**Anatomically Correct**

by

Rosario Peralta Cortez

When we first met, your hands were empty and so were mine. And before I knew it, we were in love, and so I let you sandpaper my heart.

When I first showed you my heart, I thought it’d be simple.

“That’s not what a heart is supposed to look like,” you’d explained. “Hearts look more like this,” and you’d ripped open your chest and you showed me what it was supposed to look like.

Yours was so small and so shapely. Two perfect circles at the top and a sharp point at the bottom. A perfect red, still heart. It was the most beautifully awful thing I’d ever seen.

So I had shown you my heart—in a comparison game, and the hope that you could love mine anyways.

I remember how plump it was then and how strange and mangled it looked next to yours.

You gasped at the sight of it all, at the sight of my strange heart. Because, my heart, anatomically correct, was useless in its current state. I wanted to close up my chest and hide it from you forever.

But instead of running, you rummaged through your drawers and came back with sandpaper.

“I can fix this,” you said.

And for some reason I believed you. I think it’s because I loved you. I think it’s because I love you.

Love is supposed to be hard. If it was painless it wouldn’t be worth it. But I really want to complain because I don’t have a wooden heart. Because I’m a real boy (girl) and it hurts. And pinocchio surely never loved like I love you, so who’s he to say that being wooden is so bad. And you’ve been sitting next to me this whole time, and, day after day, you’ve been running sandpaper up and down and over and out of my heart.

But that’s what it feels like when you’re in love. And at least, you haven’t given up on me and my strange heart yet. And even though it burns and stings and hurts, I let you try. Because you and me, we’re everything I have. We’re the only thing I have.

And maybe one day, my heart will stop beating and stop trying to heal itself. Maybe one day, it will look as pretty and still as yours.

**The Perils of Kissing Strange Women**

by

Sarah Jade Parrish

It’s that feeling when you know that someone is following you—when you know that you have to run like your life depends on it, because, really, it does.

 My bag banged heavily against my back as I ran. The wind howled through the trees crowding around me, shifting the fallen leaves in the undergrowth, screeching in my ears with that ominous, death wail that you can’t get anywhere else but here; the sun was setting behind the skeletal woods, blanketed in black clouds—the kind that looked like they spelled bad weather, but you know that nothing will come of them but darkness.

 “Kristoph!” Her sensuous voice cut through the wind, calling out to me as a lover.

I ran harder. The wind itself was enough to send me into hysterics, but I had hoped to make it through the woods today without seeing her, without letting her stop me. I knew fully well what would happen if she did.

 She was the lady of the woods, so to speak. This was her place, and I had to tread through it twice daily, a task that would normally have been pleasing, but that was now a horrifying endeavor.

 I’d been walking through these woods for months before I’d met her, though then, I didn’t know what she was capable of. Back then, she was beautiful, radiant—a goddess. Back then, I had been stupid. I had given my name readily enough.

 And other things.

 “Kristoph!” My heart beat frantically at the sound of my name on her lips, filling me with a remembered pleasure so intense, I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else but with her, where I could hear her whisper my name until I was sure I would die.

 I tripped, my feet having caught opposite ends of the same branch, toppling me to the hard dirt, my chin and palms scraping the gravel underneath. My bag fell open, spilling its contents across the bare road. I stumbled to my feet.

 She had me now. I couldn’t escape her, and I knew it. I wondered just what had possessed me to try. But then, what had possessed me to betray her in the first place? I’d known the contract that I had entered into all those months ago, but that didn’t stop me from abandoning it at the first opportunity—from abandoning her.

 But no, I knew exactly why. I had left her because, contrary to everything I had ever believed possible, I had found someone better: someone living, warm, and mortal—someone human.

 “Kristoph?” She was right there, right in front of me. I couldn’t breathe; my heart had jammed itself in my throat. She was still beautiful, so elegant, so deadly, and her voice was soft, soothing—paralyzing. She gazed at me with a sorrowful expression, but underneath it all, I could see it for the ruse it was—I could see the hellfire in which I would burn. I was going to pay for what I had done, and pay dearly. If I hadn’t known that from the beginning, I did now.

 “Kristoph?” An edge of venom laced through two saccharine and intimate syllables.

 She reached out to me, her pale, slender fingers caressing my face. Her blue gaze pierced me, stopped me. I felt like the trees around us: unmoving. Dead. Her fingers trailed against my jaw, pulling me closer—her lips only millimeters from my own, her breath a frosty breeze against my skin.

 I couldn’t move.

 I thought of her kiss, her lips so soft and supple, but nothing like the warm, human lips I had been kissing the night before. I thought of what her kiss would mean for me now. My heart beat frantically; I had never known there was room enough in my body for so much panic, so strong it felt like I was going to break apart.

 “Kristoph . . .” There was a time when her kiss had been the one thing I longed for all day, the thing I missed at night, the thing I fell asleep thinking about. There had been nothing more enlivening, and now it was to be the death of me.

 My mind screamed at me: For the love of God, Kris, run!

 But I couldn’t. It didn’t matter how much I wanted to get away now. It didn’t matter because she had me.

 A shot of adrenaline lanced through me, resolving itself into potent terror, as her cold lips brushed mine—lips as cold and unyielding as death itself.

**To Kill A Mocking Bird**byRosiee Thormahlen

Birds—Ella hated birds, those little fuckers with their chirpy beaks. What right did they have to sing that day? No one else was singing. Everyone else was dead.

Except for her and those stupid birds.

They flew in formation, swooping and swirling against the backdrop of the blue sky, their song wafting through the desert air to reach her unhappily receptive ears. She tried to clamp her palms over them in an attempt to drown out the noise, but she found she only had one hand left; the other was a bloodied stump, covered in sand.

The ache that permeated her entire body was a minor nuisance in comparison to the shrill shrieks and cackles of the birds above her.

Ella glanced around her at the bodies strewn across the desert. Mangled body parts lay every which way. Few corpses remained entirely intact, which was unsurprising, considering the land mines. Her platoon—men she admired for their superior strength and endurance—was destroyed. She had spent her entire deployment trying to keep up, but there she was, still living, still breathing. Once again she had been left behind.

She rolled her head to the side and saw a boot inches from her face. It took her mere seconds to realize that it and the charred and bloodied foot inside it belonged to her. She let her head flop back in the sand and stared at the cloudless sky. The heat of the sun beat forcefully down, coaxing the smell of blood and flesh into the air.

The birds chirped.

They swam in streams of sunlight and spirited abandon. They knew nothing of pain, or sorrow, or what it was like to pray to be deaf. She knew that if their beaks could smile, their grins of mirth would rain down on her like the sun’s rays. They were laughing at her, the birds, mocking.

Ella grimaced, trying to block out the birds’ song with her own, aimless humming, but her mouth and tongue were too caked in sand for any sound to escape her dry lips. She groped at the ground beside her with her one good hand and snatched her pack—luckily not blown to smithereens. She fumbled with one of the pockets, the velcro catching on the fabric of her sleeve. Her fingers snaked inside and wrapped around a grenade. The metal felt cool against her skin as she lifted it from her backpack and rested it against her forehead for a moment. The sting of cold against her sweaty brow was a brief shock of relief from the hot sun.

The immediacy of her plight rushed back as the birds’ melody pounded a migraine against her skull. They sang their happy hymn in notes of three. It was nonsensical noise, Ella told herself, but the syllables rang against her eardrums, crying, “Semper-fi, semper-fi,” a haunting echo of her training, mocking, mocking, mocking.

Ella removed the grenade from her forehead, wrenched the pin out with her teeth and released the fuse lever. She tried to lift the grenade, to throw it into the sky, but her arm was heavier than the metal she held, so she closed her eyes against the brightness of sun and sand.

The loud pop of bursting metal was the last thing she heard as blood and feathers rained down from the too blue sky.

**Exposed**
by
Sophia Wellons

Parker had heard it many times before. Portland wasn’t good enough for Mr. White’s little girl. Claire deserved better. She deserved better than Portland and, most assuredly, better than Parker, the long-haired vegan who doodled for a living.

Parker stared out the car window waiting for Claire’s parents to step out of the hotel, dread burning through his body like a shot of whiskey. Ever since he had whisked his traditional Midwestern born bride to, as Mr. White put it, the “land of granola crunching hippies”, Parker had been standing on shaky grounds with his in-laws.

 “I warned Daddy to be nice this time.” He felt Claire’s small hand squeeze his shoulder.

 “I’m sure everything will be fine,” he muttered to himself clutching the steering wheel. He turned to give her a quick reassuring smile, pretending everything was under control.

 Parker watched as a man in pressed jeans and cowboy boots exited the hotel dwarfing the tiny, graying woman standing next to him. Claire darted out of the car towards her parents, and excitedly started chatting about the plans for dinner Parker had made for the evening.

 “The beef is one hundred percent organic and grass fed. Isn’t that great?” He heard Claire say as she ushered Mr. and Mrs. White to the car.

 “Sounds,” Mr. White started then saw the Prius he would be sitting in, “bohemian.”

 Parker gripped the steering wheel harder. His plans seemed absurdly stupid now.

 As they made their brief greetings, Claire’s parents awkwardly settled into the backseat of the car. Parker adjusted the rearview mirror and caught Mr. White’s impassive stare in its reflection and tried not to squirm.

 He turned into traffic behind a car littered with bumper stickers including the ever popular “Keep Portland Weird” and “My other car is a bicycle” and heard Mr. White scoff in the backseat over Claire’s narration.

 Claire babbled on, “And that shop over there sells artwork made from recycled pipes and concrete, oh, that park used to be filled with Occupy protestors. Some of the tents are even still up. Oh, the market will be open tomorrow. All the produce is locally grown. Isn’t that great?”

 Claire’s mother nodded along politely, and, to his credit, Mr. White didn’t say a word. Parker followed his lead. Silence was safer. So long as Claire didn’t mention they belonged to a co-op, everything would go fine.

 “Oh, my!”

Parker slammed on the brakes, so shocked at the volume coming from his mousey mother-in-law that, for a moment, he forgot to panic about what she must have seen.

 And then they saw them. Bicyclists. Hundreds of them.

 And they were all naked.

 Hundreds of pale nude bodies on bicycles surrounded them on the road. They came in all sizes: tall, short, round, and lean. Male, female, and a little of both. Some wore body paint and Halloween masks.

 Parker froze in open-mouthed horror as a herd of bicyclists engulfed the car, a parade of naked filling every window.

 Everyone was silent in the car.

 Then he heard laughter. He glanced back to see Mrs. White’s tiny body shaking with uncontrolled hysteria. Then Claire snorted, clamped her hands over her mouth, and snorted again. Parker slowly shifted his head and strained his eyes towards the rearview mirror feeling like a man facing his imminent execution.

 Mr. White’s eyes crinkled as he met Parker’s gaze. He smiled.

“Looks like I’m overdressed.”