eyes framed by even greener glasses came closer and eventually lined up with my brown eyes. He was short like me. About 5'5. When I started growing stubble I was excited by the idea of having facial hair like his, hair that ran wild out of my chin. He'd wear a light yellow tie most days. It matched his teeth. He became my family. I was 16 the last time I saw him, the last time anyone saw him not behind bars.

I've always been afraid of the train. At nine years old, my father took me to ride the train in hopes of a fun activity to distract from everything else going on, but I gripped his hand so hard I bruised it. I didn't take the train again until I was 18. Everyone here has a truck. Only women drive. My mother wanted to teach me. She liked to rebel against all authority and tradition, but she was gone, at least mentally, before I had my first kiss. I was 12. The train is always filled with men. I imagine they're going to their jobs as teachers or nurses. If my mother was more

stable, If my father didn't give up on taking care of me, and the house, maybe I could be a nurse, maybe even a doctor, or a lawyer. Probably not a doctor or lawyer.

No one on the train notices me. Everyone has earbuds in and those who don't only hear the humming and puffing and rumbling of the trains. It's always loud. The club is two stops away, then a seven-minute walk. I walk with my face toward the ground only interacting with the cracks on the ground, making sure to step on all of them. We open at 11:30. I prefer the afternoon shifts. It's either unemployed slop who often seem to tip more than the employed slop: women on lunch breaks in fancy suits that, to the average eye, stick out like a sore thumb in the sea of lingerie and bulges. All the dancers are used to this melting pot. There are a few regulars who I like to think come to see me but in all honestly, my shifts probably just line up with their breaks. I walk in from the cold in street clothing. I imagine for a second I'm a customer. I might be if not for the huge sign that reads NO MALE ADMITTANCE.

Seven months ago, on my first day, Theresa introduced me to the staff. At the time it was Harry, Idris, Max, Jacob and Fritz. Josh was hired about a week after when Jacob left. Josh doesn't look like a dancer. He doesn't look beaten down. He looks like he could be a teacher, sort of like Mr. Plemmons, but taller and instead of sporting a tie he wears pasties. He mostly works at the bar. He doesn't have the temperament of a dancer. Some of the people here feel like they were born to do this. As a kid it's not like I knew I was destined for a life of taking off my clothes and gyrating in front of women twice my age, but I wasn't that old when I knew it wouldn't be feasible for me to do anything grand with my life. After Mr. Plemmons went away

nothing encouraged me to even try. Josh seems like he had potential to be grand. He looks like he had a father who made him grilled cheeses and cut the crust off, who sent him to school with a forehead kiss. It seems that he is above me somehow. He feels like an authority figure when he stands behind the bar, I'm dancing to impress him.

Today there are three women inside when I arrive. One is sat at the bar flirting up Josh. She twirls her thin red straw in her drink with her left hand, on her fourth finger sits a gaudy diamond ring. One woman is clearly recording Harry on stage. I don't feel like it's my place to say anything. He's a specific clientele's type, with his bush perpetually hanging out of his underwear. I think we should have a phone check in at the entrance, but Theresa says that's not practical. People need to circle back on emails and check in with their fiancés. I walk to the back and slide the black curtain open and shut behind me. There aren't any doors here besides the entrance. The bathroom (one toilet) is also behind a curtain. Customers and dancers share a toilet. I always wonder what it was before it was a club. I've tried to look it up, but the internet tells me nothing. My coworkers make jokes, assumptions, theories but none of them really make sense. In the back room for us there are two of those white plastic fold out tables. We've all brought our own mirrors so there's a strange variety of mismatched looking glasses. Fold out chairs to match the table of course. I get to work early so I have time to sit in the back and stare. I examine every detail of my face and make sure it is exactly how I remember it. I have to do this before I can show my face to the customers. There's no sound system so whoever gets in first plugs their phone into a small speaker which cannot be heard unless you're right by the stage, but the place isn't that big anyway.

Fritz is dancing for a woman wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt that says "I'm no urologist but I'll take a look." She has a long black braid down her back and it's tied off with an orange scrunchie. The scrunchie happens to match Fritz's get-up. He is wearing an orange fishnet top, big orange hoops and silver shorts. At an earlier time in my life strip clubs rattled my young body, gave me goosebumps and made my cheeks red, but now this is just work. I've felt sexless for a while. I never did feel attractive to anyone after Mr. Plemmons. I haven't had one sexual encounter my whole life where I wasn't thinking about him. I try desperately to find him in people, in places. I took this job after he died. I realized a long time ago I'd never find love like his. Once he was gone, I knew without a doubt that there was no love left in the world for me. I guess I'm trying to find some semblance of it here.

All the boys who got off around my time invite me to drinks with them. They knew I had a particularly draining day. A customer purchased a private dance and I left the curtains cracked so I could still watch the club. About 20 seconds in she turned her face to the side to let out a burp which smelled like barbeque. She had dropped by the barbeque place next door on her lunch break before stopping in for a dance. I wish I could tell her co-workers she was here. How they would react, if they'd care at all. I occasionally hope there's women out there who see men as people but the women that come in here seem to prove this theory wrong. I blur out the faces of customers. If she robbed the place blind, not that there's anything worth taking, and a police sketch artist asked me to describe her, she would never be caught. She forced her crotch under my thigh and I let her grind against me. I looked toward the ceiling. She burped again then put a finger on my chin to direct my face towards her. Her blurred face came into focus, first green eyes, then an overgrown goatee with a wide nose. She burped once more. I stared into the false

green eyes then yakked on her. She grabbed her purse, ran out of the room, headed towards the bathroom and found nothing helpful. I did not bother to apologize. She cursed out the whole club. Fritz got up from a customer's lap. A dragged-out squeaky sound drenched the room as Harry slid down the pole.

Josh suggests the barbeque place, a chill goes my spine. We settle on a bar with a surprising array of sandwich options. We sit down around a circular table with curved booths on both sides. Max slaps my back twice. He's much bigger than I am and it hurts more than he intended. He assures me it happens to everyone. I want to respond that I've never seen him throw up on a woman before but I decide against it. Josh sits across from me. I avoid eye contact. I am content to enjoy people from a distance. I've avoided going out with the other dancers. I don't intend to make friends with any of these guys. It really does happen to everyone, Josh assures me. I can't quite interpret if he is serious or making fun of me. I glance at his mouth and find a big smile on it. I look back down. A waiter in yellow low tops approaches the table. He gives us all glasses of lukewarm water in translucent green glasses. I thank him. Max orders a club sandwich. Josh, a turkey and swiss. I order a grilled cheese. Max moves on from the subject of my unfortunate accident. He reaches his arms across the booth, one rm behind me, and tells us he had sex with yet another woman from the club. He tends to do that. It started for money but now he just does it for the hell of it. It makes him feel good about himself. He asks me if the throw up victim was pretty. I can't explain what I had seen in her face. I just nod and take a sip of water. Max explains how he had a beautiful woman tip him some grand amount of money earlier. I only pay attention to the yellow shoes returning. He hands me a warm plate with a grilled cheese, no

crust. I look up at his blue eyes and swiftly look down, knowing I would see green eyes if I looked a second longer.