

DRIFTWOOD

By Jordan Christison

It started with a smile. A single curl of lips, barely perceivable from over the rim of a white coffee cup.

It ended with a perfect ring of faded skin around his finger, and his life in ruins.

#

The man was young—so embarrassingly in comparison to himself, that the term ‘boy’ might be more appropriate—but he had a spark of lightning in his eyes that John had long forgotten the taste of and missed with a sudden ache that was ferocious.

It was a quiet thing, in the beginning. Mere curiosity towards an enigmatic stranger who walked like not even gods could touch him, and smiled like he carried the secrets to life in his back pocket.

It was innocent. Harmless. Like sweet waves that lapped at his ankles, taunting and tantalizing. Never once hinting at how treacherous the water was.

John thought he was a good swimmer. He thought he was strong enough to handle the deeper waters.

If he could go back to that day he would—

He—

He didn’t know what he would do, and that was somehow the worst thing of all.

#

It *really* started with the answer to a simple question.

The café was bustling, packed to the rafters with the early morning rush, people of all ages stooped over their devices, greedily sucking up the free Wi-Fi.

John cast his gaze over the sea of heads, searching for a seat. He just needed somewhere to sit for the few minutes it would take for his coffee to be made, and him to drink it.

It was pure chance that he happened to catch his eye over the crowded floor.

He knew the face, of course. Another regular that frequented the place enough to make a vague impression on John's memories. However, they had never so more than glanced at each other in all the time they had both been coming here.

There was a free seat across from him though, and John was willing to try.

The other watched his slow, cautious navigation of the room with curious eyes, pausing mid-sip when John came to a stop by his table, his worn hands awkwardly twisting around the metal number the cashier had given him.

"Excuse me," he said, even though he already had the other's complete attention. "I was wondering if I could sit here as well, if that's alright?"

The younger man blinked, his brown eyes taking on a golden shine, before a sweet smile bloomed over his face. He gestured to the seat across from him, the pale slip of his wrist peeking out from his black sweater. "Sure, I don't mind. It's a bit crowded today, isn't it?"

John huffed a laugh as he gratefully took a seat, offering his hand politely. "It certainly is. I'm John, thanks for this."

The man shook his hand firmly, that kind quirk of his mouth never faltering as he replied. "Stanley, but you can just call me Stan."

He should have run in the other direction.

John wondered if sharks could smile as pretty as that.

#

Stan liked to laugh. His words always tinged with a trickle of amusement, like one was forever perched on the back of his tongue, ready to leap forward at a moment's notice.

He laughed at John's jokes. He laughed at the little anecdotes from John's work. He laughed when John insisted on buying him a coffee in thanks.

It was a lovely sound, like rain on a tin roof, soft and echoing in his ears. He felt like he could listen to it forever.

He laughed when John asked to meet him again—after they had lost hours just talking over their mugs, throats growing hoarse as the shadows grew longer—his long pale fingers sliding a piece of paper across the polished table with a wink and a promise.

#

Olivia smelt like lavender, a faint scent he could chase with his nose as he lay close to her that night. The strap of her white nightgown was loosely hanging off one of her shoulders, revealing the soft skin there to the cool night air.

On her bedside table, a small purple bottle of perfume sat. The same one he had gotten her for their anniversary. The same brand she had worn since the day he had met her, years ago.

On his, a folded slip of paper caught the moonlight. The row of neat numbers printed there had been burned into the backs of his eyes like a brand. But even with its contents saved carefully in his phone, he couldn't quite bring himself to throw the scrap away.

#

His kisses were harder than John was used to. There was no gentleness between them. No tentative touches or sweet caresses. It was teeth like knives and nails carving into the arch of his spine, hooking into his flesh.

It was fast and disorientating, like all the oxygen in the room had been sucked away and he was left gasping for breath.

And afterwards—after the other had left with a skip to his steps and his neck burned red by John’s beard—he sat there with his head in his hands and tried to find the guilt.

But there was nothing other than the steadily growing need in his gut to do it all again.

#

Her dress was a gorgeous red, shimmering in the dim lights of the restaurant and reminding him of a sunset as she shifted in her seat.

Her eyes were large and bright and locked on him, filled with enough love that John knew he could swim in it if he wanted.

And he did want to. He knew that if he let himself sink back into that blissful little existence then everything would be fine. Olivia was a fine woman, and he had loved her for so long. She was a safe harbour, a port in the storm of his life.

But John wasn’t content to be like that anymore. He wanted more. He wanted to drown in something.

#

“Are you okay?” Stan asked, fingers tracing loose patterns over the skin of his shoulder, his nail digging in faintly and sending shivers down John’s body with each lazy loop. “You’ve hardly said a word all night.”

John glanced up from his hands, tilting his head enough to catch the other's eyes.

"I'm fine. Just—work's been busier lately."

Stan let out a hum as he perched his chin on his other hand. His brown eyes drifted from John, to the hotel wall, to the window. "And how's things at home?"

He twitched at the blatant mention. It wasn't a secret between them. Stan had seen the ring. He had known since the beginning about Olivia. They just never spoke of it. John sometimes wondered just what kind of person happily had an affair with a married man.

Then he wondered what kind of married man started an affair, and his mind shrivelled away.

"Things are...fine." He breathed out, turning easily as the touch on his shoulder became more insistent. "Just fine."

"Good." Stan said as he pressed in closer, no longer interested in the conversation. He dragged John under with him once again.

#

The sting on his cheek still burned.

John couldn't help but feel hurt by the hit, at how quickly she had struck him. It wasn't fair, and he knew it. He deserved this and more.

"Did I do something wrong?" She asked him, voice choking even as she kept her chin raised. Her gaze was unwavering as she pinned him in place. "Did I make a mistake somewhere? Is it my fault?"

And he couldn't do anything but close his eyes. Because it wasn't. They both knew it was him, and only him that had caused this. It was his choice, and nothing would ever make up for the fragile thing he had broken.

“I hope it was worth it.”

#

He took off the ring the very next day, the sight of it making his stomach churn. Every glint of light reflecting off of it a clear reminder of what he had done.

He felt adrift. Alone, with no path to take. He had lost everything, and there was nothing he could do but watch it all unravel around him—his life slipping through his fingers like fine sand.

He was a fool.

#

And Stan. Stan, who had laughed when John kissed him, had laughed when John pressed into him—Stan who laughed when John told him what had happened, the mark on his face still shining for all to see.

The mocking curl to those painful lips. The closing of the door. John watched as the lock clicked into place and the last lifeline keeping him afloat snapped away from his stretched out hands.

He wanted to scream, but the water was swallowing him down, wrapping around him and crushing his weak body under its weight. If he opened his mouth, it would slip down his throat, and there would be nothing he could do to save himself.