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LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT MUST BE GLORIOUS. I WOULDN'T KNOW, SINCE at first there was no sight. Smell, yeah—the tangy, salty scent of horses. Plenty of other sensations too. But I'll get to that. The point I want to make up front is that by the time I laid eyes on Sinclair Youngblood Powers—in the flesh, that is—I was already in love with him. Nothing could change that. Not even the fact that he was dead.

Sinclair appeared—in this dimension, this century—on the autumnal equinox, but he'd been with us since late July. That's right, us. Pen's been involved, intimately involved, from day one. Which was, as I mentioned, late July, the second half of summer like haze across a field, and us by then thoroughly indolent, twitchy, bored.

“Dice, I've got to *do* something.”

Dice—that would be me. Everyone goes by a monosyllable

here—reference Pen, née Penelope—so this past spring, having been plucked from the companionable misery of NYC and dumped in the Connecticut countryside, I took mine. It's fine. Candice never fit; too fancy. Candy, either; too cute. As it turned out, Sinclair adopted a tidy truncation too. Can you guess? I'll give you a hint: It wasn't Clair.

But I'm jumping ahead. Let me focus, let me feel it—that fervent midsummer afternoon in the village green, Pen and me, free and idle.

“Watch this.” She jumped up, stubbed the joint we'd been sharing onto the stone fence (never would the potential consequences of smoking pot in plain sight even occur to my cousin), then took off at a trot. Me, toasted, I just want to loll, let my mind go off while my body indulges inertia. Pen, no—she had the remarkable goofball gusto to go climb a tree.

Physically, the girl could do anything. Throw and catch with agility and accuracy. (I could duck.) Dive and swim and water-ski. (I could . . . not drown.) Even in flip-flops she scrambled up that tree like a monkey, hoisting herself onto carbuncles that stuck out from the trunk like mutant broccoli. Pen knew the tree, had grown up with it, and must have scaled it countless times. Still, it's huge, a handsome, ancient ash. Grabbing at branches, strong of grip and sure of foot, she was soon half lost in foliage—saw-toothed leaves and clusters of purple-black buds. I got off the fence to stand below, admire her ascent. Pen

was high, literally. Then, with a rustle, she changed course from vertical to horizontal.

“Dice!” she called from her limb. “Can you see me?”

A patch of tan skin, a swatch of blue shorts. I saw her. Apparently I wasn’t the only one. There, across the village green, lounging legs splayed on a bench with some cohorts, was Kurt Libo, his antennae up. He’d picked up that Pen Leonard—*the* Pen Leonard—was going out on a limb. Not that Pen has to do much to capture the attention of any sentient being, especially if male. With those breasts and that silken bolt of blond hair, all she has to do is breathe. And what did she do with this embarrassment of rapt male riches? Not much. Banked it, maybe, in case she wanted a favor later, or gave a groan that turned into a giggle. The way guys behaved in her presence, Pen thought it was funny.

Further on she crept, hands and knees, fingers and toes. Then she cursed, and one of her flip-flops swished down. The limb she’d picked was thick, but it bent with her weight.

“Pen, you are a cuckoo bird,” I said, more to myself or the universe than her.

“What? Louder!”

Hmm, so—she’d noticed Kurt had noticed her. That was to be my role, then. Fine. I could play emcee, no problem. “Pen!” I shouted. “Pen, you’re crazy! Oh my God, you’ll kill yourself!” Overwrought lines from some soap opera script. I didn’t have

to turn to know that Kurt's radar for girls gone wild was in full blip. I hollered some more, waved my arms. I didn't have to look to know that Kurt was on his way, friends in his wake, with their slouchy, gas station saunter.

At some point during my theatrics I felt a prickle of fear, the plain and simple fear that Pen could get hurt. Yet before I could fix on how unfair that was—I wasn't supposed to know such fear, not now, so soon, not here, in Swoon—there came a familiar, tingly foretaste. That anticipatory tremor, that distant thunder roll. There wasn't a thing I could do about it. There never is. So I let it course through me with secret not-quite delight.

Right about then Pen wrapped her legs around the branch, emitted a shriek, and let go. The bough dipped, and she dangled like a lantern, ankles locked, hair a cascade, bra threatening to disgorge out the scoop of her T-shirt.

“Holy crap!” from someone.

“Nice!” from someone else.

Hooting, whistles, applause. Kurt, his boys.

Pen may have been laughing, too, but it sounded strangled—it must be hard to laugh upside down. But oh the ease and grace of her swing, like she could do it and eat a sandwich; I was impressed. Only the awe got shoved aside, diminished by a second, stronger tremor that didn't seem related to Pen at all.

Not even as she fell.

Talk about buzz kill. Energy versus gravity. Arms and legs pawing at elusive leaves and then the utter emptiness of air. Torso twisting like a cat righting itself post-plunge. Only Pen's no cat. She body-slammed onto the ground, hard. The impact reached the soles of my feet while a cranial choir sang hosannas of "*Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!*" I dropped to kneel beside her. Pen was on her back, eyes closed. She was very, very still. My mouth was open, but her name hid behind my tonsils. Kurt and company hovered nervously, wondering if somehow they could be held responsible. Them. Yeah, right.

Then, the third tremor—a steamroller with thorns this time—and with it, the equine smell. The world folded in and out like accordion bellows, and suddenly none of this was here. No, it was—but it wasn't the same. The tree wasn't nearly as mighty. The day was different, too; drizzly, the sun off duty. Pen, Kurt, et al were absent, but there was a crowd. This was . . . an event. A spectacle. The atmosphere was thick with it. Every one of these people had something to feel, and none of it was good.

Then, with a time-wrenching twist, I was back again, kneeling by Pen, and her eyes shot open. Except they weren't her eyes. Pen's eyes are indigo, same color as mine—her mother's eyes, my mother's eyes. These were shards of onyx, sharp and black.

"You put to death this day an innocent man!" cried Pen, who was not Pen.

“What the . . . ?” wondered Kurt, or someone, a distant insect.

“You convict me of murder—what a cowardly lie! In truth you condemn me for doing in life what you all dare do in dreams! It festers there in the sweat of your beds, expunged now as this poisonous righteousness.”

The voice spilling from Pen was her own, but as I began to grasp that the cadence, the eloquence, the unadulterated wrath could never be, the cosmos convulsed again, and I was once more part of the angry throng.

“Mark me, oh town of Swoon, oh great Connecticut colony, I shall be avenged.”

I couldn't see him for all the people in front of me, who crushed forward and howled back. I could feel him, though, his rage and his terror. The onslaught of his oath seized me from the inside, held my heart like a shipwreck victim clings to flotsam.

“So warn your children's children's children and beyond—warn them well!”

The assembly roared scorn, and tightened together as fibers on a loom. *They're going to do it*, I thought, all at once comprehending. *String him up on this very tree.*

It takes a while to hang a man. He must have been strong; he must have fought. But at last he was well and truly dead, for the knots and clots of the crowd began to unravel and disperse.

For me, the world flexed in and came out the other side. There was sunshine. And there was Pen.

“Dice . . .,” she said weakly, her eyes—they were hers—on mine. “Did I do something dumb?”

Relief was oxygen, brisk and blessed. “Yeah . . . no,” I told her. “You fell. You probably shouldn’t try to move right now. I think you lost consciousness or something.”

“Whoa . . . really?” She blinked. Tickly shards of hair covered her face. I smoothed some away with a finger. “I think I’m okay,” she said. “Nothing . . . really hurts.”

Me? I was burning up, but it would pass. I studied Pen. The position of her body was normal; nothing stuck out at odd angles. My cousin is one of those indestructible people. One of those lucky people nothing bad or weird ever happens to. A bouncy rubber ball of a girl. Except something about the way Pen’s glance flicked to Kurt’s—the way she seemed to suspend him for a second with an almost sexy smile—made me wonder if such people genuinely exist, or if they’re just a legend we hold to so we can feel safe.