

Mangleface

She had been beautiful once. I could tell by the way she walked: straight-backed, long strides, confident. She walked like a beautiful person. The first time I saw her I was putting rentals back on the shelves. I noticed her studying our foreign-film section. I couldn't see her face but I had a good view of her body. That was enough to make me put down my armload of movies and saunter over.

'Can I give you a hand with anything?'

She turned towards me. She had her hair styled so that it partially obscured her features, but it didn't really hide much.

'Yeah, I'm looking for—'

She saw my expression. I couldn't help it. The skin of her face was cross-hatched with scars, dry and leathery. Her nose seemed to melt into her mouth, which twisted down on one side.

'Never mind,' she said.

I stood beside her for a minute, couldn't think of anything to say, and slunk back to my till in a daze. As she moved around the store I watched her out of the corner of my eye, like I usually did with potential shoplifters. I wasn't satisfied with how I'd left

things. After several minutes I tried again.

‘Hey, I’m sorry about that.’

She picked up a display box, avoiding my gaze.

‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘You like foreign films?’

A shrug. ‘I’m getting bored of the normal stuff.’

I figured if I was in her place I’d watch a lot of movies, too.

‘That one’s all right.’ I tapped the case in her hand. It was a Brazilian film about this lady who falls in love with a dolphin man, and has his kid. ‘Weird, but kind of cool. I dug it.’

She smiled at me. It was hideous enough to shatter all the mirrors in the world.

‘Thanks,’ she said.

I wouldn’t say she came in frequently after that, but she came in regularly. She stopped by in the mornings, when I was the only cashier and the store was empty. On Fridays, she always rented two or three movies. She never came in on weekends.

She walked in one day when I was training a new kid on the till, this kid from West Van. He served her politely – giving her our usual sales spiel – but after she left he turned to me and asked, ‘Did you see good old mangleface there?’

I told him to shut his mouth.

‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘I didn’t know you had a thing for her.’

He was a lippy little shit. She probably got that kind of comment a lot, from assholes like him. At the end of the week, I told my manager I’d seen the kid taking pop and pretzels from the confectionary without paying for it, which was something I usually did. He was still on his two-week trial period. That was enough to ensure he didn’t get the job.

The nickname stuck, though. I started thinking of her as Mangleface. I never learned her real name. She rented movies on her father's account. I only knew that her last name was Rice. Mangleface Rice. It seemed to fit.

Mangleface had a boyfriend. I only saw them together once, but that was enough. They made the mistake of coming in just after five. The pre-dinner rush is our busiest time of day. I didn't notice them until they got in the checkout line, which snaked halfway to the back of the store. Between customers I kept an eye on them as they waited. He was dressed in black jeans and a silk shirt – a real cold lampino. They stood a little apart, muttering to each other occasionally. Everybody was staring, of course, while pretending not to. It was almost as if they were celebrities of some sort.

When they reached my till, the guy asked, 'Is this flick any good?'

He thrust the tape into my hands. I glanced at the title on the spine. It was a documentary about this crazy Italian guy, driving around on his scooter, looking for Jennifer Beals.

'Sure, it's kind of all right.'

'Kind of all right,' he said to her. 'You hear that?'

'I want it,' she said.

He lowered his head and shrugged his shoulders, then slapped ten bucks down on the counter. I took it and asked him if they wanted any popcorn or candy. I didn't address her, or look at her much, because we were both pretending we didn't know each other, in that way you do.

'Why would we?' he said.

'I have to ask.'

‘We don’t need any of that crap.’

I scanned the movie, fed the ten into my till, and gave him his change. The store had gone quiet. He took the movie and walked out without waiting for her. As she left she glanced at me. It was hard to read her expression, because her face didn’t work like a normal face. It always looked sad, clownish, the mouth drooping down on one side as if she’d had a stroke. But just then there was something resigned about it, as if she knew what was coming, and soon.

The more accustomed I grew to her disfigurement, the more I was able to ignore it. It was as if her face was changing. For me, anyway. And as it did, over time, we got to know each other. If there was anybody else in the store, she was anxious, shy. When we were alone, though, she wasn’t afraid to talk to me. I learned that she liked pecan ice cream and skiing. Her favourite movie was *Night of the Living Dead* – the original black and white version.

I never asked about her face.

Sometimes, though, when she wasn’t looking, I’d check her out. If her back was turned to you she was hot. She had a great body: tanned and lithe and toned. Then you’d see her face, and that would be it. It could be pretty unsettling. I wondered if her boyfriend felt similarly. Did they ever have sex? Maybe every so often – but only with the lights out. In the dark it could be anybody’s face. He wouldn’t kiss her. He’d just grab her tits and squeeze her ass and imagine she was somebody else. That asshole didn’t deserve her. He really didn’t.

Chatting with Mangleface became part of my routine, like unlocking the store and emptying the returns bin. I opened at nine, and she usually came in just after ten. She would linger at my till, telling me what she thought of the movies I'd suggested. I started keeping a copies of the new releases behind the counter, which we weren't supposed to do, in case she wanted to rent one. Sometimes she did, other times she didn't. But the choice was always there.

If she didn't turn up, I got worried. What had happened to her? Maybe she'd had a fight with her boyfriend. I would wait for her to come running to me. She would be in tears. She would need a shoulder to cry on. Who else could she turn to? Me, of course. I was the only one who could see past the horror of her face.

Other times I imagined she was in trouble. She would rush in, distraught. She was sick, injured. She had an enormous debt. Loan sharks were after her, or some lunatic. A lunatic who only stalked chicks with disfigured faces. Or maybe it was something simpler, like her car had broken down. Whatever the scenario, I would help her. I'd take care of her.

I had a lot of time on my hands at that video store.

I was talking to her one day when this guy came in. He wore a pinstripe suit with burgundy leather shoes, and his hair was crusted with mousse. He looked like the kind of guy who managed a bunch of other people for a living. He was drunk, too. Vodka. I could smell it. Drunks think you can't smell vodka, but you can.

Mangleface was at my till. When he saw her he did a double-take.

'Holy shit – what happened to your face!'

Silence. Nobody else was in the store.

‘I’m sorry – I don’t mean to pry – but Jesus Christ.’

He turned to me. He wasn’t trying to be cruel. He was just another asshole.

‘You seen this poor girl’s face?’

‘I seen it, man. Settle down.’

‘I’m sorry. I just couldn’t help it. What happened?’

Mangleface had a hard time controlling herself. She was looking down at the movie she’d just rented. She didn’t cry. I never saw her cry, not even once. I sometimes thought her tear ducts might have been damaged, somehow. But her eyes were fine, so I don’t know if that makes any sense.

‘Car accident,’ she whispered.

‘Jesus. That’s tough.’

I gave Mangleface her change. She left without saying anything. Even after she was gone he couldn’t let it go. He went to the window to peer after her. He was really unsettled by it.

‘Did you see that, man? I never seen anything like it.’

He kept saying that. I kept telling him I’d seen it. Eventually he left. Afterwards, I accessed his account and ran a pre-authorisation on his credit card for three hundred bucks. We do that for renting games consoles, occasionally. It wouldn’t take the money out, but it would freeze the funds for a month, or until he caught on. It wasn’t much, considering how he’d behaved, but hopefully it would screw things up for him a little.

I started thinking of Mangleface outside of work. It was weird. My friends and I would be shooting hoops, or down at the beach, and she would be there, in my head. It worried me because that usually only happens with girls I like. Somehow,

without my realising it, Mangleface had become one of those girls. That was okay, I told myself. Nobody has to know. You've got a secret crush on Mangleface – so what? It's not like you're going to do anything about it.

A date with Mangleface would be agonising. Everybody would stop and stare and wonder what the hell you were doing with a chick whose face looked like that. And those were just strangers. What would happen if my friends found out? I'd never hear the end of it. My friends could be merciless like that.

Some days I wished everybody were blind.

At night, I began to think of doing things with her. I focused on her body. That was safe. Her body was beautiful. I wouldn't admit what I really wanted. Her body eased me into it.

I imagined running my hands over that body. I was always very tender with her. She was timid. It had been a long time since she'd been appreciated. I took my time, kissing her legs, her belly, her breasts. I didn't look at her face, not at first. I approached it indirectly. I kissed her throat, her earlobes, the nape of her neck.

A few weeks went by before I imagined kissing her face.

It was a frightening experience. Her lips were dry. All the skin on her face was withered like a scorched prune. But I liked kissing her. It drove me crazy kissing those twisted lips. Soon enough we were making love.

I fantasised about that every night for months.

Though in my head we had gone all the way, during the day our relationship remained chaste. She would come in, wander for a bit, then ask my advice on picking a film. I'd walk with her up and down the aisles. Sometimes she wanted a horror movie,

sometimes a love story, sometimes an arthouse flick. With Mangleface it was never the same. I would take my time helping her. I knew that she appreciated my company as much as my advice. She liked hearing me summarise the plots of films.

‘What about this one?’

‘It’s awesome. There’s this guy who goes around killing people with his electric guitar.’

‘His guitar?’

‘Yeah. It’s got a drill attached to the end. Whenever he hits the strings the drill starts spinning, and he drills people.’

‘That sounds hilarious.’

‘It is. You’d love it.’

We had pretty similar taste in films. That was part of why we got on so well. Any movie I liked she usually liked. Or maybe she was just being nice to me because I was being nice to her. Maybe she secretly hated all those movies but kept renting them just so she wouldn’t hurt my feelings.

I’d never thought of that.

I knew it was finished between her and her boyfriend when he came in with another girl. She was wearing heels and a miniskirt and no tights. She had these legs. Bare and smooth as a mannequin’s. In the kids section, where we keep all our cartoons, I saw him snort something off the back of his knuckle, like a total Carlito. As they stumbled about the store he kept slipping his hand up her skirt. Whenever he did this, she giggled and swatted it away.

They grabbed the latest blockbuster – this movie about an asteroid hitting earth – and came to my till.

‘You got your membership card?’ I asked.

‘I forgot it. I can give you my phone number.’

‘Can’t rent to you without a card. It’s policy.’

I rent to tonnes of people without a card. Not him, though.

‘I’ve done it before,’ he said.

‘It’s a new policy.’

She leaned over the counter so I could see her cleavage, and put her hand on my wrist. ‘Can’t you make an exception, just this once?’ she said, making a pouty-face. ‘Just for me?’

I wondered if Mangleface had been like that, before the accident.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I can hold the film for you, if you want to come back.’

‘Forget it,’ he said. ‘Come on – let’s go someplace else.’

‘Have a good night.’

‘Fuck you, pal.’

He flipped me the finger on the way out.

In the parking lot, car doors slammed. An engine roared to life. I looked out the window and watched his Jetta fishtail around the corner, the engine whining, the wheels screaming.

I thought about things for a few minutes, and then went to get three pornos from our adult section. It’s a family store but we have this backroom. I got real dirty ones – the dirtiest. I scanned the tapes onto his account, carried them outside, and tossed them in our dumpster.

In a week or so, after the films hadn’t been returned, they’d be added to our late list. Our manager would start calling up his house, asking after them. And the next time he came in, the enormous late charges would show up on his account, along with the titles.

Everybody would know what kind of guy he was.

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I was happy about the break-up. My fantasy was coming true. Mangleface would need me more than ever now that the asshole was out of the way, and she was alone.

I was surprised when she didn't show up that week, or the week after.

I started to worry. What if being dumped had made her do something crazy? What if she'd killed herself? It had to be something like that. Poor Mangleface. I concocted all kinds of scenarios. She had cut her wrists. She had hung herself. She had overdosed on Tylenol, or sleeping pills. She had thrown herself off the Lions Gate Bridge. Mangleface was no more. She would be laid to rest. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Nobody would think to invite me to the funeral.

She came back.

I hadn't seen her for a month. I heard the chime over the door and turned, and there she was. She looked terrible. She'd really let herself go. She was wearing sweatpants and a dirty blouse and her hair looked as if it had gotten caught in a fan.

I pretended not to notice.

'Hey – haven't seen you for awhile.'

Her mouth twisted into a smile.

'No,' she said.

'Are you okay?'

'No.'

Then she started sobbing. I had imagined this. I went around to the other side of the counter and held her. She smelled of sweat and felt fragile as a bird in my arms.

'It's okay,' I said. 'It's okay.'

It was just what I'd wanted. I was her great protector.

After a few minutes she stopped sobbing. I held on until it passed, rubbing her back, then let go of her. She still hadn't really cried at all. I mean, there were no tears on her face.

'You know what's strange?' she said, staring at my chest. 'I've gotten so used to seeing this face in the mirror that I can't tell how hideous it is anymore. I only remember when I see other people's reactions to it.'

'It's not that bad.'

She sniffed. 'You don't react to it like other people.'

'It doesn't bother me.'

She looked up at me. She had such nice eyes. They hadn't been damaged at all. They were clear, and blue, and wide open. A baby's eyes.

'But would you ever be able to kiss it?'

I thought of countless lonely nights, of all the times I'd kissed her in my mind, but for a few seconds I couldn't bring myself to act.

The chime above the door rang out like an alarm. Two teenagers sauntered in. They were laughing and shoving each other, horsing around a bit. That all stopped as soon as they noticed her. One of them whispered something. They lingered nearby, watching.

Her question still hung unanswered between us.

'I don't know,' I said, stepping back.

I barely whispered the words, but she flinched as if I'd shouted. She didn't say anything else. She just turned and walked out. The door eased shut behind her, sighing on its hydraulics. I gazed at the space where she'd been, still stuck in the scene. I wanted to press pause, and rewind, and play it out all over again, with a different ending.

Those two kids were still standing there, gawking.

Tyler Keevil

‘Get the hell out of here.’

They looked at each other uncertainly. One of them tried a smile, as if he thought I might be joking. I wasn’t. I started towards them.

‘I said get the hell out of here!’

They did. I followed them to the door and slammed it behind them and flipped the lock. Further down the street I could see her, walking away, getting smaller. I pressed my forehead against the glass and watched her go, feeling as if I’d crushed a butterfly in my fist.