



**THE VEINS OF A PASTEL HULK**

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By: Grizzly K. Sunshine

Shoveling three scoops of pistachio-flavored ice cream onto the waffle cone of a Seattle-level-hipster was not exactly how I wanted to spend my Friday night. But after I wrecked the Jeep that I borrowed, I couldn't take any more shifts off at The Savory Shoppe for the rest of October...or until death.

I tried to sell the Ambush concert tickets I had for 8:30, but nobody answered my Hail-Mary Facebook ad. Being carless in LA, I'm completely dependent on social media to meet anyone. Giving out your address is as risky as Dateline says but on my own, I'd only met my second amendment, firework-loving neighbor. And there were a few time-killing chats with a retired 80s porn star at the Washateria on Hollywood Boulevard. They needed a cup of sugar and a chest hair detangle, respectively.

The hungry hipster clicked his painted nails and starred at me, holding a clear, repurposed Kraft cheese case as a 'wallet.' He was wearing a homemade, rose-gold paperclip as an earring. I handed him his waffle cone right before he was about to whine. As the hipster was accessing his Apple Pay, he spotted the Ambush pin I was wearing on my apron. Upon seeing it, his scrunched-up face relaxed. Any animosity was gone. We both loved Ambush. All was forgiven in his eyes.

"Going to the show tonight?" the hipster asked, not noticing the thick, melting, mint river dripping patiently down his tattooed mermaid knuckles. "Ambush. So legit. I—" His thought was interrupted by the now aggressive, ice-cold lines that were wrapping around his elbow like the veins of a pastel Hulk.

"Can't. Stuck scooping..." I shrugged as the register signaled that his Apple payment was accepted. The hipster contorted his body to keep his wet arm away from his outfit as if he were wearing Gucci. But this was LA. He might be wearing Gucci. Who knew what the hipsters valued these days. Fashion? Recycling? This guy had a calf tattoo of a 1900s traffic light. So, who knows? "Need a receipt, sir?" I asked, even though it always felt odd to call somebody with neon-colored hair by an honorific.

"Nah," he took a fistful very thin napkins. "Ticketmaster boned me hard when I tried to order. Sold out in seconds." he said. This guy didn't strike me as lucky despite his Lucky Care Bear suspenders.

Before selecting the worst seat in the gallery, the hipster threw his pale green, sticky napkins into the little garbage hole next to the register; the one that was almost exclusively for receipts and smoothie straw wrappers. His aim was pathetic. "I was supposed to go tonight..." I mumbled. It was unclear to me why I kept the conversation going. But my manager was in the back—out of sight and making cakes—and the rush of slacking off on the clock was the only high I could get here. So, I continued, "...had decent seats too."

Suddenly, the hipster's body language changed for a third time, a flirty, homosexual, chameleon of circumstance. He leaned into me with interest as if he were investigating my cologne. "What section?" he pondered. It instantly occurred to me that I had perhaps found my ticket buyer. His eyes were desperate to hear my answer. I took a deep breath in to prolong his agony and raise the price. He deserved it. He had a Lowe's spike in his nose, after all. And I had a wrecked Jeep to pay off...

With poetic timing, Jack entered the front gallery before I could exhale a number. Without even acknowledging the hipster's glowing chartreuse manbun, Jack quietly barked my name through gritted teeth. "Knox." That particular low bark, accompanied by one sharply cocked, forty-five-degree brow, meant 'get over here.' He had balls to speak to me with such aggression...over ice cream, no less. I was bigger than he was and two years older. Jack disappeared again into the bakery with a stiffness.

I headed toward the back bakery but whirled around before I exited the gallery and pulled the tickets from my apron. "Pit seats." I whispered just to see the hipster turn siracha red. "Won them on the radio. KIIS-FM. Not front row, but—"

He shrieked out a gasp at light speed. "Name your price!" But before I could even consider how to gouge him, we both heard Jack loudly bellow from the bakery. The hipster flinched, caught off guard, being that he was out of his safe space. Jack probably dropped something heavy; the bladders of sweet cream could weight up to 50 lbs. But this particular Jack bellow had more sorrow to it than just plain frustration. Jack sounded angry, possibly hurt. But he made five dollars more an hour than me, so I was in no hurry.

I looked at the hipster who instinctively knew that our conversation had just ended. He smirked as he exited the shop, throwing up a rock'n'roll guitar flair with his free, non-pistachio-d hand as he did. Only a moron would choose pistachio ice cream when cake batter is on the menu. I walked around the register and locked the double door. I don't know why I did that; we were still open for several hours. For a moment, I rested my head on the logo that was engraved on the glass.

"What's the matter, Jack?" I called into the bakery. There was a brief silence. I didn't move a muscle in case I had to excavate faint cries for help. In that five-second silence, I imagined the worst. I could picture Jack being electrocuted in at least three ways back there. Or burnt by the oven. Or trapped underneath a tipped-over refrigerator...and I was too weak to lift it off of him. And then I had to sit there and wait for help while he was being slowly stoned by Whirlpool...

The polyester apron I was wearing tended to rustle so I truly couldn't move at all if I was going to listen with fidelity. I could have walked into the bakery and investigated Jack's bellow with my eyes. But I was giving my ears a chance to shine. I firmly believed in training the senses. A lesson I learned from this job actually, when the owner of this franchise sent a French speaker from Arizona. He was sent to teach us how to refine our pallets. Pierre told our crew—with an accent that sounded like a lot of work to keep up—that we had to make the ice cream here, on-site, ourselves.

"A new batch every day," he said with his blurry accent. Pierre took the alphabet as just a suggestion. He would add letters into words that were ridiculous and had no place. Sometimes I thought he was inventing new letter combinations altogether. It didn't take long though, before my ear got used to his language bending. But I never got used to his use of numbers. Anything over seventy and I was lost.

Pierre said that we had to give each batch a quality test. We literally had to taste it. "Part of ze job." We spent that summer tasting all sorts of ice creams and cakes. Different brands and even a gluten free bread. I gained ten pounds before the Fourth of July. But I was the only one that passed all of Pierre's taste levels. Jack incorrectly chose Dairy Queen almost every time. And now he's manager...

Most importantly, Pierre taught us all that there were certain things that one could do that make tasting more pleasurable. "Cleansing ze palette! If you eat white bread, tortilla chips, or even certain fruit

sorbets, your mouth gets a new start. Only zen, can ze mouth taste food properly for what it really is,” he explained.

That sounded a little ‘hipster with a French twist,’ but I really thought about it. He said, “Would a master, brilliant pastry chef in Paris want a potential customer to try his world-famous crème brûlée right after zey ate onion soup? Zhere still could be bits of onion in zeir teeth zat interact with ze sugar in ze baking cream and cause a flavor disaster!”

I appreciated Pierre and the pastry chef—that was obviously his alter ego—for even thinking that way in the first place. It was nice to work with someone who had such passion, even for baked goods. Pierre brought lots of new menu options, recipes, and generally good vibes. He warned us to be prepared for an ever-changing menu in the future. “We must give ze people what ze want.” It was clear to me that Pierre had his finger on the pulse. Pierre was probably why The Shoppe was doing so well. Or at least why it *used* to be doing so well...

Jack could have been decapitated back there and I was still in the front toying with hipsters and daydreaming. Minimum wage. My forehead left a greasy stain on the glass, which made me realize that I was sweating pretty profusely. Scooping ice cream was a sneaky forearm work out. I longed for my hot shower at home and a 40% off, employee-discounted smoothie. Lemon Sorbet Sunset was my drink of choice. I took off my cheap work cap and rubbed the sweat from my brow with the bottom of my untucked polo.

I daydreamed. It was too bad humans couldn’t *fully* cleanse themselves with an icy, lemon sorbet shower. My balls shrunk just thinking about the sensation. But we could cleanse our souls with lemon sorbet so that we could meet others at our purest forms—like kindergartners get to do. Instead, we tangled-up, adult-humans go on blind dates after over drafting at the bank, we sit for parent-teacher conferences after finding out we can’t eat salt anymore, or we do a job interview—hosted by someone we once called ‘anorexic’ at a party in college. I don’t know these humans. But they do exist, and they do deserve an icy lemon sorbet shower. Nah, that would cost a fortune. Besides, once kindergarten ends, a fresh start is really a nostalgic memory anyway...no matter how many lemons you can afford...

Even though Jack took his bakery job way too seriously, I liked him. He *did* care. It’s better to have a boss that cares than one that doesn’t. He cared about other people too. He let me borrow his car on more than one occasion. It was actually Jack’s Jeep that I had wrecked. It was cosmetic, but pretty ugly. He gets half of my paycheck for a while...

Jack was not a hipster. But at first look, I was sure he got mistaken for one quite often. He had short, sandy-red hair and jade green eyes with specs of gold in the left one. He was slightly muscular, but the one time he was on a police radio scanner, he was described as having a ‘slim build.’ I think that fact bothered him more than being caught. There was also a skull tattoo on the back of his neck. The skull was smoking a cigarette made of Marilyn Monroe’s naked body. Jack’s manager polo blocked the tattoo out from customer view mostly, but he covered the rest with a bandage. He said that his tattoos were ‘Rated R.’ I’d seen him forget the bandage before and have to get creative. He once worked an entire shift with a half of a Milky Way wrapper taped to Marilyn’s tits.

There was a darkness to Jack. A darkness that gave every ‘tortured’ hipster standing next to him a Disney wash. In my opinion, he’d make an excellent ghost at Disneyland in the Haunted Mansion... Jack wasn’t at all trendy or someone to post photos of his new vintage trumpet on Twitter. Jack was

typically quiet. He was serious, and a bit scary...almost like a pirate; another potential job for him at Disney. He was the opposite of a hipster. Hipsters rode trends and tried to be weird for ironic attention. Jack didn't want anyone around him, with one exception...

Even though he was only seventeen, Jack had a daughter. He told me her name at least once, but I couldn't remember it. Even though he didn't talk about her much, I sensed he would have given up his life to protect her. The baby lived with him and Jack's stepmother. All I knew about the baby's biological mother was that she wasn't in the picture. He didn't say that explicitly or anything, or even talk down about her. I just observed him showing a photo of the newborn baby to another coworker, bad-breath Janice. His eyes were in love with that Kodak. Not with the mother who was holding the child...but with the baby. Months later, he loaned me a few dollars to buy a smoothie, and I noticed that that same picture had been torn in half inside his wallet. Only the baby remained.

Even when you don't know someone intimately, you can really tell when love pours through their eyes. Look carefully. They can't hide it. I learned this firsthand when I saw our grumpy, diabetic mailman tear up the first night that we turned on our Christmas lights at The Shoppe. He could have been a paid actor for Christmas joy.

Nearing the end of my daydreaming saga, I walked into the bakery to see if Jack needed actual help. Even though there was no door between the bakery and the gallery, there was an invisible smell barrier. The second that I entered the back room, I got overtaken by a multigrain multiverse of joy. It was hard for my brain to decide what to focus on first. But the buttered croissants greeted my nostrils with a fury. I could *smell* their warmth. It was healing. They brought a savory shiver that came with a muscle relaxation so instant it should be studied and bottled. Cancer patients should recover in bakeries.

My nose then gaily trotted over to the sparkling, sugary doughnut wrack. My feet followed. The fruit fillings and the sour custards harmonized, designed by Jack to elicit a strong, sensory human response. This harmony usually sealed a purchase from any waif who had just so happened to wander in, like a spellbound cartoon wolf following the dancing white odor of a pie on the windowsill. The frosted air that Jack had concocted that day seemed too sweet to take in for long periods at first, but much like a cold pool, the body adjusts to enjoy.

Jack worked the night shifts in the bakery, looking as though he just came from a firewood expedition in the snowy Alaskan wilderness. Confectioners' sugar was always dusting his shoulders, ears, and hair. When I laid eyes on him, Jack was not underneath the refrigerator. In fact, he was sitting on top of it...reading a printed piece of paper. It was evident that he had crumpled it up in anger at least once. His face was as red as the watermelon sorbet. I wondered how he got up on the fridge and if he made it up there on the first try. Perhaps the bellow that the hipster and I heard was from one of his failed attempts.

"Have you seen this fucking shit?" I was caught off guard by his anger. I also thought that two curse words had no place amongst such a decadent smellscape.

"What happened? What's Arnold done now?" I said in a Schwarzenegger accent, trying to lighten the mood. Jack and I had first bonded over that Arnold impression when we met here a few years ago. Our trainer at the time sounded just like Arnold in *The Terminator*, and we would both laugh behind his back as he taught us how to clean the whipped cream off of the 'zpatulaz.'

Unamused, Jack bravely hopped off of the refrigerator from a height that I know had to hurt his worn, Van-covered tootsies a little bit. A powdered-sugar dust cloud rose around him as he landed on the chipped, Terra Cotta tiles. He handed me the abused paper to read. It was a printed off email...

I started to read it but had to keep starting over. It was like a fever dream.

“Marijuana!” He yelled! “This was supposed to be a family place! I was going to bring Amelia here.”

Amelia. That was his daughter’s name. I wondered how long it would be until I forgot it again. As I finished reading the email, I started to read the last bit out loud so that Jack knew I was up to speed. The email was from Lev Conklin. Nobody wanted to see an email from Lev in their inbox. He was the one responsible for firing two people at every location last month. But, to be fair, he is also the one that sent Pierre to us. I guess Pierre’s menu change warnings were no joke. “In an effort to bring in new clientele and bolster sales in the fourth quarter, we are going to be adding marijuana infused products to the menu.”

I looked up at Jack. I could tell from his demeanor that this upset him, but deep down, I thought it was pretty cool. I had the thought that the vape in my pocket needed charging. “Keep reading,” he said with a smile indicating that I wouldn’t believe what I saw next. He was right. I read the sentence I knew he was referring to at least five times.

“Cocaine?” I said, still dumbfounded.

“That’s right!” Jack scoffed. “Marijuana isn’t enough for them. They are experimenting with trace amounts of cocaine in the pistachio ice cream! It’s already in there!”

“Nobody told me!” I said.

“Me either!” He proclaimed. “I guess I need to check my email more often.”

Not knowing how to match Jack’s energy, I said, “Cocaine goes with pistachio? I would have put it with vanilla.”

“They also want to add it to the croissant butter and the mango glaze on the cheesecakes,” Jack said.

“This can’t be real...” I laughed and popped a few sprinkles in my mouth.

“Flip the paper over, there’s more!” Jack flipped the paper over for me. He pointed on the paper so hard with his index finger it’s as if he were punching it.

Before I could read the back side, there was a loud banging coming from the gallery. Jack and I both looked up like prairie dogs hearing a distant threat. An instant relief washed over me when I realize that I had forgotten to unlock the doors after the hipster left. It was probably just a fat couple here for a double scoop. Jack angrily went to investigate before I could tell him about the locked door. After a moment, I adjusted my apron and then followed Jack into the gallery. He was stopped dead in his tracks. The hipster was standing outside of the frosted glass doors. He was holding something.

“Don’t move,” Jack warned. He put his hand up to make sure I didn’t get too close to the double doors. “Something’s off.” Jack spoke through the glass. “We had to close down. Our registers are out,” he lied. He had a protective air about him, the instincts of a father.

Through the glass, a muffled voice bled through. I could tell it was definitely the Hipster from earlier, but he sounded strange. I moved to unlock the door. Jack stopped me. “I know this guy,” I said. “He’s here to buy concert tickets off me.” Jack was about to protest, but before he could, the hipster interrupted us. He started pounding on the glass again, aggressively. Any harder, and it would break. His shirt was covered in melted pistachio ice cream.

“Who said anything about buying them?” he said, now revealing what was most certainly a baseball bat. It was smaller than an adult bat. It looked like something from the Little League field nearby. In the hipster’s ‘adult’ hands it almost looked like a metallic police baton, or as I’m sure the millennial hipster would have called it, a ‘beater’s bat.’

As he revealed his Dick’s Sporting Goods weapon of choice, a 1993 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme SL drove by with the windows down. Its added stereo system was playing Ambush so loud the speakers sounded like they were trying to escape from the car like the pure soul of a possessed body. The hipster’s bat swayed in slow motion to a particularly perfect air guitar solo riff from the Cutlass.

“Back away from the glass,” Jack moved me before I had a choice. He was more worried than I was. From my brief conversation with the hipster, I could tell athleticism was not something he valued. He wasn’t out of shape or anything like that, but he also had a waxed mustache. I knew we had nothing to be worried about. As I stepped toward the double doors, I realized that there was something stuck to the bottom of my shoe. It was one of the mint colored, sticky napkins that the hipster used before.

“Pistachio!” I looked at Jack with crazy eyes.

“What?” Jack said, still on high alert. He had worked at a gas station in a shifty neighborhood when he was only fifteen, so even minor events triggered his fight response. He had a real problem with car backfires even though he’d never admit it.

“That Rainbow Bright pussy, is all hyped-up on cocaine! Three scoops worth!” I peeled the pistachio covered napkin from my heel as proof. We really needed to get thicker napkins. It was at that moment, the glass on the double doors was smashed in. My peripheral vision could have sworn that the hipster used his head instead of the black bat, but I didn’t see it directly. Jack and I both turned away out of instinct. The unwanted LA humidity rushed in to reveal unmonitored children’s finger drawings on the glass. My first thought should have been to call the police. But it really was that I needed to clean those fingerprints. I had left the Windex in the bakery...

The hipster reached through the glass and unlocked the door himself. His eyes were blood red. He somehow looked taller. He breathed heavy as if had sprinted two miles to get here. His clothing had scratches all over it, clearly self-inflicted. I pulled the Ambush tickets from my apron and held them up. I was waving them in his face like I was a snake charmer. I moved away from Jack. I had the hipster’s attention, so Jack had the chance to run. He didn’t.

The hipster moved at me, drooling. I think Pierre needed to add a teaspoon or two less of cocaine to his recipe. This guy was tweaking out of his mind. The hipster took very slow steps toward me. He

was quivering and growling in a way that sounded a bit like Cookie Monster working on his taxes. As I was being pursued by the Urban Outfitters monster, I set the Ambush tickets near the Pepsi machine but, to my surprise, the hipster didn't have any interest in them. He didn't even look at them. He was focused on me. It was at that moment I realized that I shouldn't have underestimated this guy. The hipster quickly cornered me against the counter and the wall.

He gnarled at me, not the benefactor of braces or Scope. Even the mermaid on his hairless knuckle tattoo looked angrier than before. His trembling hand pounded on my chest and then contracted and grabbed my polo. I felt like a fuzzy animal doll inside a claw machine at the pier. The hipster wasn't interested in tossing me around, though. Instead, he had ripped the Ambush pin off of my apron. He used the sharp part of the pin to pierce his other ear. He left the pin in there; the tiniest drop of blood caressed the edge the plastic pin. He smiled the smile of a troll.

The coked-out hipster then removed the rose gold paperclip from his own ear and grabbed my neck. He shoved the homemade earring into my lobe, off center as fuck. It hurt. There was more blood this time. Jack moaned out of disgust in the background and finally decided to step in to help me—In his defense, he was probably daydreaming about Lemon Sorbet Showers—With one swift smack, the hipster threw Jack into the Pepsi machine. It was as if Jack was stunt actor hired to get his ass kicked by one of the X-Men. The Pepsi machine's lights flickered to the beat of my heart. Jack was barely conscious.

The hipster then tossed me down to the floor. He lifted the bat up and I was sure he was going to bring it down on my head but instead he hit the glass on the freezer holding all of the ice cream drums. The glass shattered everywhere. He jammed both of his arms deep into the drum of pistachio ice cream simultaneously. He needed a second hit. He looked like a mole, too fat for his hole. Glass was cutting his torso as he leaned in, but that wasn't stopping him at all. I wiggled away, picking up a shard of glass, just in case.

After a moment, an even more altered hipster emerged, looking like a melted Statue of Liberty got hit by lightning. Godzilla would envy the roar that came out of him next. With a drum of ice cream under each of his arms, now bulging with cocaine-laced, Easter-colored veins, the hipster exploded through the door, destroying it completely. I stared at Jack. He was standing by then, already looking for a broom. He checked the bandage on his neck to make sure Marilyn was still decent. A small crowd gathered outside and began to peer in.

Like a true dad, he was in a hurry to clean up the mess as to not traumatize the crowd. As Jack handed me a broom, he lost his footing and slipped in some melted pistachio. Trying to save him, more than he did for me, I grabbed his hand, but his weight took me down with him. We sat on the floor and at one another. We smiled but only with our eyes. There was a small vibration above us. All we needed was an earthquake. But it wasn't the ground shaking.

A ripped drum of lemon sorbet hovered above our heads. It has been moved out of the freezer by the Hipster and was beginning to melt. Gravity was about to clown us. The drum tipped over, probably with enough time for us to make a quick move away, but we were both tired, and Lemon Sorbet Sunrise was my favorite, after all.

“Brain freeze!” Jack said as he wiped the ice off his cap, which was somehow protected by the dusting of confectioners' sugar.

I was cold, but my soul felt pure, or at least, lemony fresh. “There’s glass in the ice cream,” I said, eyeing the Ambush tickets near the Pepsi machine. “Can I go early?” Jack looked at me with a face that indicated he was disappointed by my question. I winced a little as I removed the rose gold office supply from my ear. “Minimum wage, man.”