

The Gloves

He only went in there to get away from the rain and the crowds, pushing, pushing.

The door jangled shut. Malcolm's round-eyed glasses blushed with steam, smudging the shop interior into a jumble of dreary shapes. What was it that Caroline used to call him in these frames? *Distinguished*, that was it. The

way her lips pinched a smirk around the word, playful.

He smoothed his hair back, brushed the wet off his hands. *Auf Wiedersehn, Caroline. Begone.*

“Hello there.” A male voice carried across the space; lofty, with the hint of a question mark. Malcolm’s lens-fog crept down to reveal a small, neat man tucked into a black suit, hands clasped behind his back. Two narrowed brown eyes appraised Malcolm’s own rain-flecked suit under an arched eyebrow.

“Er, hi,” Malcolm muttered, shuffling his shoes on the mat. Around him, brand new shoes gleamed in rows; handwritten tags that said WALNUT and EXTRA TALL dangled from lean umbrellas; silk ties dripped from a sort of wooden trellis. A gentleman’s shop.

With the shopkeeper's attention levelled on him now, Malcolm slid a look of mild interest over the displays. He parted two blazers that hung side by side, two shades of navy deepening to black.

"Terrible weather we're having," the man continued. "Perhaps I could interest sir in a pair of gloves?"

Bemusement tickled the corners of Malcolm's mouth – *Sir?* – but his eyes were drawn nonetheless to the counter as the man strode aside and twirled a wrist to it with a small bow, like an understated circus master. But Malcolm's humour melted to nothing when he saw the gloves laid upon the glass. Five pairs, all leather, each twin placed delicately upon its counterpart, as if resting. Waiting.

He took a step forward, his forehead ringed with surprise at his own reaction – but how good they looked. What quality. He cast a frown around the shop, giving a small shake of his head. He never went for this crazy-expensive stuff, but here he was at the counter, his fingertips prickling.

The pair in the middle. Deep brown. Slightly glossed but somehow masculine, like the side of a horse. The tag along the side bore the name of the shop in arched curlicues: *A Sense of Taste*.

He cleared his throat.

“How much are these?”

The crowds dispersed as easily as the rain. Malcolm stole quick, admiring glances at his new gloves as he strolled. They fit snugly

against the contours of his hands as if they'd been tailored just for him. He sauntered now, taking his time in this older part of town. The buildings either side of the cobbled street pressed together like gossipers needling the news. The grey sky had paled, a fissure above him. A slash of tarnished sun winked between the rooftops.

The shops were loyal to their old-world style: bay windows bulged like glass cheeks stuffed with colours, glistenings, jewellery that bit the light. Malcolm's eyes flicked hungrily around the street. He'd never really *seen* this place before. Gold watches basked on velvet swathes, their spines slack, surrendered to the inset LED lights that adored them from above like tiny suns.

A boutique sweet shop teemed with bright shapes, a miniature cartoon city of lozenge bricks. An artificial strawberry scent wafted as he passed.

In a toy shop window, a grinning puppet sat on swing, its limp legs dangling. Malcolm peered at the frills of its clown suit, the impossibly tiny stitches. His head quivered from side to side in amazement. Such attention to detail!

He blinked around him. After the rain the colours of the street stood out, pierced with a newness. A trick of the light, that's what it must be. As he lingered over the threshold of a jeweller's, the gold and silver pieces thrummed as if glowing. Yes, now that the rain had gone, things seemed fuller, more solid. Each surface swelled with an energy that was more than just

itself: everything contained a richness, a quality that reached out to him. But no, it was he who was reaching out.

“A lovely watch, isn’t it? Allow me...”

He turned a corner. Then another. The tingling that had begun in his hands crept up his arms and into his chest. He stood against a wall to let the other shoppers past and took in great gulps of the cool air, feeling giddy. What had he eaten? True, he’d bolted down the microwaved leftovers of last night’s curry take-out in a rush to head out of the office – to not get stuck in a conversation with that boring woman in accounts. He passed a hand over his stomach. Perhaps that was it.

His gaze swept down an old alleyway, where the buildings pulled together even tighter. Not like gossipers this time, but conspirators.

And yet it was this he craved. These shadows. The coolness. The silken darkness as it slunk against his neck; a softness he could almost touch.

Here, houses stood with their doors flush against the wall. A ring of fairy lights hummed around an open door. A woman lounged next to it, her lips rising out of the shadow like a blush on a cheek. As she caught Malcolm looking, her smile flicked open like a knife, easy.

Not wanting to stare, he pressed on as if he had meant to come this way and knew it as a shortcut. But despite his efforts to appear casual, he couldn't tear his attention away from her. Her black eyes pored over him as he

passed, eating his gaze hungrily. Her skirt was short, tight. Her thin shawl hung loose at the front, barely covering the spider web frost of lace that crept over the curves of her brown skin. As he neared her, still battling to look away, she swivelled on a spiked heel and her naked shoulder slipped free. A bowl of light swirled then melted into her skin like chocolate.

She hesitated, her head tilted towards him. Eyelids heavy, her pout quirked at one corner, knowingly. Those lips – that was the last Malcolm saw of her. They burned a red bow into his mind's eye as the rest of her vanished.

He stopped and stared. He ached to take another step forward, but his feet were pinned to the ground.

What he would have done, for Caroline to look at him this way.

Why would he think of her, all of a sudden?
When this woman was nothing like her...

He glanced at the brand new watch on his wrist. He had barely five minutes to get back to the office before his absence would be noticed.

Blustering in with the smell of rain still fresh on him, Malcolm tugged off his new gloves and all was dullness again: the four corners of his computer screen, his to-do list. A hundred emails, each query demanding priority.

On the train home, his fingers tapped restlessly on his lap. That credit card splurge, so out of character. And the alleyway. It was best to just forget about it. He shook open his newspaper but the inky digits blurred and tangled before his unfocussed stare, refusing to form words. Over and over, his mind turned

down side roads and wove around elicited corners that opened up, the cobbled streets unravelling under his stumbling feet until he was there again in that low-lit alley. Again he ached to follow the beautiful woman but each time he kept on walking, unable to stop but incapable of turning away from the slice of darkness where a pair of lips seared their afterglow, a pulse in a blackened doorway.

He pulled off his gloves and coat, poured some pre-pack pasta-and-sauce onto a saucepan and found himself eyeing them where he'd left them on the side table: the gloves. He didn't recall laying them down like that, gently criss-crossed, as if trying to tease back that moment in the shop, question it again. They were only

pieces of leather, after all. But he felt how they looked: cast off, emptied. Lifeless.

He snorted, shook his head. They weren't *alive*, for God's sake.

He blew out a sigh and sank into the sofa. A long day at the office.

He guzzled the pasta, barely conscious of its flavour. The TV blared its jumble of voiceovers, canned laughter and snippets of music that always seemed cut short. Images licked the surface of his glasses with glimpses of colour: a grinning face, a red sofa, a knife hovering over a cake. As he spooned the last few pieces of pasta he looked down as if noticing his food for the first time.

His gaze was drawn to the dark oblong of the window. He hadn't closed the blinds. He stood up, meaning to do it, but instead found himself

back at the table where the gloves lay. Quickly, he put them on.

Malcolm stared at the TV as if wishing there was a witness, someone to remark that this was normal.

As if all the thoughts and actions of the day had brought him to this moment, she blossomed in his mind. Caroline.

The figure in the doorway, the lazy pout that left a stain in his memory. Caroline's form filled out these shapes as surely as if she'd been there at lunchtime.

Caroline had worn 'real' skirts, not like that stretched fabric that almost wasn't there, but skirts that were meant to be noticed: full, pleated, bell-shaped things that had a fifties feel about them; skirts that blundered about her as she walked, her arm in his. A kiss, light-

hearted on his cheek, but that was all. It was that wholesomeness that drew him to her, or perhaps it was the challenge she presented.

Something had been 'wrong' for her. She wasn't ready to commit, or so she said. *As if falling into bed represented a commitment.* He sneered at the memory. An old-fashioned girl, Malcolm thought, thumbing the remote control. He hadn't wanted that after all.

Yes he had. He dropped the remote onto the sofa next to him, pushing it down into the crease. He had fantasised about her falling for him – yes, him, Malcolm, a distinguished, reasonable-looking, and heck, well paid man. He had things to offer! Just a little slippage in her oh-so conscientious restraint, that's all he asked for. But it was he who'd begun to slip, to stagger, under the brightness of her smile; the

way she considered him over a plate of spaghetti bolognaise, her eyes squinted like a cat's. *This is a test of how well you click with someone*, she'd said, her smile tipped at a mocking angle. *You eat spag bol. The messiest dish there is. All pretences go out the window. And oh, if the man wears a white shirt...*

He glanced down at his baby blue shirt and smiled. *Close, so close.*

She chuckled, snatching dare-devil looks at him, wiping the corners of her mouth. Two points of red bloomed on her cheeks, a double echo of the warmth that beat in his chest right then.

It stung him, the way he liked her. To want something he couldn't have; because she left him at the doorway, with her too-quick, short kiss. And the shine of her flat door slowly

angled towards him as she murmured her promise to *do it again some time*, a few words that she almost whispered through the gap as it closed. It never happened, though he'd called her three times. Or was it four?

The gloves tightened around his fingers. He looked down, saw his hands curled into fists. Fury hit him like a slap. Caroline. He said her name out loud, glaring at the walls of his lounge as if expecting them to react. *Caroline*.

He stood and trembled, the muscles in his neck rising as he stared at the blank-faced window. This pathetic apartment, the cheap plastic rim that ran around the glass pane, like an excuse. His stupid desk job, the people at work who, as he pinched his eyes shut against them, grew ever more vivid in his head. Dogooders who whined at everything he told

them, their mouths flapping in hollow complaint. He wanted it all to be swallowed up into that black void. His fists tensed as he saw the depth of the night sky, how it went on forever. It was the darkness of the alley unfolding, beckoning him to drink its everlasting sea.

He wasn't sure how he'd got there. He'd marched down lamp lit streets, irritated by the pools of liquid light everywhere, puddles of it winking off the pavement where the rain had fallen. He craved darkness, hunger. He lurched towards it, unstoppable, barely seeing the brushstrokes of faces that blurred past, faces that frowned at him with their fish-eyed stares under hoods and umbrellas.

Her front door had been easy. After their date he'd seen where she kept her spare key, tucked beneath a loose floor tile under her mat. Stupid woman had done it right in front of him. So trusting. He bent to slide the key back in its hiding place and sidestepped into the cool, innocent darkness of the hallway. Desire in his chest fell open like an unzipped suitcase.

He stood at the foot of her bed. The window was open. Cool air stirred the gauzy curtain. Her outline was obscured by rolled fabric, twisted in sleep. Only her bare feet were touched into colour by a lamp outside, delicate, naked.

The gloves seemed to spasm at the sight of her, tugging hard into the flesh between his fingers – again, that buzzing in his chest. For a beat he felt as if the gloves wanted what he

wanted, only stronger: that absolute closeness to her, to fit so snug against her there was nothing between them, not even air. He the glove and she the hand. His cheeks burned. To cover her completely. To almost – be her. To see through her eyes, taste her and –

He hesitated on the balls of his feet. These thoughts. Where had all this come from? Closing his eyes he pressed a finger to his temple – and flinched back. The skin of the glove had almost scalded him. As he lowered his hands in front of him different expressions flitted across his features, quick as shuffled photographs: disbelief, bemusement, wonder, fear, horror. He gripped his wrist and pulled. The glove wouldn't come off. They were *his* now. Or, he was *theirs*.

Caroline stirred.

Malcolm's calf muscles squeezed as he tipped forward, his poise broken by surprise. The floor whinnied at the shift in weight. The body in the bed sighed and rolled over.

He stood rigid. The moments oozed like glue. In the silence that was too complete he became aware that he wasn't the only one who had stiffened. She'd stopped breathing.

His resolve loosened. Why was he here? What was he really going to do? He threw a glance over his shoulder. He had to get out, get out now, the way he had come.

But Caroline...

Her breath came uneasily. He could hear it now as he leaned over the bed. She was confused and afraid, calculating what to do under the slur of sleep, its unforgiving weight.

Something knuckled inside him. He would take what he came for.

She drew herself back on her elbows. He fell on to her, a second too late. Her knee caught under his chin as she tried to kick him off. He grunted, swallowed, clutching his throat as he staggered back. Through glassy-eyed pain he tried to focus on the images in front of him: the curtains billowing as if to take a mouthful of the night air, the bed post, the figure that came towards him, draped in a long, pale t-shirt.

She threw her hands against his chest with a cry. Still unsteady, he crashed backwards into a noise, a lamp that clanged emptily as it fell on its side.

“How *dare* you? What are you *doing* here?” she screamed in his face, her lips a rubber band stretched horribly. He gasped in a breath,

and her fury filled him up. It tasted of blood. He held his jaw. He'd bitten his own tongue in the impact.

His fists hooked inside the gloves. He wouldn't just stand here and let her shove him about. She belonged to him.

He launched himself onto her, onto both versions of her: for a moment there were two, blurred twin figures that drew apart then reassembled with a jolt of shock as he rammed his hands around her neck. Her eyebrows pinned up as she pulled back, her mouth wrenched to an angle that cried, "*No*". But he was ready for her now.

The heat inside his gloves was liquid, bright against his palms. It poured into him, this glow of strength, a power in his very hands! A power he owned and held. It swept down through his

arms and into his torso, filling him up. Under the press of his hands Caroline faltered, her t-shirt nothing but a weak glimmer of the streetlight, just a passive thing – that's all she was! A cheap, lame echo of something real. A fantasy. As she slumped onto the floor with a wordless mumble he took his place above her, glowering over her bowed head. He almost threw his head back and laughed. To think how she'd tried to fight him off! He snarled and flexed his hands for the final blow, his nostrils flaring at the warm scent of leather.

He heard her gasp and in that second of hesitation the ball of her knee came up once, twice. He crumpled with pain, a new heart beating in his groin. She threw herself against him and he twisted and fell backwards, his head catching on the corner of the dressing table.

Lights and an image of the carpet tipping towards him worried the inside of his head as the outside of it grew warm, sticky on the floor.

She couldn't catch her breath. Never, never could she believe... And they'd only had that one date, when was it? Some time in the summer... He seemed so nice back then, and those glasses, *distinguished* she'd thought, though he wasn't quite her type...

She flicked on the main light and stared and stared. He could not be here, in her room. It could not be real.

But there he was. His closed face was scrunched tight as a fist.

She had to make the phone call. That was what you had to do. But the awkward angle of his head; and underneath it, the scurrying pool

of red. In the grey of his shadow, the brightness of it throbbed.

She would make the call, *But let me just check first*, she thought. She bent to peer at him, nervous of getting too close but unable to tear her eyes off the body on her bedroom floor.

Oh. She felt the smile pour its warmth through her face. She reached out to touch. Oh, what beautiful gloves.

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