

Katie Brunero

Sweetshop

If you sliced me open you'd find clumps of slightly damp confetti and slick noisemakers sounding out the motions of my chest. I ain't makin this up! You draw that exact blade down the length of me and out tumbles cone-hat lungs, party favor organs, and streamer intestines all glittering with bile and blood. Of course I've thought of seeing someone 'bout that. Bet the sonogram would perplex doctors. *Is that a pony?* Piñata pregnant gives wife beating a whole new meaning, don't you think?

Anyway, that's not even my biggest secret. The Biggest Secret is walking towards my bakery in low-hanging pants all sown over with silver thread depicting him, or someone like him, holding smoking guns. They are ridiculous, but my love turns them cute. The door crashes behind him, sending the sound of bells all over my small shop.

"Why you wincing? If you hate 'em so much, take 'em down," he says. When he does things like that, like noticing how I'm feeling, it just cuts me up, my party parts fallin' to the floor so I have to walk careful not to step on myself.

"You lookin' hot today." He fans himself all theatrical, which I hate, 'cuz I know it's just show; but don't let me fool you, his low whistle twirls my pinwheel. And you wanna know the worst part! Oh no you don't. You are going to shame me—hell, I shame me.

"When you off work?" he asks, pretending like he'll have me after work instead of right now.

"Few hours, maybe." I play along.

They say love is blind. It ain't. It's just stupid.

The shop feels nice with him in it, but since he started coming 'round I've done a lot to fix it up. Before the windows were sort of foggy, and pasted over with local advertisements. Since him, I've cleared them up, even added a few chairs. Not that anyone uses 'em. People are mostly in and out. When I first took over the business fifteen years ago, I'd hoped my desserts would speak for themselves. I even tried to be nice to people, but I quick found out customers just went to me 'cuz I was the only convenient option.

"How 'bout one of them sugar cookies?" he asks, looking at the single glass display beside the register. He hasn't shaved in days and I can picture the few brave hairs that have pushed through the oily soil of his upper lip. I don't like it when he forgets to shave cuz it reminds me of just how much of a difference twenty years makes. He pretends at being a man, and it shows just how much he ain't. When that happens, I say "you be you!" and he says, "Me being someone else *is* me being me," and then it's like a video of someone blowing out candles in reverse: breath coming in, flames jumping onto wax sticks, warm light illuminating hungry faces.

"Want me to flip over the sign?" he asks. I get so excited my stomach turns and I feel like vomiting sparkles.

He looks me up and down, his tongue darting over his upper lip. He's playing cool, but there's a snap of uncertainty in his eyes. Damn if I don't love him for it. You might find it hard to believe, but until he walked into my shop, I didn't think that sort of kindness existed, not for longer than it took to get what you wanted anyway.

He repeats the question with raised brows. I don't know why, but this time, something stops me from inviting him around the counter. Party music paused, the guests in me are silent, waiting for the first tare of wrapping paper.

"Well?" he asks.

I shrug, but am already releasing myself into the sturdy hold of his confidence. He fishes behind him, finds the sign, flips it. I look down the barrels of his guns, spitting threaded smoke. 'OPEN' rocks just above his waist. He's real short for sixteen. The kind of small you don't grow out of. That's parta why I acted the way I did that first time. I thought, *damn, somebody get that boy some cake*, and then, *That somebody is YOU*, so I took a cupcake from the case and held it towards him and

said “It’s on the house.” He didn’t move so I said, “You want it or what?” He ignored the cupcake, kept looking right at my face, eyes scanning all over it, and said *yes PA-LESE*.

“Can I ask you something?” he says, back still barring the door.

“Shoot,” I say, even though I don’t want him to. I get nervous when he asks if he can ask.

“There’s this thing tomorrow. I was wonderin’ if you’d wanna go with me?” His hands are eaten up by oversized pockets, the bump of his knuckles make the guns lifelike.

“We’ve got here. Why you wanna to go somewhere else?” I’m bluffing. I want to blindfold his words. Want him to chase my tail, pin me down, but I know, to him I’m not just a piece of ass, and maybe that’s the worst part.

“Tomorrow there’s gonna be this thing at Joans’s Lot. Just tell Old Man you was at work?” Old Man is my husband. When he was the age of The Big Secret, he was a thick arm hanging out a yellow Camaro; from rings to wife beater, that arm was nothing but muscle and ink. He saw me following that arm down to the heavy-watch wrist, so he curled a fist around his middle finger and gave a half-smile head nod like he already knew he had me. Party over. Until The Big Secret came along, that is.

“Well, you wanna go?” The Big Secret asks.

I can’t think of a worse idea than showing up at some party with this boy. Me, sexy as a sack of potatoes, trailing behind The Big Secret, all full of babyish bravado.

“You wanted some cookie?” I ask. Damn I sound stupid. Every word that forms in my mouth gets away from me fast as it can. I’m the kid no one invites to the party. Hell, I *am* the party, and I’m not even invited.

“I want you there. Aint nobody gonna mind. They do, I’ll fuck ‘em up.” He laughs, and looks me in the eyes with a fearlessness so fierce it’s a challenge. I wonder what it is he thinks he’s doing.

I don’t say anything, so after a few moments he walks around the counter and says, “I’ll take that cookie now.” We laugh at *how dumb we sound*. Our exhales becoming inhales until there isn’t room for breath. He lowers his hand between my legs, trying to light the fireworks, clicking the lighter again and again, until it produces a flame, spreads down the wick, bursts

into a thousand sparks. We make it to the backroom, where, hours from now, I'll be folding eggs into a bowl of sugar and flour and powdered strawberries. I almost trip on my apron in a rush to get it off. Then I am rolled out on the table, my brown body a landscape of doughy dips and rises. I'm embarrassed by his inscrutable gaze. For a moment I think he's going to change his mind and get the hell out of there, but he leans in, his breath sour, and says, *Fuck, you are so god-damned beautiful.*

He moves lower until only a sliver of his head is visible above the swell of my breasts and belly. He's just hoverin' so I ask what he's lookin' at.

"It's like a party in there," he rises a bit to look up at me.

Suddenly panicked, "TELL me about it," splutters from my mouth. The flour on my arms and thighs turns to paste.

He chuckles low. Can he see, *really* see, what's in there? With a boy like him you never know. Too fucking smart. Too fucking young. Before I can stop him, he starts in. Finally he finds that spot, pins the tail just right. The fire workers let loose their grand finale. I sigh. He raises his head over my stomach and tongues a circle around my belly button. I let my hand rest on his head, fingers tracing around the tight, nubby knots of his hair. He is the frosting on my cake. The kid who brings the best present, a small gift wrapped in large packaging because he knows the tease is my favorite part. He pushes into me, serious with concentration. He is a wish come true, but probably the kind that turns out to be a curse because you weren't specific enough. Before him, I was all: *Please, Help. Something, Anything.* I guess you can't get much vaguer than that. *Shit, son.* He moves quicker, hungry. Somewhere people are clapping. Happy happy happy. I am going to pay for how good this feels.

"I gotta get back to work," I say, wiping flour from my arms.

"When you want me to pick you up?"

"You're crazy," I say.

"Ain't nobody gonna care or nothin'," he says. I read the spice rack labels, avoiding his eyes. He takes my chin in his fingers, his gaze jumping from my left eye to my right, like he's taking inventory of my thoughts.

"What?" I say.

"I'ma come here tomorrow and get you."

“You be wasting your time. I ain’t gonna be here,” I say, which is a lie.

He pulls his ridiculous pants from under the counter and hustles them on. I get that feeling when after all the guests have gone, and you’re at the table facing a slice of cake but you can’t take a bite, and you’d trade every present for the presence of the friend that gave it.

The next day, I force toffee icing through a star shaped taper and think of how to let The Big Secret down easy. At first I am simply saying no to the party, but as the hour passes, our imagined conversation intensifies until I’m ending things completely, repeating the list of why it’s all wrong, each reason a note played over and over in my mechanical music box of excuses. It is a jolty, tinny sounding song not even a monkey would move to. I ruin another cupcake with sloppy frosting, scrape it bald, start again. Maybe he and I could find a home together where distance doesn’t exist. Somewhere in me, a clown with performance anxiety worries the bright fabric of his parachute pants.

The list of my mistakes grows as the day passes. The buns burn; I pull them from the oven all covered in black cracks. There’s too little flower in the death-by-chocolate cake; its rim turns to cement and the center goes soft and drops out. The cookies looked fine, but I taste one and it is like biting into potato salad, which made no god-damned sense at all, so I give up tasting things.

That’s how it was before The Big Secret came slouching into my shop that first time. I’d soak warm fruitcake in perfectly-whipped cream but it never tasted any better than that night’s frozen fish sticks (which I rarely bothered to reheat). Before him, if I had to deliver a birthday cake, the only thing I’d say to the customer was: “it’s heavy,” like I was lying on a curse. Maybe the curse worked in reverse. I place brightly colored fruit on a soft skin of custard, and think, if I lose The Big Secret again, I’ll be losing his version of me, the only one worth a damn. And what about after? When the party drains from me—leaving me a husk, a Party Place with the light on but nobody home—where would all that joy go? Could I stand to see *our* happiness swinging from my husband’s heavy arm?

My back is turned, but I hear the clatter of bells. Instead of crashing back and forth into the glass door they are silenced immediately. My breath stops with the silence, but my heart continues its thunder. When I turn around, The Big Secret is cutting off the bells with a pocketknife. I open my mouth to ask how he expects me to know when a customer has come in and I'm in the backroom arm-deep in dough, but he stops me with a finger. From another pocket he pulls a round metal object. He peels a strip from it and sticks it to the doorframe. Then he swings the door open and closed. A simple, hushed version of "happy birthday to you" swells through my shop. I am filled with something—gratitude—so much so I get goose bumps. I feel nestled in a bed of frosting. I am soaked in the smell of warming butter. I am a chorus of celebration. I forget about all my years, draggin' down my skin and spreading me out. I am a new kind of expansive, the kind that floats.

"You gonna come then," he asks in response to my smile.

Reality is a pin to my helium heart.

"I'm not gonna be able—" I struggle. "This thing we're doing—"

He stays stand off still.

"We have to end this," I say. A little glitter spits out.

"You breaking this thing off? You can't," he says, so calm.

I can get angry with fear. "I've got a choice, and I'm makin' it," I tell him.

"But it ain't about us," The Big Secret says, messin' with the paper he'd peeled from the back of the door alarm.

"What?"

"You know," he says, looking right at me, eyes bright as a camera flash.

"I know what?"

"The baby," he says as if it's fact, and not terribly interesting at that.

"What?" "What you know about that?" "There ain't no thing—"

"You think I can't tell?"

"You're just a kid," I say. The party in me has turned riotous and I am fighting, uselessly, to keep order.

“My mom had twelve kids, my sisters have five among ‘em,” he says. “I know your body, and I know the signs, and you’ve been shoutin’ them all over the place.”

“You’re just a baby. Babies shouldn’t make babies.”

“I’m not scared. I’m actually kinda excited ‘bout it,” he says.

Suddenly, I am ready for him to go.

This is not a conversation I am capable of.

I am more exhausted than I’ve ever been, might just curl up right here on the floor. He starts pitching me a plan, a future together that sounds so good it’s cruel. I have to say something to shut him up before I agree to everything.

“Whose body is this?” I demand, knowing full well it’s the one his love has made me.

“Yours,” he says, looking like he’s been cornered.

“Mine. You’ve mixed up what you want with what is,” I lie. “You’re forcing me to act my age—” He scoffs at this but I keep on. “This thing we are. It’s like eating cake. First bite is the best, you know. Then each following bite tastes a little less sweet, until eating is a chore—”

“That’s not true—” the muscles in face start to seize.

“—Until you are sick of the sweetness,” I say.

He has the indignant, inward gaze of a person shot in the chest.

“It’s just too much of a good thing,” I say, trying to soften where I’ve stung.

Happy birthday sounds through the store.

I tap the register’s space bar over and over. “It can’t be your birthday every day of the year,” I say to the sound.

END