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A Video Store Called Desire

My mother was a serious woman, suspicious of everything that did not go according to plan and, being a widow, frightened too. My father died in car accident a month after we left Pakistan and arrived in Kankakee, Illinois, leaving her alone to figure out a life different from what she had expected. Threatened by a culture that she was convinced would rob me of my innocence now that I had no male figure protecting me, she became my jailer.

She did this in the following way: Every morning she would call me the minute I left the room we shared at the Economy Inn where she was the front desk clerk. She called every five minutes after this, until I passed River Red Park, where she stayed on the phone for the entire minute-and-a-half it took to cross the green and I parked my '82 Chevy, bought for twelve hundred dollars from the inn manager, in the Kankakee Community college parking lot. She repeated this routine the second the clock hit two forty-five and punctuated my drive home with two-second repetitions of "OK?" meaning Are you OK? Are you driving carefully? Are any strangers following you? Did you talk to any guys?

I was never late, but she would test me occasionally anyway. She would skip her afternoon calls, and I would find her standing at the door of the inn. There was no way that she would have ever missed me from her seat at the front desk. I had to cross the parking lot and walk past the front office to reach the side stairs that led up to our room. Still, she would stand, lips pursed, a hand shading her eyes as if she was peering into a great distance, waiting for someone to return. She would look me up and down and, presumably satisfied, nod her head before heading back inside where she resumed her suspicious watch,

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in between reading passages from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, over guests that hovered by the coffee machine.

My mother loved words and teaching them and when her foreign qualifications failed to land her a job at local schools, I became her only student. She wrote ferociously, sending up to three letters a week to her family back in Pakistan. Often, she read me the contents of these, musings on what life might have been, had been, and what lessons she was drawing from her present circumstances. These included her plans too, for her and me—complex fantasies of life aimed mostly at success and a justification of the decision to migrate. Between her and the TV, which she turned on but rarely watched, our room was always filled with noise.

At work, however, she was quiet, often carrying out silent transactions with customers. She held herself in reserve, as if her words were only a privilege for those close to her. "Sure," she would say if anyone asked her to look up their reservation. "Thanks," when they took their keys and left.

I understood this. She was different people in different places. We were not unlike in that way, saving one side for each other, the other for the rest of the world, our real selves trapped somewhere in the middle.

I was not allowed to work. My mother believed that getting an education and then landing a professorship, like she had done in her previous life in Pakistan, was the only path out of the place fate had landed us in. This was also her scheme to keep me away from the outside world I knew. She oversaw this project with great dedication from her stool behind the front desk. I was expected to spend the afternoons with my books in the room behind the front office amidst paperwork and folded towels. Occasionally, if the afternoon was slow, she would ask me to take her place at the front while she threw stained bedsheets in the washer or sat on the plastic chair and rubbed her calves.

The way my mother worried about my character made me think I was in peril, that there was something wicked inside of me that might one day be released, like a genie from a bottle, and threaten the person that she was building with great care. The thought excited me. And in the few moments I had to myself at the front desk, I tested my powers. I practiced lifting my eyes slowly from the book in front of me when a guest approached the counter. I smiled only halfway, the way the

women on the billboard on Route 52 did, mouths slightly open, eyes charged with something. Often my mother came back to the front and found some young inn guest, or the manager on duty, with a comb-over and a moustache, leaning on the counter asking me what it was I liked to do in my free time. This was cruel, I know, but I felt suffocated. I never went shopping with girlfriends. No one asked me to go to the movies or drive to Chicago for a concert because groups of young people always implied danger to my mother and she always said no. I was never even allowed to join any study groups because I couldn't leave the house once I returned unless it was in her company. I wondered if she would have been the same way had I been a boy.

Sometimes, in the afternoons, I didn't feel like studying and hung around the front, straightening the local attractions brochures that sat on a table near the entrance. Directly across from the front window of the inn office was a video store where Carla, my only friend, worked evenings. Junior, the night shift manager at the inn, also Carla's boyfriend, told me it used to be called Dee's Video Rental before Carla started working there. Now, there were several letters missing from the neon lit sign above the entrance, and the letters read, "DE'S I RE."

My mother made the trip across the street to the video store on the occasional Friday afternoon to bring back movies, always two, and always something old that she considered appropriate and classic. She would go, seven dollars and the dog-eared video card in her hand, "stay" trailing behind her, implying that I was not allowed to take this as an opportunity to befriend anyone in her absence.

Once on a particularly busy Friday—there was an Indian wedding in town and the inn was crawling with guests who had driven in for the event—my mother was swamped with sorting out room keys and air conditioners that had stopped working and sent me across to rent the movies. *Gone with the Wind* and *Pride and Prejudice*. When I brought the movies up to the cash register, Carla was out, and an older man sat reading in a chair. He looked up at me through his glasses and smiled. I smiled back, a full one.

"Well, you must be Amal," he said and looked me up and down. "Give your mother lotta trouble, do you?"

I didn't know what to say. The man must have been more than sixty. Maybe even sixty-five. He had a hollow chest and fingers with skin that was cracked at the ends. His graying beard looked like it

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had grown because he had forgotten to shave one day, and then the day after that, and once it was on his face, had decided to just leave it there. It moved when he spoke, and he did so with great enthusiasm.

"It's a responsibility," he said. "Having a grown daughter. But I figure your mom is a smart woman."

I nodded my head. There was no arguing her intellect.

"She gave me this book to read." He held up a copy of *Great Expectations*.

I recognized the cracks in the spine, the tea stain on the front cover.

"I'm slow reading it, but that Estella ... lord."

I placed the movies on the counter and smiled again, not knowing what to say.

"Well, tell your mom Dee said hello." He rang up the movies and slipped them back across the counter.

"I will." I said and tried to smile again.

The idea that my mother had spoken about me to a stranger unnerved me. It made me feel like there was something about me, a secret that was sliding around in the world, something everyone knew but me, a big dark thing she might be afraid of. So much so that she, who liked her distance from the world, had felt the need to confess this to this man. Handful, he had said. I could imagine my mother saying that to him, tucking the wisps of her hair into the clip she wore, and something in me felt resistant. I did not like the idea of her sharing this intimacy with him.

The thought occurred to me that maybe, being her daughter, I was something like her. And if the reason she kept hiding me from everyone was so I wouldn't slip, like she had, with my words. I walked slowly toward the door, pretending to study the candy by the front.

I was almost there when Junior walked in, his eyes still heavy and swollen after a day's sleep.

"Carla here?" He asked Dee and from behind the counter, Dee shook his head without taking his eyes off the book.

"Can I use her account? We got a date tonight." Junior smirked at Dee, who gestured toward the store with his hand, meaning go ahead.

Junior gave me a quick wave and headed to the back wall where all the new releases were. I tucked the movies I was holding under my arm and pretended to look at the Westerns in the first row. I could see Junior's head, appearing and disappearing above the shelves as

he read titles of movies, top to bottom. Slowly, I moved toward the middle of the store.

I met Junior as he was at the end of the last aisle, choosing between an action movie and a romance.

"Which one do you think?" He held both up to me.

I studied the covers for both. One had the close-up faces of two men facing each other, the ghost like image of a woman hovering between them. The title said *The Other Man*. The other one was *Hellboy II*, and a demonic-looking man stood against the backdrop of the horizon. I pointed to the first one.

"This, I think."

Junior groaned.

"Chick flick," he said. "Have you seen it?"

I shook my head, not wanting to admit that I would never be allowed.

"What are you watching?" He asked me, noticing the two cases I was clutching under my arm. I started to shake my head, but he reached out and, despite my protesting smack on his arm, slid them out.

"What the hell are these?" He laughed, looking at the titles.

I was torn between defending my mother's choices and wanting to join him in the disdain that he was offering.

"My mother likes them." I finally said.

"Ah." Junior leaned his head back like he understood and handed them back to me.

I thought I should leave. The visit across was already longer than I had intended, but Junior was studying me, his head cocked to a side.

"You know," he said finally, "these aren't the only movies Carla and I watch on date night."

I must have looked confused because he leaned in closer, like he was about to confess a secret, and said, "We watch some real action, too." And then he winked.

I had never noticed that his eyes were so black and from this close up. They looked like the kind of dark that can slide you inside it. They skipped around my face and left a trail of heat, resting, for a small moment, on my lips.

My heart beat faster. I was speechless and shy and, driven by some instinct I did not know I had, I bit my lip. At this Junior's eyes glinted, and he leaned back again, as if he had understood yet another thing.

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"Wanna see?" he asked, although it sounded more like a statement than a question, and pointed behind him with his thumb. I didn't know what he meant, but he took me by the shoulders and walked me to the blue door at the end of the wall, across from the cash register where Dee had put the book down and now seemed to be staring out the window, head turned away. I had assumed this was just the back room, filled with paper and boxes of receipts, and maybe old tapes—a collection of things to sort, just like at the inn. But on closer look, I saw that the door said "18+ only."

Junior pressed against my back. "Let me show you."

But I was backing away and moving his hands off my shoulders.

"No thanks," I said, starting to move toward the front door.

"You are a good girl." The way he said it, it was both a question and a taunt.

"No," I said. "I don't feel like it. I have to get back."

I ran back across the road, not paying attention to the traffic, which was toward the heavier side at this time of day, which is to say a car went by every ten seconds or so. When I reached the entrance to the inn office, I turned to look back at the video store. Carla was just getting out of her car and waving excitedly at Junior who was standing just inside the door waving back. Dee was still behind the counter, and I could feel him looking at me. My breath was in disarray and, trying to maintain a calm for my mother who I knew was sure to ask questions, I turned and walked into the front office.

The manager on duty was at the desk, and I must have looked flushed because he said something about how I looked like I had been up to no good, something about the color of my skin.

"Where is my mom?" I asked him, my heart racing like I just run across a field.

He pointed to the back. I entered the small door at the side of the front desk and headed to the back room, but there he was standing in my way.

"Excuse me." I said, attempting the kind of firmness I had seen Carla use with the guys who, hoping for her attention, accosted her after class. My voice shook.

"Sure, darling." The manager looked me up and down and then walked to the computer, hands up in the air as if he was being held at gunpoint, but not before walking by me close enough that the front of his jeans brushed against my thigh. I walked into the back room and wished Carla was there.



Carla knew her way around life. She lived in a two-bedroom close to Route 52 with her father and younger brother, and on nights when Junior was not working, stayed with him in his room at the inn. It was through her that I learned of all the perils out there in the world. She told me stories about her father and his girlfriends who came smelling of roses and alcohol and left in the morning, smeared and deflated. She slept with men and pulled me aside after calculus to give me details about what they did. Sometimes, she had issues with the men, too possessive, too violent, too distant, and she shared these with me too as we sat outside class, her smoking cigarettes, me high on her confidence. She snuck me copies of *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* and occasionally, when Junior wasn't looking, the occasional copy of his *Playboy*, which I hid behind my side of the headboard. I took these out only when I was alone and flipped through the pages, growing warm with envy at these women with absolute freedoms and shining skins.

Between her and my mother, I learned all there was to know about men and life, everything that was there to fear, and everything there was to celebrate. It was all theoretical knowledge, of course, and I had no real use for it. I did not have the boldness to move out from behind the front desk and run my hand up and down any man's arm, nor to display the goldenness of my skin to anyone. I went from home to school and back home.

One summer day I pulled into the parking lot at school in the morning, hung up the phone and an inexplicably sad feeling came over me as I watched groups of students making their way toward the buildings. Something about the ease with which they walked, arms swinging, saddened me. Carla, who was sitting on the curb smoking a cigarette, saw me and knocked at my car window, all energy and golden hair. She jumped into the car and made me drive her to the Taco Bell followed by the convenience mart and then to the River Red Park where we lay in the grass, the water flowing by us. She drank cheap wine and ate burritos and asked me about where I thought we would be in ten years. She told me about her dreams of being onstage in Chicago some day and, drunk on the sun, we both pretended that we would make it big.

"Don't forget me." I laughed and she laughed, too, her eyes sparkles.

"Never," she said. "Who could forget you?"

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At nineteen, she was only a year older than I, but I was enamored with her life and her kindness in the way of a younger sister. She was confident and loud, and knew about men, which was like knowing everything. When I said I wished my father was still alive, she told me that I wasn't missing much. She said her father never even knew when she was around. He was depressed that his wife had left him, and drunk half the time, and so he may as well not have been there. That made me feel like we were the same, and I felt a lot better and a little indebted to her.

It was autumn now and the chill from the air seemed to have settled inside me as I sat in the back room and pretended to read. That day by the river had been hot, the grass pricking the backs of my legs, the air warm and the earth cool like it can only be in the summer. Carla, with her legs splayed out, her top lifted so the ring in her belly button glinted, wrapped her mouth around the end of the cigarette with a lazy ease. Had I known any better, I would have recognized it as being a sensual day. But I was just a girl on the outside of everything, held inside words and no action, with nowhere to go, not even sure how to make my place in the world, knowing nothing except the things she told me about: the taste of skin, the tremble of legs, the wetness and want, loneliness.

She told me, too, about Junior, and how he was different from the others she had been with. How he held her up against the wall and knelt in front of her and made her feel like the most important woman in the world.

"Do you love him?" I asked.

"Love him?" She laughed. "He makes me feel like magic," she said and closed her eyes, as if nothing more needed to be said.

I remembered seeing Junior at the inn before he and Carla became an item. He always entered the office just before seven, fresh from the shower, wet black hair combed back, yawning the remnants of sleep away from his dark eyes, ready to take over the night shift. Something in the way he walked reminded me of a jungle animal, perhaps a cheetah. It was the air of alertness about him, the way his body looked tense even when he settled himself on the stool behind the desk, hunching over and playing Tetris on his phone, as if he might spring into action any minute.

Sometimes he woke up earlier and walked across the road to see Carla. I envied him and how he managed to look so sure of himself as he stepped across the asphalt, dodging traffic, balancing caution with danger. I didn't know much about who I was or who I wanted to be, but I knew the knot I felt in my stomach when I watched him run across meant something.

When Carla introduced me to him, he shook my hand firmly and said how nice it was to meet me even though I had already seen him come in and out of his room at the inn. He asked me all the right questions and I could see why it was that Carla felt safe with him. He made me feel like I had all the answers, and laughed when I made a joke about both of us being nonpaying guests at the inn.

Junior was my neighbor, in the room right next to my mother and me. It was the exact replica of our room, the same brown-and-green-patterned bedcover, the same off-white curtains, the same maroon carpet. He had added to his room a radio and some colorful pillows, Carla's addition, I assumed, which I had seen whenever the cleaning ladies left the door ajar. We were hardly ever in our rooms at the same time. Junior spent the afternoons sleeping or with Carla while I was downstairs in the office. She often walked by, hair swinging, keys jangling in her hand, and waved at me through the glass of the front office before sprinting up the stairs. Even on the odd days when I was in my room in the afternoon, I could hear voices from across the wall, the slow steady squeak of the bed, or the bursts of sudden laughter.

That evening as I lay across my bed, flipping through the channels on the TV, I heard his door open and slam shut. Twice. My mother had not yet come upstairs and since this was an unusual time for him to be in his room, I turned off the TV and patted my hair into place before opening the door and sticking my head out.

He stood in the doorway, his hair askew, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He was texting on his phone, and there was a frown of concentration on his forehead. When he saw me, he smiled, a quick hesitant pull of the lips, and went back to his phone.

"Hi." I said, not finding anything else to say.

With the sun glinting on my face, my eyes, which had been red and puffy earlier in the afternoon, must have looked awful because he didn't look up again but nodded instead.

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"My mother is still downstairs." I said, stepping into the entrance so that my back was against the frame and I was holding the door open with my feet.

"I'll go down in a minute," he said, still not making eye contact.

Not finding anything else to say, I asked him where Carla was. At this, his face seemed to twitch.

"Her fucking dad," he mumbled.

"She left?" I asked.

"She left," he said and thrust his phone into his back pocket with some force. "I guess he needed her."

We both knew Carla's dad was trouble, and I didn't know what to say to this so, slowly, I slid out of the doorway until the door slid and clicked shut behind me. I leaned against it.

"My father is dead." I said. "Accident." This seemed like the right thing to say, something emotional, from the heart, to connect.

I wasn't sure if he heard me, but he shook his head and said, "Poor little girl. Poor, poor, little girl."

This encouraged me. I felt that he was being friendly and familiar, and the way he was looking out at the parking lot, head tilted to the side, made me feel like something was going to happen, although I did not know what and the thought excited me.

"So you watch a lot of movies?"

He shook his head. "Not really," he said. "It's Carla's thing. She's obsessed." Then, he squinted at me. "You? You like movies?"

I shrugged. I did not know what I liked and what I was allowed to like and the distance between the two confused me. I had been alone all afternoon and feeling an ache that had not disappeared since I had thrown myself on the bed a few hours earlier. At that moment I probably would have said I liked anything.

"You want to come in for a while?" he asked. "Till your mom comes back."

His offer felt like a small victory of some sort, and I nodded my head. He held the door open, and as I bent my head to slide under his outstretched arm into his room, I could smell him, the smell of earth and sweat and soap.

He followed me inside and closed the door. I had never been in a room alone with anyone but my mother and father and the realization that I was here—in a new place, with a man who knew how to make magic—was exhilarating. I felt my legs weaken and sat down at the

foot of his bed, holding my hands under my legs to keep them from shaking. He lifted a beer out of the small fridge in the corner and pointed it at me. I nodded my head. It seemed like the right thing to do. He popped the top open, threw it at the trash can in the corner, missing it by a few inches, and handed me the bottle. The liquid tasted bland and bitter at the same time, and I took a few gulps, hoping that if I drank it faster, I would not have to taste it.

"Whoa." Junior said. "First time, right? Slow down."

I placed the bottle between my knees. It was cold and wet, and I rubbed my hands against my jeans. Across from me the TV sat on top of the dresser, the picture on it frozen. It looked something like an ear or a side of a face.

"Which one were you watching?" I asked him.

Junior, who had been leaning against the dresser, taking sips of his beer and watching me, smirked.

"Just a movie," he said. And the way he smiled at me made something thump inside of me.

"I want to see," I said.

Junior looked at me for a long time, and I met his look even though I could feel the blood burning in my cheeks. I expected this to make me look like Carla, bold and present. When he didn't move, I reached over and hit the play button and suddenly the screen was a jumble of arms and legs and skin and tongue and body parts that I had never before seen this up close. There was moaning, too—and *Oh yeah, oh yeah*—and even though I knew my eyes had opened wider and I was breathing shallow, I could not take my eyes away, even as Junior stood where he was, watching me.

I looked back at him. He stood against the wall, quiet. My skin burned and I felt a pull between us, as if in the air, inside me, there was suddenly something alive.

I put the beer down and stood up in front of Junior. I was not yet sure what it was that I expected to happen, but I knew that Carla had said he was magic. When he didn't move, I leaned in toward him, trying to find his mouth with mine. The touch, when it came, stung my lips, the feel traveling across my skin until I could feel my entire body buzzing. The idea that this is what my mother knew about and had been protecting me from set fire to my blood. My body moved in toward him in a way I had never considered, and I thought that I suddenly knew what to do, that he really did have magic. I felt both

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powerful and weak, and pressed against him, my fingers searching for his skin, breath in disarray, my focus on nothing but the desire for more.

When his hands touched my shoulders, I held my breath. Something was raging inside me now, and I knew he could recognize it. I smiled. But he did not go any further and held me that way for a while.

“Go home, Amal.”

I opened my eyes. Neither of us said anything, but I could see that whatever had been flashing between us a few moments ago was gone.

He reached past me and turned the video off. I stood, not sure what to do, even though part of me saw that the streetlights outside had turned on and were shining brightly over the parking lot. I caught my reflection in the mirror above the dresser and was surprised to see that I looked no different. It was the same face, the same lips, the same hair that fell in disarray over my shoulders.

But that was not how I felt. Inside, I felt weak and aware at the same time, and like I had contracted a disease, and that it was now traveling through my veins, making my skin throb. The fever showed nowhere but in my eyes and looking back at them, I felt what my mother must have felt for me: afraid. I hurried out of the room and to my door, trying to steady myself before placing my hand on the knob. From inside, I could hear the sounds of the TV, which meant my mother was inside. I felt awful and certain that she would be able to see the sickness in my eyes and tried to think of an excuse as I looked in through the window.

When my mother saw me, she stopped drying her hair with the towel and stared at me.

She was suspicious, as she always was, but as she stood staring at me, I knew that she was someone else, too, just like me, not just connected to me, but a woman with a life and conversations that I did not have access to.

“I went for a walk.” I said and as she studied my face, it seemed that she was assessing me, too, recognizing something.

“You OK?” Meaning was I still who she expected me to be?

I nodded and walked over to her. She touched my hair, a gesture from my childhood, and ran a finger along my cheek. Then, putting her towel on the bed, she pulled me toward her and even though I knew she was smelling me, trying to discover what I hid, I held her and said nothing at all.