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Who are the Fantasy Girls?

When Audrey pulled open the steel door, one that looked like it belonged on a meat freezer, and walked into the black box of St. Clare's, she couldn't tell the difference between people and furniture: everything and everyone was made of black leather and silver studs, scrawny Sids and puff-faced Nancys, their dark shapes of lace, leather, and chains vibrating against the black walls veiled in electro-bright graffiti, Social Distortion, the static soundtrack, set to two girls scissoring on a gigantic TV.

David said Saint Clare's on Friday night was where he'd be. He said, "Bill Murray's son hangs out there," his long, greasy hair fuzzed up against some American porn on the screen.

Audrey knew not to ask David to meet her at the airport; she knew that wasn't very cool. And she thought the image of herself—riding in the back of a shiny black car, traveling the bridges and tunnels into the dark, distinct beat of the city—was ideal. It was like the opening scene of *Rosemary's Baby*, set to that low-hung melody, far below the floating, suspended view of the city, where God and the angels were watching. It would be a time machine—her direct trajectory out of dull and dusty Biloxi. Like Kim Novack in *Vertigo*, maybe, all blonde hair, tight-lipped and held together, a wild-eyed lie. The Audrey she was vanishing before she walked through a green fog and into another image of herself, in another city.

But David didn't let it play like that.

When Audrey asked, "Can I get your address? We'll meet at your place?"

That's too easy is what he really meant when he said, "Better to throw you to the wolves," his laugh shallow and plain.

It didn't much matter to her. The thought of another summer in Biloxi— the pock-marked animals in baseball caps and cutoffs, their facial hair wiry like catfish, clawing at her relentlessly behind the bowling alley— was suffocating. The motel rooms, air molasses-heavy and cigar-sweet, the tediousness of slow dancing to the alarm clock radio, smoking all that weed and never feeling anything. She thought David was probably right, even though it would ruin the image she had of herself. With his plan, she would have to drag her heavy suitcase into St. Clare's, which was evidence of her absolute novelty, her immaculateness in the face of that all-encompassing city. It was embarrassing.

Though all that foresight was for nothing. When Audrey got to St. Clare's at one am— her blonde bob newly blunted around her face, the heavy black eyeliner she applied on the plane—no one really saw her get out of the taxi, except for maybe some faceless dude puking in the street. And when she pulled open that meat-packing door, she knew she wasn't as impressed as she was supposed to be.

A girl at the bar screamed, "I'd just die!" before she and her friends took shot after shot of whiskey, which the bartender kept pouring. The girls looked like Edie Sedgewick, but with big hands and thick necks. They looked like girls from Minnesota, from Kentucky; they looked like girls who'd say they had no homes to go home to. And the bartender was the used-to-be good girl from that one modeling reality show; she once dated and dumped Andrew WK. She was the redhead from Kansas, covered in cupcake and cream-puff tattoos. David said she was cool, but the way she scowled at the Edies, Audrey knew she couldn't ask to keep her suitcase behind the bar. So she dragged it behind her, pretending *it* was the stranger, not her. Audrey moved through the bar lethargically— like she imagined the girls in magazines would do— her black-netted legs the rhythmic pendulums that matched the beat of the bodies still scissoring on the screen. She pretended she wasn't looking for anything.

When Audrey finally saw David leaving the bathroom behind a pudgy, hairless man, and a woman with leathery skin, she could hardly believe it was him. He was shorter than she thought a man should be, and he didn't look much like the photos she'd seen. Maybe older, his nose and belly more defined behind his long black hair and Bauhaus tee-shirt. His cheekbones and chin sharper, black eyes harsher; the angles had all changed. Audrey thought maybe it was an illusion— the strangeness of the other two, the hairless man, dressed

in puffy, checkered pants and rubber shoes, the vinyl halter top on the leather-faced woman— that made David so far from what she imagined.

“I thought you were into the Devil himself?” Audrey smiled and put her arm around him in a strange half-hug, as she tugged at the Silver Star of David and meat cleaver charms hanging from a rope around his neck.

“It’s supposed to be ironic.” David half-smiled, his black eyes wild. He nodded at the hairless man, his hairless arm around the leathery woman, and they both turned to the bar. “They’re gonna get you a drink.”

“Who are they?”

“Raoul’s a molecular gastronomist—gotta restaurant in the Bowery. And Genie makes films, has for a while. That’s one a hers.” David nodded at the two girls on the TV, their narrow hips still pressing in half-circles.

Audrey laughed. “Pretty tame,” she said and looked at the cocktail table, every surface covered in empty tumblers and swollen ashtrays. Before she could think of what to say, beyond “How old were those photos you sent?” Raoul and Genie returned, bearing six shots of whiskey between them.

“It’s all she’ll pour after midnight,” Raoul said, tilting his hairless head toward the bartender as he set three shot glasses in front of Audrey.

Genie shouted, “Here’s ta Audrey’s first night in tha city!” the missing teeth in her mouth creating dragging sounds around every syllable.

“May it be deviant as all hell.” David’s wolfish face centered between the pulsing projections of where the two girls met on the screen.

Audrey laughed before she tipped the shot glasses to her lips—one after the other, after the other, in the same way she’d seen the Edies at the bar maneuver their whiskey.

“Get her two more of these, and a bump before we hit the street,” David said. He pulled a sack of tobacco from his pocket and quickly rolled a cigarette.

“I’ll go easy on her tha first go-round.”

“Not too easy,” Raoul mumbled and slapped an invisible fly against his hairless head.

David smirked, his long tongue licking the paper, and stood up from the table.

“What about my suitcase?” Audrey asked, hoping he’d give it to that mean-mouthed redhead behind the bar, but David didn’t say anything.

Genie and Raoul followed behind Audrey, behind David, who led them all into the tiny red bathroom of St. Clare’s. After Raoul locked the door, Genie pulled a small mirror and a brown vial from her halter top; Audrey had seen both of these things once, a year before, during Homecoming on a riverboat in Biloxi.

“Alright girl, on Friday nighths, we play ‘Queenie.’ I play tha queen, and whenever I give outta gift, I getta sign a devotion in return.”

Audrey nodded. After all that whiskey, she thought the room could be the tiny scarred heart of the city, the walls and floor covered in graffiti, all the lines of green-scum plumbing moving in and out of the walls so easily.

“For tha first round, ya have ta show us ur boobs.”

Audrey shook her head. “Can I just get a cigarette?”

“It doesn’t really matter,” David said tapping ash into the toilet. “They’ve already seen your nudes.”

Audrey grimaced and looked at the checkered floor; her boot stomped out half the face of a bug-eyed alien, a gigantic penis between its teeth.

“Loosin up,” said Raoul. “You’re face wasn’t even in em.”

“Come on girl, be cool. I bet ya sent thosth same pictures ta otha dudes.”

This was true. She had first sent them to Tom, before that homecoming cruise, and since then, she had used them a few times at Pee Wee’s Grocery for free booze.

“You said you were up for anything.” David tossed his cigarette in the toilet. With his teeth, he pulled an elastic band from his wrist and haphazardly knotted his long hair on top of his head. That lone ritual was enough for Audrey: suddenly, David transformed into who she had so long anticipated seeing.

Audrey pressed her lips together. In her best fantasy girl voice, one she had refined behind that Biloxi bowling alley, she said, “Oh baby, I was just playin.” As she spread her legs, one boot on the alien and the other on *Jamie likes it rough*, she slowly pulled up her dress.

“Hot damn,” Raoul said, shaking his head. “You got us a live one.”

David stared at the tattoo on Audrey’s hip. “And there’s that blue rose.”

With her dress hiding her face, Audrey smiled with abandon. She had long believed that anyone worth knowing recognized the blue rose as the mysterious omen in *Twin Peaks*, her favorite television show. Audrey wanted to be the harbinger of all that fantasy and shadow—the blue rose gave her something to live up to.

In the street, no one really said anything. Audrey knew she'd remember that moment as the image she wanted of herself: blonde and young and sexy, walking to some party. That would be the image of her first movements in the city. She forgot the airplane, the shiny black car, everything that happened before that walk through the Bowery, the skeletal buildings, infinite in their ascent to the sky, but fractured and weak, bombed out and black looking. She wanted to feel that rawness, lick the walls.

Audrey was lost in her daze-dark dream, the reckless liberty she knew was moody and forthcoming. Nonetheless, the romanticism of becoming invisible within the city lost its luster when juxtaposed with the immediate knowledge that she was alone on that dark street. The space and shadows were swallowed up by the weight of the needless shops, still advertising things that had long been missing. Audrey saw her lone image reflected in a storefront window, the glass fractured, jarring. Audrey's reflection split at her waist, her face. The opposite directions were more menacing than her dream. It was then Audrey knew she was probably into something deep—it was then she remembered she had forgotten her suitcase down the street, in the black box full of Edies, ex-models, Danzigs, and teen queens—but she kept going.

Audrey ran the block back from where she had come, back to Genie's slump-shouldered shape leaning into a large steel door, her heavy tapping echoing in the street as David and Raoul kicked at the concrete. A small peephole slid open, big enough for a newspaper or the neck of a gun, and Genie mouthed a single word. As the locks shifted in the door, David put his arm around Audrey.

"I left all my things back at St. Clare's." She thought his skin and clothes were made of cinnamon and smoke, and she leaned further into him, as if against a great wind.

"Baby'll get it," David said, and pulled her into a small passage that led to the party: black-walled with one black table, one black chair.

Audrey could hear the music playing on the other side of the door, which matched the beat of the blinking red light in the hall. The flashes between blackouts and red-toned everything made Audrey feel a little

vertigo. She was on a sinking ship, not knowing which direction was air, not knowing if the world beyond that hallway had capsized beneath the sea.

“Age of consent,” said the doorman, which was also the name of the song playing at the party, the red light matching the hook and the beat.

“Won’t you, please let me go?” Audrey smirked, reciting the New Order lyrics as she handed him her id.

The doorman drew two black Xs on Audrey’s hands and slipped an orange band on her wrist, which had *Genie* written all over it. “You ain’t got long.”

“Out come the wolves!” Raoul yelled, and the doorman let them in.

The warehouse looked exactly like St. Clare’s, and mirrored the black distortion of the city Audrey had seen, though the movie screens were multiplied, all projecting the same image simultaneously—a young, blonde, Catherine Deneuve tied to a tree, in the opening scenes of *Belle du Jour*. A series of men in white uniforms tore her red riding jacket, her dress, and whipped her harshly. Beneath the suspended screens, the dance floor was framed with what looked like torture machines—some sleek oak and steel, others all ropes and greasy wheels. Most of the girls on the dancefloor were costumed in lace, their bodies matching the pace of the music and *Belle du Jour*. It was like walking through a museum of dioramas—strange stage plays, like the Civil War reenactments in Biloxi.

Audrey stared at the scene distractedly, thinking about how all that beauty made Raoul and Genie even greater oddities. Raoul was punching his arms in the air, howling between the melody, and Genie’s wood-soled platforms pounded loudly, completely off beat, on the polished concrete. Their peculiar parade went on until they reached a monstrous red curtain suspended from the rafters. In the dark, red-flashing warehouse, Genie pulled a velvet loop that parted the screen, revealing a backroom.

“Secret gifts.” Genie smiled, the folds of her leathery skin matching the heavy red curtains.

“This looks familiar,” Audrey said. The room was exactly like the Dark Lodge in *Twin Peaks*: a black and white zigzag pattern replaced the polished concrete, and though the red curtains were heavier, they obscured every wall, every escape, muffling the music in their thick flesh. Audrey felt static, absolute, like she was role-playing her own dream.

“Genie owns us all now!” Raoul laughed, pulling Genie to the dim border of the room, which was patterned with wire-framed beds, each shrouded in red gauze. On the beds were girls Audrey thought were glamorous and beautiful, all melded together in varied stages of dress and drug use. The girls were heavenly, smiling and whispering, sharing mirrors and syringes as their most secret diaries.

“The best rooms are bleeding hearts,” Audrey said cryptically, in the way the *Twin Peaks* prom queen, Laura Palmer, spoke in those slow lullabies she recorded before she died.

“There’s nowhere to be alone anymore.” David led Audrey to the bar, its black lacquer a shiny skin. “Two well whiskeys, doubles,” he said to the bartender.

“You know, I’m named after Audrey Horne,” and though it wasn’t wholly true, she was actually named after Audrey Hepburn, like most every other girl with the same name, Audrey didn’t believe that fact matched who she was becoming. Unlike Hepburn, the skinny fawn, Horne was a cult icon; she was the doll-faced beauty, the real teen queen of Twin Peaks.

“Audrey Horne’s my dream girl— you’re more of a Laura Palmer.”

“How’s that?” Audrey pressed her hands against the bar, slowly tracing its knots and grains with her fingers.

“Beautiful and menacing, but easy— you could convince a man to do anything.”

“Nothin menacing is easy.” Audrey smiled and finished her drink.

David rolled another cigarette and signaled to the bartender for two more doubles. “Things that are menacing are the easiest, ever heard of Baudelaire?”

“Is he directing a new movie?” Audrey said, jokingly.

“He died in the 1800s—sex and drugs, the original rock n roller. Baudelaire worshipped women, but he only made it with the Lauras cause he wanted to keep worshipping the Audreys.”

“That should be on a tee-shirt.” Audrey took the cigarette from between David’s fingers and put it to her lips.

“Point is, the Audreys could be anybody, they’re statues in museums. But the Lauras are mysterious. Easy girls have secrets—they’re the living fantasy.”

“Wild line—I’d almost believe it.”

“It goes both ways.” David leaned into Audrey, pulling his cigarette from her lips and biting her on the cheek. Audrey moaned softly.

“You’ve got her good,” the bartender said to David as he set down two more whiskey doubles. David smirked, put a twenty on the bar, and handed Audrey her drink.

“It’s about time to join the party,” David turned to the line of beds canopied in red, and pulled at Audrey’s hip— so Audrey went.

Audrey was pulsing; her clothes were somewhere, missing on the patterned floor, and if anyone in that backroom was watching, she didn’t care. She was vibrating for that raw wonder, her body humming, fascinated by David’s roaming and static movements. As a magnet navigates iron filings into Rorschach figures, she felt every part inside her shift and pull, spread thin then quicken, anxious to meet every part of him. The heaviness of David’s body, that encompassing, suffocating feeling of being absorbed between mattress and skin, when gravity bears down, annihilating all autonomy, made Audrey feel like she was rocketing blindly into the darkness. She was looking through the opposite end of the telescope: each part of her body was its own universe that needed comprehending.

Staring down the dark well, into that fuzzy dream of ecstasy, she could feel herself beginning to break inside that bright-light spectacle. Her body propelled through it all: David’s face, his shoulders and hips, the red-gauze canopy and velvet curtains, the rafters and roof. She was living within the suspended dream, feeling it tilt, shifting with anticipation. Finally, Audrey burst open in splendor, full petals, soft and beautiful, like the magnolias she swore were glass-vased, blossoming on the bedside table. Her orbit was complete. Audrey was finally in the universe she had been seeking: dark rooms and shadows, gloomy love, mysterious and incomplete.

But as fast as Audrey’s reverie began, it was distorted beyond all recognition. Audrey focused her whiskey-dim skull on the shifting mattress. She had grown smaller, and so had the bed. Being thrown so far into the void, the compression, the steady root, became smothering. At that moment, nothing made sense to Audrey. She couldn’t remember movies or names, songs or places—all she recognized was Raoul.

“That’s right baby, ride it till it’s dead.” Raoul’s body was slick, thick-skinned like an elephant. Pinning her arms from behind, Raoul held Audrey’s jaw tightly, pushing her face, her eye-line, to the end of the bed, where Genie was standing, camera in hand.

“She’s so wet, ya can both get it in.” Genie laughed, but all the sounds were suffocated, snuffed out by the velvet curtains.

“I’m gonna need a minute between takes,” David said, pulling up his pants.

Genie passed him the mirror and vial. “We’ll do a few just with Raoul.”

It was no longer romantic, no longer risky. Raoul’s hands were stronger than all of Audrey, and she was the traveler: the mark within the suspended nightmare, still too stunned to scream, to fight her way out and leave. “I thought you liked me.”

David fixed Audrey’s hair, pushing the wild strands behind her ears. “Baby, nothing in life is free, just make it easy.”

Audrey started to cry, the tears heavy and full, turning her cheeks pink.

David sighed. “You have to—you can’t get out of here without Genie.”

“Put her bra back on so I can cut some new scenes.” Genie flung Audrey’s bra on the bed. “An keep her head steady— it’s hard ta see anythin.”

“No.” Audrey’s whimper was muted beneath Raoul’s hand.

“Come on girl, ya only came here fa one thing,” Genie said.

Raoul laughed. “Should I get the leash?”

Audrey couldn’t feel anything, see anything. The mattress and curtains, the backroom and warehouse, every part of the city was spinning, and Audrey was hurtling beyond it all; she alone was being buried beneath, and absolutely nothing remained of who she used to be. She tried to cower; then, she tried to shake loose the weight of Raoul. But no part of her could move or scream. No part of Audrey could leave the physical world, so her spirit attempted to do the only thing it could, and Audrey became a blank, blacked-out machine, one that tried to spare itself the chance of remembering anything.

Sometime later, in some other place, Audrey woke to an absolute stillness that terrified her more than what had come her way before. There was a plastic clock over the sink, ticking the seconds slower than they should be, the time on its face only matching the hellish heat of the day. Audrey knew she was laying on someone’s kitchen floor, the linoleum marred with severe gouges, and what Audrey assumed to be her puke, which was also the only thing blanketing her body, the rest of her still nude. Audrey traced the linoleum’s

diamond pattern with her fingertips before she thought about being brave, tracing her own face, searching for an escape. Her skull stuffed with cotton, puffed and swollen shapes she couldn't feel beyond the burden of surfacing from the blacked-out consciousness which she came. She had seen that floor before. The repeated images were sensory: Audrey imagined the taste of her grandmother's homemade breakfasts of beignets and orange marmalade, taking shelter in the long-since memories of her childhood in Biloxi. An animal playing dead on a busy street, Audrey knew she had to get up; she had to leave.

Using a leg of the kitchen table, Audrey slowly pulled herself from the floor. The movement was dizzying: the shock of pain she felt in her abdomen and legs, crippling. The kitchen floor bowed and creaked, and every step she took made her feel like she was sinking. There was one window in the kitchen, leading out to the fire escape, but there was no way to reach it. The July sun bleached the surface of everything it could clutch within the window frame, but the panes were nailed shut. Audrey was caged and kept thinking: *this is a tomb, this must be what a tomb is like.*

She kept chanting it over and over again, like an incantation that would take her far from there: stripped bare and new. She could walk into another light that would transport her into the space of her memories. Where God would turn the telescope around, and look at her, down there, locked deep in a circle of hell. He'd realize she wasn't ready; she was too young to be buried, and his hand would break through the sky, the trees, that apartment building, and pluck her up easily, tell her the things she needed to know to keep going, and put her back down in Biloxi. Maybe at her grandmother's kitchen table, in the middle of a Bridge game, and then Audrey could act just like nothing had changed; that she never had to leave, that she had never, ever felt the necessity to go looking for anything. She could forget about the things she learned behind the bowling alley; she could forget the empty catastrophe of the world beyond Biloxi, and just pretend, for years, that she had never left God or her grandmother.

Audrey prayed for these things as she crept towards the front door, its brass locks stacked atop one another, mocking her from down the hall. Their laughter only became louder with the static *click, click, click*, of each turning knob, each face, hurrying for escape. Audrey heard those locks still laughing as she hobbled down the stairs, clinging to rails, still naked, still too terrified to look down.

The streets were filled with faces—black and red—blistering beneath the heat. The ghouls, their hellfire and sway, were amplified by the holiday. The whole city was in that street, laughing and screaming, lighting the

skinny tail-ends of Black Cats and Bangers, comets and Jumping Jacks exploding with great, violent barrages of energy. The air was dense and smoke-heavy; there were no shade trees, just the crumbling buildings, American flags hanging from the windows, bending into the street. The sun melted the pavement, the concrete, and every step Audrey took on her bare feet was daunting. Audrey knew she was sinking further into hell—she was descending into another place, one that was even more menacing, and God wasn't coming.

But Audrey was sure of what could save her. Her mind had never been purer. She searched for the shiny black car that brought her there, that giant beetle on its back: the precursor to every vicious rendering she had seen. Audrey knew if she could find that car, she could begin again. She knew if she could open that gleaming black door, she would see herself sitting there on a leather bench seat, and if that could happen, Audrey could leave, bright-eyed and beautiful, fully encased in the belief that she was within a world of her own creating.