

Like a First Kiss

By Gabriel Matthew Granillo

Author's note: This story was published by Alsina Publishing through their language-learning app, Lingo Bites, in 2017. I was asked to edit some of the strong language for the purposes of the app, and I have since gone in and inserted some of the original language. I felt this character, a hit man no less, was a grimy, unfriendly character, and his language should reflect that.

Quite honestly, I knew very little about Gregory Jones.

All I really knew was this: he took money from the wrong people. And when you take money from the wrong people, they send out even worse people to correct your ass. I am one of those even worse people, and I was in Flagstaff, Arizona, waiting for the right moment correct Jones.

All this sounds painfully boastful—I'm sure—but, honestly, it's bad as fuck. I wear a three-piece suit. I carry a gun. I kill people. That's some real *Pulp Fiction* shit right there.

But I fear the adrenaline has worn off and I've started to spiral. It's inevitable; after the excitement of a new job wears off, reality sets in, reminding you that a job is just a fucking job. Gregory Jones, unfortunately for him, was just another transaction, a paycheck for a job I'd done a thousand times. He planned to skip town tomorrow morning, and I was there to ensure that didn't happen.

The plan was to pay Jones a late-night visit at Kick's Motel on Route 66, just a few miles east of downtown. Quiet and clean—well, as clean as a bullet to the head is. That's the way we

do it, always have. Always in a motel, apartment, trailer, or studio—alone, deep in sleep, with their mouths oozing drool and their hands halfway down their pants.

I stopped downtown for some coffee and a slice of apple pie at Big Daddy's Diner. The coffee was shit, but the coffee was cheap; the waitress was sweet, and so was the pie. Her glasses were slightly larger than her face; she constantly pushed them up the bridge of her nose, only for them to slide back down seconds later. When she smiled, her face would blow up into a great big, beautiful bubble and all I wanted to do was pop it.

"Can I get you another slice of pie, sir?" she asked me.

"That's all right, darling," I said. "Between you and the pie, I think I've had enough sweets for one day." She exploded into a delightful laugh and smiled sweetly toward my chest, avoiding my eyes. "I would, however, appreciate another cup of your wonderful coffee."

"You got it," she said. She made her way to the kitchen and returned with more coffee.

I returned to reading Judith Merrill's short story, *Exile from Space*. From what I gather, it's about a humanoid dwarf alien experiencing her first days on Earth as a young girl. The alien describes terribly banal matters of existence in exuberant detail. Seeing humans as beautiful, though pungent and foul, she finds their shrill voices and their ability to dance and to feel love altogether strange and wonderful.

The alien experienced her first kiss at one point, and there was just something about the way she described it. Sometimes you stumble onto a sentence, *the one true sentence* as Hemingway might describe it, and you can't help but immediately reflect upon it. You can feel the change it brings and you know that life, however insignificantly, will forever be different.

I set the book down and looked up at the narrow diner entrance where—wouldn't you know it—I saw old Gregory Jones in a flannel jacket with a green beanie. Unlike his photograph,

he had a boisterous grey beard, but it was him all right. A bell rang as he entered. He shook off the rain and kicked his wet boots against the floor mat.

“Hey, Greg,” said the waitress. “Can I get you some coffee?”

“Please,” he said. “What’s your dinner special?”

“Fish tacos.”

“Fish tacos it is—to go, please.”

“You got it.”

The waitress placed a piece of paper in the kitchen window for the cooks, grabbed the coffee pot, and filled a cup for Jones. She then walked toward me.

“Can I top you off?”

“Yes, please. Next time, darling, don’t ask. Just keep the coffee coming. All right?”

“Sure thing.”

I watched Jones as the waitress filled my coffee cup. He was watching a fat television above a dusty blue and grey telephone booth. Baseball. A Padres player made an error at short and now the game was tied.

“Come on, man,” said Gregory to the T.V.

His mind was gone, blissfully unaware of the man with a gun in the booth in the corner. He looked like he belonged right where he stood: drinking coffee, watching the game, and waiting on dinner in a diner. It was then I knew that this would be different. This would be new, like a first kiss. I reached into my bag and felt cold steel against my fingers.

Jones took a seat at the bar, unbuttoning his jacket and glancing in my direction. Our eyes met, and he took a long look at me. Then his face fell all to pieces. I wasn’t there for the coffee, nor was I there for the pie. I was there for him, and he knew it. I smiled at his wrinkled brows.

“Would you like a slice of pie?” the waitress asked Jones. “It’s on the house.”

“Uh,” he said, looking back at the waitress. He heaved a long and bitter sigh. “Yeah, hon, I think I will have a slice.”

The pie *was* awfully good, so I thought I would let him enjoy it for the time being. Or at least until I had finished my coffee.

The waitress brought a fat slice for Jones, and he delicately took a bite, understanding it to be his last. My cup was dry. I eyed the waitress and lifted my cup for more coffee as I grabbed my pistol. She turned around and went for the pot, and as I walked over to Jones, I felt new. A cook struck up a conversation with the waitress as I placed my pistol behind Jones’ beanie. Good. She didn’t need to see this.