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# Not Quite Dead Yet

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Friday

October 31

## I

Dead gray skin, rotted away to show off the stringy sinews of muscle below. Sunken, rubbery sockets around sparkling hazel eyes. Those were actually hers, though; they moved as she studied herself. Decaying corn-on-the-cob teeth with gore stuck in the spaces between. What did zombies eat again? Just brains, or they weren't fussy about the other guts too? Probably didn't enjoy the candy apple she'd had earlier.

Jet watched her reflection in the funhouse mirror, her dead face – sorry – her undead face. OK, she'd worn the mask for three whole minutes, so Mom couldn't complain, and now Jet couldn't breathe; hot toffee air that turned wet against the rubber, sticking it to her skin. She pulled the mask off. Still pale, slightly less gray, though, but the mirror elongated her round face, distorting her thick brows and upturned nose. Her short blond hair was sticking up now; static buzzed against her hand as she flattened it.

'Jet?'

'– Damn.' She flinched. The mirror warped his face behind her, squashed his muscular frame into accordion ripples, but Jet knew his voice. Of fucking course. JJ Lim. But not with his usual black swept-back hair and clear tawny skin. He wore a garish red wig and denim overalls over a striped shirt, train-track gashes drawn on his face. Chucky. They'd watched that movie together on their third date.

'Didn't mean to scare you,' he sniffed, awkward.

'It's Halloween, that's the point.' More awkward. Jet walked away without looking at the unwarped him, past a

stall of pumpkin pies and apple bread. *Just \$5!!!* yelled the chalkboard sign.

‘It’s . . .’ JJ slipped off his wig and stumbled after her, through a group of freshly face-painted kids. Why was he following her? She’d given them both an easy out. *Again.* ‘Sorry,’ he continued, ‘I was wondering. I just . . .’

Well, this was fun. Jet was super glad she’d come to the Halloween Fair now. The whole of Woodstock, Vermont, swarming The Green in the middle of town, and she’d managed to run into the one person she didn’t want to see.

‘Trick-or-treat!’ a small vampire yelled up at her.

Jet hoped he’d choke on his slobbery fangs. Were kids always this annoying, or did the sugar rush bring it out of them? It was past ten now; when did parents put children to bed these days? Not fucking early enough.

She picked up her pace, but JJ didn’t give up.

‘Jet, please.’ He reached out for her arm. ‘I need to talk to you about something.’

Jet stopped, sighed. *Something* meant *them*, didn’t it? And they weren’t a *them* anymore, not for months. ‘I can’t right now.’ Lie. ‘I’m helping my parents run the fundraising booth.’ Bigger lie. ‘Did Henry draw those scars for you?’ Change the subject.

JJ narrowed his sharp eyes. ‘Please, Jet, it’s important.’

‘Oh, *important*,’ Jet snorted, ‘like when you said I was the best you could hope for . . . in Woodstock. Such a poet, J.’

‘You know I didn’t mean it like that. And it’s not about *us*, it’s —’

‘— Hey buddy, think you dropped this,’ a voice said over JJ’s shoulder, saving her. It was her brother, Luke, bending to retrieve the crumpled red wig from the grass. Pinpricks of string lights reflected in his matching hazel eyes as he straightened up and squared up, passing JJ the wig.

JJ took it, and finally took the hint too, losing himself in the crowd.

‘Saved you,’ Luke said.

Jet would never admit it. She was about to tell Luke so when he punched her in the shoulder, aiming for the dead-arm spot. He missed. But – also – he was fucking thirty and a dad now. When would the punching stop?

Jet didn’t react, a lesson all sisters learned one way or another. It annoyed them more.

Luke grinned, sharpening his jaw. Actually, his whole head somehow – he’d had his honey-brown hair cut too short again; no honey, just fuzz. But Sophia liked it that way, apparently. And – great – here she was now, holding baby Cameron dressed as an unhappy pumpkin.

‘Was that JJ?’ Sophia asked, slotting in beside Luke, hip to hip, claiming her husband back. She was dressed as Cat-woman, tall and lithe in a tight leather suit that would be unforgiving on Jet’s shorter, curvier frame. Remember when they used to share clothes, when they were teenagers? Back when they were the ones joined at the hip. Until Sophia got tall and Jet got boobs.

‘Didn’t JJ get the message?’ Luke surveyed the bustle of the fair, finally starting to die down, thank god. ‘How clear can you make it when a guy gets down on one knee and you say no?’

‘Literally,’ Sophia added, unhelpfully.

‘That’s not how it happened,’ Jet said.

‘So, Marge,’ Luke said, looking for another reaction. ‘What did you come dressed as this year?’

‘Oh.’ Jet gestured down her black turtleneck sweater and sleeveless denim jacket, black pants and boots. Yes, the boots were also black. ‘I thought it was super obvious. I came as a law-school dropout who still lives at home with her parents at twenty-seven.’ Made the joke before someone else could.

Luke hissed. 'Scariest costume here.'

Sophia nudged him.

Something stirred in Jet's gut, burned in her cheeks.

'You're also not wearing a costume,' she reminded her brother.

Luke cleared his throat. 'No, 'cause I'm here representing our family, representing Mason Construction. This is our fair, important to look professional and approachable.'

'With that hair?' Jet laughed, still smarting. Maybe she'd feel better if she took Luke down with her. Just a little. 'Company's not yours yet, Luke.'

A muscle ticced in his jaw.

'Next year.' Sophia squeezed Luke's arm, a red-lipped smile spreading across her face. *Next year*, when Dad retired. No, sorry, *if*. He'd been 'about to retire' three times already. They weren't supposed to talk about that and Jet knew it; she shot him an empty grin, too many teeth.

'Cameron's first Halloween,' Sophia said quickly, switching to something they *were* allowed to talk about. Her baby. All she ever wanted to talk about, actually. 'He's a pumpkin.' She jiggled him on her hip.

'Oh shit, really?' Jet said. 'I thought he was a butternut squash.'

'Jet.' Sophia turned on her. 'Can you not swear in front of the baby, please.'

'Fuck, sorry.' Jet clapped her hands to her mouth.

'Seriously?'

'It slipped out.' It hadn't.

'You still writing that . . . what was it?' Sophia asked. 'That screenplay?'

Jet shuffled, digging the toe of her boot into a fallen leaf. Didn't want to talk about that but Sophia and Luke were

staring, and she had no choice. 'No, I'm not doing that anymore.'

Luke tucked his hands into his front pockets. Here we go. 'Given up already?' he said, and clearly enjoyed saying it. 'That must be a new record.'

'I'm working on something else, actually.' Jet kept her voice level, walls up, teeth together. 'A new idea.'

'It's not that dog-walking app business thing, is it?' he said.

That feeling burned brighter, churning in her gut. Jet hardened her eyes, an unspoken question.

'Dad told me.'

'Well,' she said, like she didn't care at all. 'I wish you'd all stop talking about me.'

'Well,' he replied, 'I wish we didn't need to.'

'Fuck off, Luke.'

'Jet!'

'He can't talk yet, Sophia.'

'That's the difference between me and you,' Luke said. 'When I have goals, I actually see them through.'

Jet laughed. A dark, husky sound that didn't match her face, people said. An old man's laugh, like she'd smoked a pack a day when she'd never smoked one.

'I've got all the time in the world,' she said, same thing she told herself every Monday morning when her parents went to work and she didn't. Repeated the words until they stuck. Anyway, she shouldn't let Luke get under her skin like this. 'And I think you're forgetting that I won that district spelling bee when I was just ten.'

Luke bowed his head. 'I remember.' Of course he remembered, because that wasn't the only thing that had happened that day.

'Well,' Sophia said, unaware of the dark memory she was

trampling over with her singsong voice. 'We're heading off. This little guy is getting grouchy.'

'Aw, Luke, haven't had enough protein today?'

Damn, he wasn't even listening, craning his neck to look over the heads of witches and superheroes, toward the stall their parents were manning.

'I gotta go rescue Dad now,' he said, no goodbye.

'Good little CFO,' Jet muttered.

He heard, turning back, a flash behind his eyes.

'At least I'm chief financial officer and not chief fuck-up.'

'That doesn't even match.'

'Jet!'

'That was Luke who swore, not me!'

Cameron fussed and Sophia sighed, watching Luke through the crowd.

'I wish you two wouldn't fight,' she said.

Jet shook her head. 'That wasn't a fight. Just a normal conversation. You wouldn't know.'

'He's under a lot of stress.'

'He's Luke,' Jet said, 'he's always stressed. And I bet he managed to find time to play golf with Jack Finney and David Dale at least twice this week. *Stressed*. I knew him first, remember. Knew you first too.'

Because that was the real thing, that cold, barbed thing between Jet and Sophia. You go away to college and your best friend who stopped calling and stopped replying – and stopped caring – sets her sights on your brother instead. Anything to be in with the Masons. Jet didn't know how to talk to her anymore, and she'd never say it, but she thought the baby was boring as fuck.

'Well, I'm going to . . .' She didn't finish, didn't really need to; Sophia looked just as relieved when Jet left her behind, disappearing into the thinning crowd.

People were starting to leave now, werewolves and serial killers jostling her. A ginormous cat costume headed her way, a mismatched human head bursting from its white-and-ginger-furred shoulders, cat head tucked under one arm. Jet recognized the human part: bald head and dark brown skin, eyes magnified by circular glasses. It was Gerry Clay. He was on the board of village trustees with Mom. Actually, Gerry was chair and Mom was vice, and Mom said she didn't mind that when she was elected, but Mom was a bad liar.

Cat-Gerry was walking between two police officers. Not costumes this time, uniforms. Shields on their chests and guns in their belts. Lou Jankowski, their newish chief of police, and Jack Finney, who lived opposite the Masons; always had.

'Hello Jet.' Jack gave her a familiar smile, tall and broad-shouldered, the gray in his dark hair creeping into his stubble. Sophia used to call him a silver fox when they were teenagers, even though the silver part was pretty new.

'Hi Mr Finney.' She was supposed to call him Sergeant or something, but it had never stuck. Mr Finney was an improvement on *Billy's dad* at least, and that's what Jet had called him for most of her life.

'Billy was looking for you,' he said, like he'd read her mind. Wow, Jet was Miss Fucking Popular tonight.

'Sorry, Lou,' Jack added. 'This is Jet. Scott and Dianne's daughter. Don't know if you've met?'

'Don't know if we have,' Lou said. His face looked mean, hard eyes, but his voice didn't match, too soft. Yellowy-gray hair, close to mustard, and ketchup-ruddy cheeks. Clearly the man had never heard of retinol. 'It's been a pleasure working with your mom, and Gerry of course. Oh, that's my wife, that scarecrow waving at me. Excuse me a minute.'

'A pleasure?' Jet said, watching the chief go. 'He must have the wrong Dianne Mason.'

‘Ha!’ Gerry shouted it, not really a laugh. ‘You’re a funny one.’ Jet already knew she was a funny one. Sometimes that was all she had.

‘What do you think of your new boss, Jack?’ the half-cat half-Gerry asked, his attention on the retreating chief. ‘Don’t tell anyone I said this, Jack, but it should have been you. Made so much more sense to have a chief who’s lived here for decades, not some out-of-towner who doesn’t know anyone. Of course I voted for you. I don’t know why the other trustees – shit, don’t tell anyone I said that. But . . . it should have been you.’

Jack’s shoulders dropped. He glanced away awkwardly, probably for somewhere else to look, finding a perfect distraction in the stall behind them, where Jet’s parents were selling bags of candy corn, fundraising for the town’s *Green Spaces*. All sponsored by your friendly local home construction business, of course. The ones who built mansions next to those *Green Spaces*.

Jack coughed, coming back to them. ‘I’m sure you picked the right man for the job.’

How had Jet found herself in yet another conversation she didn’t want to be in?

‘Cool,’ she said, trying to break the tension. ‘If you want to arrest someone to cheer yourself up, Mr Finney, I nominate my brother. Think we both know he deserves it.’

Jack didn’t smile at that, clearly still lost in what Gerry had said.

‘Oh,’ Gerry piped up. ‘There’s my kid, Owen, the one taking the photos. He’s starting a photography course soon. Let’s get a picture, Jack.’

Gerry looped one thick cat arm through Jack’s and dragged the poor man away.

‘Hey, Jet.’

For fuck's sake, could she just get one minute?

'Billy Finney.' She turned to face him, her fakest smile. 'You found me. Thank god, because I've hardly spoken to anyone tonight.'

'Really?' he said.

'No. I'm sick of people.'

'Am I people?'

'You sure look like one.'

A tall one, with dark brown curls that skimmed his wide-set watery blue eyes. A mouth that was always open and always slightly crooked, even when he wasn't smiling. He raised his eyebrows at her. She knew that look; Billy hadn't changed much since he was ten years old.

'What?' Jet asked.

'I just spoke to your mom, and she asked me my name.'

Jet snorted.

'I literally grew up next door, spent more time at your house than I did my own.' Billy shrank somehow, even though he towered over Jet. 'She was joking, right? She hasn't forgotten who I am?'

Poor, sweet Billy.

'Don't take it personally, bud.' Jet clapped him on the arm. 'I never do.' Which was, maybe, her biggest lie tonight. 'Is that why you wanted to find me . . . sorry, what's your name again?'

'I'm not ready to joke about it.' Billy frowned. 'Actually, I was going to ask if you wanted to come to the bar on Tuesday. We're doing another live music night. It's me, actually, I'm the one who's playing, I – I think I told you before, a few times. Guitar, singing some songs, some I wrote.' Why was he talking so fast? And – was he sweating? 'Just wondering if you could make it this time. N-no – no worries if not.'

Jet sucked in a breath. She couldn't, not the last time he asked, not now. Because what if he was terrible and she laughed and then it became this whole thing? 'Sorry,' she said. 'I can't this week. Really busy. Maybe next time?'

He shrank again. 'Yeah, cool.' Billy nodded, his turn to fake-smile. 'There'll be a next time, don't worry.'

Jet wasn't worried but didn't get a chance to say so because a clown was bounding toward them, slipping and stumbling on the grass. A drunk clown, beer bottle in hand.

'You OK?' Jet asked.

Now she recognized him, only a clown from the neck up, a half-assed red nose and wig. Underneath that, it was just Andrew Smith. He rocked on his feet, his eyes unfocused, setting on fire when they found her.

'You,' he slurred, pointing the empty beer at her. 'Where's your brother? I need to speak to him.'

'Luke?' Jet shrugged. 'I think he left.' Lucky prick.

Andrew laughed, a dark, whistling sound. 'Your fucking family. Think throwing this fucking party every year makes up for any of it?'

Billy stepped closer to Jet, into the line of fire. Well, beer.

'All of you. Destroy everything you touch!' Andrew spat.

'I – I think you've had a little too much to drink, huh, Andrew?' Billy said, raising his hands, palms exposed. 'That's OK. How about I get you some water?'

'Don't tell me what to do, boy! Always telling me what to do!'

Andrew half charged, half fell into Billy, shoving him backward. Billy didn't fight back, let himself get pushed.

'It's OK, Mr Smith,' he strained to say, the clown throwing weak drunken punches at his chest.

Why wasn't Billy doing anything?

'Hey,' Jet yelled, doing something, but it was done before

she could reach the scuffle. Billy's dad – shit, old habit, try again – *Jack* had appeared out of the thinning crowd, Chief Lou on his heels. Jack grabbed Andrew, wrenched him away from Billy. Andrew tripped over his own feet, into Chief Lou, who held him in a barrel grip.

'Calm down, sir!' Lou barked into his ear, the softness gone from his voice. Not super calming.

'I've got this, Chief.' Jack gripped one of Andrew's arms. The clown's head lolled onto Jack's shoulder. 'You OK, Billy?' Jack asked his son, over Andrew's head.

'Yeah, fine, Dad,' Billy answered. 'Just a misunderstanding. He needs to go home, sleep it off. Please don't arrest him.'

'You know this man?' Chief Lou asked Billy's dad.

Jack nodded.

'Know where he lives?'

Jack nodded again. 'He lives in the apartment next to Billy's.'

'All right.' The chief righted his uniform. 'Can you escort him home, Sergeant? Make sure he gets a drink of water.'

'Yes, Chief.'

'Next time,' Lou spoke down to the clown, 'it'll be a night in the cell and a charge of disorderly conduct.'

'Come on, Andrew,' Jack said, leading the man away, toward the road and the streetlamps, holding the clown upright, the man too.

The chief turned to speak to Billy, and Jet slipped away. She was done talking to people and done with this Halloween Fair. Maybe she'd pretend she was sick next year. Actually, it didn't matter: next year she wouldn't even be here anymore. She'd be in Boston again, maybe back in law school, or maybe running her new company. There was time for that. She had time.

'What was that about?' Dad asked when she finally reached their stall.

‘Andrew Smith.’ Jet dropped her zombie mask on the table. ‘Drunk and sad again.’

‘About his house?’ Mom said, distracted, counting cash into a lockbox, her sharp haircut swinging around her neck.

‘No, probably about his only daughter killing herself last year.’

Dianne hissed, an intake of breath. ‘Jet, I wish you wouldn’t.’

‘Wouldn’t what, Mom? Speak? Exist?’ Her mom gave her a look, those fierce green-brown eyes magnified by her glasses, but not softened.

‘Ah,’ Dad groaned suddenly, bending double, his hand pressed to his side.

‘Bad again?’ Mom turned, a wad of twenties in her hand. ‘Take some painkillers when we get home. And don’t say no, Scott; you’re going in for another checkup.’

Dad could only grunt. He was sweating, his thinning hair stuck down to his temple, new lines etched in his face, pain bracketing the wrinkles.

‘A heating pad and a whole bunch of water,’ Jet said with a sad smile. ‘That works best for me. You can borrow mine.’

She understood the pain. In fact, she was the only one in the family who could. Mom and Luke had never spent weeks at a time pissing blood, or unable to walk because of the pain in their side. Them and their normal kidneys.

‘Well.’ Jet clapped her hands. ‘It’s been a pleasure, but I’m going home.’

‘You can’t,’ Dianne snapped. ‘You said you’d stay till the end and help us clear up. People are leaving now. You can make yourself useful and take the chairs back to the hotel.’

Jet had never agreed to that, and she hated when her mom told her to make herself useful. It didn’t make her feel useful; it made her feel small.

‘I’ll do it tomorrow,’ she said.

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Your catchphrase, Jet,' her mom sighed.

'That's not the catchphrase,' Dad said, but there was warmth in his voice. 'It's: "I'll do it *later*."'

'*Later* is a great word,' Jet said, voice rising as she turned away from her parents. 'Means I never have to be *useful*. See you at home.'

Mom was distracted again anyway: Gerry Clay was back, a full cat this time.

'Boo!' He jumped out from behind the stall. 'Dianne, I know your deepest, darkest secret,' he said, low and diabolical.

'You're having too much fun, Gerry,' Dianne clipped back.

Jet walked across The Green, onto the street beyond. It was dark, but not yet late enough to worry about it. The town was still thrumming and shrieking with departing cars and the undead. A gaggle of teenagers outside the little church, too loud and giggly for just sugar. Found Mom and Dad's liquor cabinet, she'd bet.

Past the houses beyond, jack-o'-lanterns still glowing outside, mean triangle eyes glaring back at her. Someone hadn't bothered carving theirs; just a bunch of naked pumpkins and gourds lining the steps up to their front door.

Jet turned up College Hill Road, saluting the skeleton hanging outside the Romanos' at number 1, its limbs creaking and flailing in the fall breeze. Up the hill to number 10.

Home.

This big obnoxious house that Dad had renovated and extended, and extended again. It stuck out against the normal houses on the street, against the Finneys' directly opposite at number 7. Jet might just hate the Masons too, you know.

She jogged up the large ringed driveway, past her truck, giving it an affectionate pat on the cargo bed. A Ford F-150 in powder blue. Mom thought Jet had bought it just to piss her off. Mom wasn't totally wrong.