

DUST TO DUST

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The crinkly pink flier in his gloved hands had been typed out in Comic Sans. There was a stock photo of a group of people sitting in a circle of chairs engaging in a conversation that he would never know. To the side of the picture the flier read:

"For dust you are, and to dust you shall return." *Genesis 3:19*
 Life's getting you down? Come to Trivia Afternoon! The Catholic Church of St. Thomas is dedicated to bringing together senior citizens in order to maintain community and achieve a better lifestyle. Join Us Every Wednesday @ 3:00 PM

Over dinner a few nights ago, Bijoux had slid the piece of paper towards him without a word. He'd scoffed in return and Bijoux had frowned and he knew then that he'd have to go at least once just to appease the lovely little fiend he called a fiancé.

"It's just something for you to do, Teo, while I'm at work all day." Bijoux said, elbows deep into the soapy water of the sink. "I think it would be good for you to not hole yourself up so much in the house."

"But I love to sit at home and read. Sometimes I go to the diner with the plastic seats and read there. And I do have friends." Galateo replied. "Living ones at that."

Bijoux had to crane their neck back to look up at him. A set of icy blue eyes tore into him like a chisel. When he first met Bijoux, he thought of them as the most beautiful creature in the world, the most beautiful mortal alive. But that was the thing with mortal people - they had so much energy, so much to do with their limited time. Galateo had happily settled into his immortality like a well worn couch, molded perfectly to fit his aching joints, and everyday it was getting harder and harder to get back up.

Bijoux worked long hours as a nurse, which left Galateo with lots of free time to nap and read and sunbathe out on the back porch and nap and read and sunbathe out on the balcony. Bijoux dealt with the immortality thing like they dealt with everything else—efficiently and without making a mess.

"It's not like you look young anyways, Teo. I knew



what I was getting into, if I had minded the age gap altogether I would have never even given you the time of day.”

In order to look “like you actually want to be there,” as Bijoux had suggested, he stopped by the 7/11 on his way to the local church where the meeting would be held. He would buy some snacks as an offering of peace and a sign of good fortune, and because he did not want to eat the green gelatin cakes with pineapple inside them. On the steps of the 7/11 there were two teenagers passing a joint back and forth. From inside the store came the gentle sound of a radio. Bijoux had done him the favor of putting up his hair into a braid that fell over his shoulder and he wore a coat over his suit because it was chilly outside and old people got cold almost too easily. Perhaps he was overdressed. Galateo walked up the steps to the front door and pulled it open.

“Hey sir, can you buy us some cough syrup?”

He turned around to find two sets of inquisitive eyes looking up at him.

“What?” He asked. The wrinkle in between his eyes deep end. “Cough syrup?”

One of the kids took the joint from the other to gesture.

“Yeah, you can’t get it if you’re underage, but we are feeling kinda under the weather.”

The first boy let out a weak cough. He wore bright green sneakers. Galateo was not stupid, there was definitely something illicit happening here, but he was also not up to date with the drug-scene to know what kind of high involved cough syrup. Neither of these children looked old enough to buy a lottery ticket, much less alcohol or marijuana, yet here they were. He thought about it for a moment—remembered Bijoux’s own tales of teenhood—and then he shook his head. He turned again and opened the door to the store. The two boys dramatically threw their heads back and groaned.

“Aww come on man!” The boy with the green shoes scrambled to his feet.

“Wait! Wait! Can you buy us a Sprite?!” The two teens trailed behind him into the store, still attempting to get something out of him.

Galateo veered directly towards the wall of refrigerated

foods and drinks. The radio played a janky Spanish tune, and behind the counter stood another, slightly older teenager scrolling through her phone. While the two boys bargained for a bottle of Sprite and the cough syrup behind his back, Galateo wondered if he might have turned into one of these apathetic children had he been born now and not a millenia ago. Texting his friends on his phone, loitering around convenience stores—would Bijoux still have fallen in love with him had they been the same age?

As he walked through the aisle with the wall of beef jerky, the door dinged again and from where his head peaked above the stands Galateo watched two other men enter the store. They were chatting to one another in low voices.

The teen with the green shoes tapped politely on his arm. The other boy held two bottles of Sprite, and the joint dangled from his lips. Galateo held up a finger. “One drink. And you put that thing out now, it is not polite to smoke indoors.”

The boys smiled at one another, eyes turning into red half-moons. The one with the joint quickly blowing on it. Galateo turned around, thought for a second, and then turned again to the two boys.

“What food would you buy for a meeting?” He asked, and before they could suggest weed or alcohol he added: “Food that old people would like.”

The two teens looked at one another and pondered their answer for a second.

“I think my Nana likes oats a lot.”

“Yeah well she doesn’t have any teeth. How about one of those plates with all the cheeses?”

“Oh yeah! A charcutlery board.”

“It’s charkushe-rey, dumbass.”

Galateo held up a hand. “It is actually *charcuterie*, which is an excellent suggestion, but this is a 7/11.”

The teens seemed to ponder other alternatives once more. Galateo rolled his eyes and turned around again this time to find a man wearing pantyhose on his head, holding a gun up at him. A harsh voice drifted up to his ears.

“If you wanna keep living, old man, you better not move.”

Galateo blinked twice, he looked back at the teenagers who stood behind him somewhere between no idea what was happening



and sudden hyper awareness. Their expressions had changed. They looked much smaller now.

“It is all alright.” Galateo said. The teens looked up at him. He tried to give a reassuring smile, but Bijoux always said he looked like he was being held at gunpoint when he did.

“You have this thing Teo, it’s called a bitchface. But it ‘s hot, so don’t worry.”

He didn’t feel very hot right now. He looked at the beady little eyes behind the semi-transparent film of the pantyhose and bit the inside of his cheek. He’d only seen robbers wear this kind of garb on children’s cartoons and the silliness of a grown man actually putting this on in real life could not escape him. Galateo furrowed his eyebrows and huffed.

“If you want to rob and shoot me, maybe you should do it like a real adult and take that sock off your face.”

The robber took half a step back.

Mortals were always intimidated by insignificant things, like when others made fun of their outfits and having to look up at people that were much taller. Galateo took half a step forward. A loud sob came from the front of the store and Pantyhose Head aimed the gun right at Galateo’s chest.

“Walk. Or we shoot the kid up-front.”

The man with the gun walked all three of them up to the front of the store, where another man in a different pair of pantyhose held the cashier at gunpoint too. Tears ran down her face as she struggled to unlock the register. In between her cries she attempted to reason with the men.

“We’ve had like three people come in all day. The register is like completely empty.”

Pantyhose Head spoke again. “Get your wallet out old man, give me your phone and watch too.”

Something heavy settled into the bottom of his stomach, a massive tapeworm gnawing at his insides. Galateo would not grow old. All around him the mortals suffered. They knew Death by many names. He left cities when they fell, closed his eyes when kings were slaughtered. He buried mortals young and old, climbed mountains, drank from rivers, basked in the early morning sunlight. Argued with historians and collectors. He wandered by himself for a while, until he found others like him from time to time, briefly and then never again. Would Death show up if he let these two lowlifes kill these children? And if he killed

these two men, would Death walk in through the door with a smile? The girl behind the register pulled out a handful of bills and coins and she placed them onto the counter with a trembling hand.

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Fights had remained a constant throughout his extended lifetime. He had not thrown a punch in a while because it was not polite to hit old men, nowadays. Though he did believe that perhaps society should return to brawling a bit more freely. In the history books now he read that the Minoans had been the first to invent boxing in the earlier years of civilization, but some books claimed it had been the Sumerians. He could not remember the name of the man who had initially coached him, but he remembered being small and throwing punches at other boys. He remembered the feeling of the leather straps in the palms of his hands. Boxing rules were different now, when he watched it go down on the television it felt nothing short of alien to him. There was one rule, the most ancient one, that he had ingrained into himself. Victory only came when the other boxer could go on no longer.

In the back of his mind Bijoux's voice was nagging him, but before any of his fiance's complaints could really form within his head Galateo strode forward, reached out one hand and grabbed Pantyhose Head by the armpit. His other arm wound backwards, hand balled into a fist. Under his skin he felt all his muscles stretched taut like a bow. When his fist connected with the man's rough cheek he felt as if he'd punched a bowl of pudding, the impact halting somewhere around his wrist - regret flooded his brain at once, but he had a fight to finish now.

Pantyhose Head landed on his shoulder atop the money on the counter, letting the gun fly out of his hand. It rattled somewhere behind the counter to where he could no longer see it. Before he had the chance to get back up Galateo grabbed a fistful of his hair through the sock on his head and lifted him up again, slamming his forehead onto the counter twice for good measure, making the loose change rattle to the floor. It was the kind of move that would have gotten him in trouble back then - and still even now. It had been a long time since he'd gotten in trouble for breaking the rules though.

He let Pantyhose Head go, and the man dropped to the floor at a strange angle. Galateo turned around to the remaining robber. The two teens had edged across the far side of the store, willing themselves to melt into the wall. Galateo



cared little for modern things like the police force and doing time in jail. Time was all he had. He locked eyes with the man. "If you take your friend and go we may call this a day."

The other man sneered back at him and lifted the gun up higher to aim right at Galateo's head. Mortals thought about Death a lot. Too much it seemed. They thought about how it would get them, surprise them one day. Or take a hold of them slowly, painfully. They wished to die without pain, without fear. And yet, and yet - when they looked at Death in the eyes they thought themselves immortal. Galateo watched the trigger of the gun move far too slow.

He had been born with a name that he could not recall anymore. Probably something regarding strength, courage, or the men that came before him. Or maybe something sweet, if his mother had been allowed to name him. He'd changed his name thousands of times over the years, assuming new identities along with them. He plucked the name Galatea from a marble statue he saw once in a museum, and he went by Teo for the most part. A woman made of stone, her skin smooth to the touch, but impenetrable. He'd made a great boxer because it was like fighting a wall. Bijoux liked to hold onto his arm because they liked the feeling of his bicep.

In the summer heat Bijoux made him sit in front of the box fan so that he would not overheat, and in the winter he slept under heavy blankets to try and stop the heat from rising off his body. He kept his hair long because he could only cut it with an electric grinder. He'd pierced his own ears on a drunken trip to the power tool section of Home Depot.

A gunshot rang then, followed by another. He felt the heat for an incredibly long moment and he flinched back. It occurred to him that the bullet might have bounced off of him and hit one of the children. When he opened his eyes the man in front of him lay unmoving on the ground. From his cheek he could feel a small wave of heat slowly rolling across his face. Around him one of the teenagers cried out.

"You shot him! You shot him! Holy shit you shot him!"

When he looked up, he found the cashier shaking and crying. In her hands shook the gun that had fallen behind the counter. He took a deep sigh. Death could not touch you, for the longest time, then it would pull tight on your reins for the hell of it. In that very moment Death had held them all in the palm of

its hand inside a dingy 7/11. She had laughed, and then it had let them go. Had let some of them go, anyways.

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The boy with the green shoes walked up to him, then stopped dead in his tracks when he looked up at his face. He mouthed an 'Oh my god'. Galateo lifted a hand up to inspect his face. Right on his cheekbone there was a sizable dent. Like a moon crater. When he looked back at his hand his fingers came off dusty.

"What the fuck." This time the boy spoke out loud. Behind the counter the other one was holding the cashier's hand and phoning the police.

"What the fuck are you?" He asked.

Galateo opened up his mouth and then he closed it again. The teenager waited, a bright fear shone in his eyes. Galateo spoke this time. "I...I am...very old..."

With the first aid kit that the 7/11 supplied her with, the cashier wrapped Galateo's hand in gauze. She placed a bandaid with a dinosaur on the hole in his cheek. Her tears were still drying, but she had insisted on wrapping up his hand, even though there was no scratch and no pain. Galateo realized that this was what Bijoux called 'going through it'. Life had been this and that, and then it wasn't anything anymore.

They all sat outside on the steps this time, while the two police officers investigated the store. In his hand he held a bottle of Sprite. His coat was thrown over the three teens and inside the pocket of his suit was their joint, so that the police would not ask any more questions than necessary. The three teens on the other hand, kept going at him, probably to fill the empty air. He obliged.

"Will it grow back though or are you just going to have to stay like that forever?"

"I had never been shot before, but I assume it will heal to some degree."

"Wait-you'd never been shot before?"

"Can you fill it in with... like... wall putty and stuff?"

"I could try."

"That's lowkey but highkey hella sick though."

Galateo did not know what any of those words meant. "What. Getting shot?"

"No- I meant like being made of rock and stuff... but yeah getting shot is cool too, I guess. That's like major



street cred.”

He remained there until the children’s parents arrived. Concern, anger, and relief drifted in and out of their mouths. There was some sort of trouble to be had with the store manager, who had left the young girl alone behind the counter even though she was not old enough to do a closing shift and was currently not picking up the phone. And there was some sort of trouble to be had with these two boys who had actually been skipping school since the middle of the day. And there was some more substantial trouble with Galateo sending a man to the hospital. And there was lots of trouble with the man in the body bag on the floor of the 7/11.

Galateo gave all three of them his phone number, in case they ever wanted to speak to him. Still, he reminded them to call at a decent hour, because he was an old man who went to bed early. He made sure to give all three kids a strong hug before they eventually left. After they interviewed him, the police let him go too. They explained that they would be in contact with him soon. For a moment he had the uncontrollable urge to skip town, like he had always done when something happened. He thought about how—once you detach yourself from the idea of permanence—life became easy, when it always kept going on and on and on.

If he were to take the bus right now, he could go anywhere. Beat up some other guys in a different convenience store. Go to every 7/11 in the world and beat up some guy each time. He could not explain the dent in his face caused by a bullet to the police. Not in believable parameters at least. He could not guess what kind of investigation the police would attempt but it did not really matter to him.

Mortals extended their mortality among one another, they shared it like a drinking glass. He could extend his immortality to others too, sometimes. And in the grand scheme of things he knew that it would not matter, because Death would always catch up to them one way or another, but for now it was enough. From the pocket of his suit he retrieved the crumpled pink flier and gave it a once over again. For dust he indeed was, though it remained unclear if he would ever return to it.

He ripped up the flier into tiny little bits and threw it into the recycling bin behind the store. Tomorrow morning he would have a raging headache, an itchy cheek, and a possible

trip to Home Depot in search of wall putty, but tonight he was only mortal. He pulled out his phone and dialed Bijoux's number.

"Hi Teo! What 's up? Are you having fun?"

"I almost bought drugs for a pair of teens and a man shot me inside a 7/11 today. I am hopelessly in love with you, you know this, correct? I think I am going to take up boxing again. When is your shift over? I will go pick you up and we will go get dinner. Whatever you want we will have it. Oh, and I have half a joint in my pocket."

