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Hallucination

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HALLUCINATION

J. Kelly Moreno

The first thing you feel is the wetness, the stickiness. You peel the blankets off the sheets, then peel the sheets off your skin. You feel the moisture run between your legs, and your muscles scream in protest against the virus that has made your body its own. Then the anxiety sets in, the fear of what comes next. Slowly, exhaustion kills the panic and you think about rolling over, shutting your eyes, and never waking up again.

Then you remember. You've been waiting, planning, living for this day for over a year, and you jump out of bed as if you don't feel a thing.

A rainbow of humanity—black, brown, red, white—shuffles by your cell, but this morning you don't join them. When there is a break in the parade, you step outside and wait next to your door.

A voice barks out your name. "Taylor Taylor!" You hold your breath and command yourself to walk slow and deliberate.

Doors slam, keys jingle, guys yell—"Yo, Mama! Hey, Girlfriend! Later on, White-Patty." It's constant. Human white noise. But as you pass a cell door at the end of the block, you stop, look inside, and tell the guy on the top bunk, "Cafe Roma."

"Two o'clock," he answers.

"I'll be there."

"I know." The guy stares down at you. "Because if you're not I'll have you killed."

The human white noise fades as you enter the Reception and Release Building. Your shoes sound softer on linoleum than concrete, and when doors shut you hear the dull thud of wood on wood. Voices no longer echo the way they did in The Big House, and you realize sounds are softer the closer you get to freedom.

You pick out some street clothes from a box on the floor, step inside a room, change

out of prison blues, then sign some papers saying you'll be a good boy on parole. A guard hands you \$200; another one opens the door.

The sun is blinding. A hot dry breeze warms your skin. You hear a flag flap in the wind; a car accelerates in the distance. But when you open your eyes and adjust to the light, your knees buckle at the realization that there are no bars, no guards, no towers, and the only thing between you and Rick Ruiz is a whole bunch of empty space.



You grab your bag, get off the bus, and walk. You once thought Santa Barbara looked so beautiful; nothing looks good to you now. Several blocks later you step inside the Cafe Roma.

At a table against a brick wall in the back is The Contact. He's reading *The Montecito Journal*. You take a seat across from him.

Immediately The Contact slides a large, thick manila envelope across the table. "Inside you'll find everything you need to know about Rick Ruiz, his associates, and Camarillo State Hospital."

You slide an envelope across the table. The entire \$200 you collected a couple hours ago is inside. "I'll send the rest later."

"I know."

"How do I reach you if I have any questions?"

"You won't."

"You didn't answer me."

The Contact looks over the top of the paper. "When you're done, you'll know everything from the size of Ruiz' birthmark to the hospital wards that are unlocked, empty, and easy to corner your man." He resumes reading. "Now leave."

You need more money so you walk up State Street to your bank. People stare at you. You're sick and they notice. You walk up to the teller and know she wishes you had chosen another window.

You tell her you want to cash out as you hand her a checkbook you haven't used in years. She stands further from the counter than the other tellers, and you're certain, that she's certain, that if you get too close to her, she'll catch it.

You leave the bank and walk across the street to the Paseo Nuevo Mall. Now you really feel it—the glances, the glares, the stops, the stares—the attempts to look away before they see you see them.

When you enter Nordstrom, it's even worse. You're in Wranglers; they're in Guess. You're in polyester; they're in silk. You're enraged; they're disgusted. And when you arrive at the make-up counter, the white-faced woman with the jet-black hair pretends not to notice you're even there.

You wait.

Finally, she says, “May I help you?”

“I want a make-over.”

Excuse me?” she says, frowning.

“I said I want a make-over.” Then you lean forward, and with a certainty in your voice that ensures there will be no mistake, you tell her, “I want you to make me look like a woman.”



You step back outside and no one notices you're ill. You look like the rest of the gothic girls posing on State Street—wig of straight black hair with burgundy highlights, chalk-white face, purple eyelids, black chunky eyelashes, and blazing red lips. Standing tall, you strut in discotheque heels, black crushed-velvet bellbottoms, leotard, and matching velvet coat. You smile, thinking how the entire staff had a holiday fitting you in their favorite threads.

One of them even wanted you.

“Meet me at The Dragstrip,” she whispered, “and I’ll show you how to take all those clothes off.”

You thought about doing her, about diving so far inside of her that you would never have to return.

“No thanks,” you said, reluctantly. “You’d regret it.”

You're broke again. You need cash. As you stroll through the mall you watch the men watch you. Even dressed as a woman it feels queer to have men check you out—you still haven't gotten used to it, despite all the time in prison. But the biggest surprise is that the women check you out, too, some of them even more than the men.

A short, young Mexican man hands you a card. As you walk away, you read the message that says the man is deaf and dumb and trying to put himself through college. A donation would help. You watch him circle the courtyard; in a few minutes he will be back.

A woman reaches inside her purse and hands the Mexican a dollar bill. Another woman does the same. People dining at patio tables from several restaurants also throw money at this man, and you take a seat on a bench and marvel at how he performs handicap magic. By the time the Mexican returns, you figure he's collected at least fifty dollars, and that's assuming everyone just gave him a buck.

You point toward the garage, motioning for him to follow. The man winces and waves his arms. You pat your pockets and say, “My purse is in the car. It'll just take a second.” You know the guy is acting; you know the man can hear you. You know this guy is as guilty as everyone back in The Big House. Finally, the man agrees to follow you into the garage.

You see a Suburban and a Range Rover parked side-by-side near the end of the aisle. You hurry toward them, motioning the guy to follow. When you get between them, you pretend to reach for your key, then turn around and slam your fist into the man's stomach.

His belly is soft. You punch him again. A third time. When the man doubles over in pain, his cards spill across the concrete. Quickly, you squat down to pick them up—there are dozens—but as you stand you notice the young man is crying, making signs with his hands.

"Come on," you say. "The game's over."

"Gi mi...mah...mon...nah."

"Nice try." You watch the man make more quick and dexterous gestures with his hands. He makes sounds you don't understand.

"Oh, shit." You realize the guy isn't faking and the guilt hits you as if you're the one who's just been punched. You turn and run out of the garage.

But, you can't do business around here—State Street is streaming with shoppers, many of whom are tourists that don't speak English. Others are transients who can tell you're pretending and don't have anything to give. And still others are college students, plucky little prima donnas who don't give a damn. Plus, you're dressed to the nines so you don't look as pathetic as that deaf and dumb little Mexican.

You think about going back and returning the cards. But as you finger the bundle of one and five dollar bills you took from the guy, desperation turns you around and pushes you down to a thrift store on the seedier end of State Street. When you leave the store you look as needy as the Mexican, and when you stick out your thumb, it doesn't take long to hitch a ride to the airport.

Summer vacationers have time, and they'll be feeling happy and generous and rich as they sit around waiting for their flight.



You enter the women's room, close a door to one of the stalls, and count. Ten...twenty...forty...eighty—you've collected nearly \$200 in just under an hour. You wonder if the Mexican ever canvasses the airport; you promise to tell him if you ever see him again. The guilt still visits your gut, but when you open the door to your stall, you notice an Asian woman struggling with the zipper on the back of her dress.

"Would you mind helping me with this?" She smiles at you in the mirror. "My little girl likes catsup and—well, you can see..."

Your heart quickens; you can't speak. You just stare—it's been a long time since you've unzipped a woman; it's been even longer since you've seen one undressed.

"Sure." You walk up behind her, reminding yourself to breathe, trying not to tremble.

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You reach for the zipper, notice her silky black hair is caught inside. You tug on the tangled clump, and then slowly escort the little latch all the way to the base of her creamy, brown back.

“Thanks,” she says, pulling her arms out of her sleeves.

She is braless, and her modest breasts jiggle as she pushes the dress to the floor. Finally, you step over to the sink next to her and lather your hands. She smiles shyly when she sees you looking.

“Might as well put on something more casual,” she says, self-consciously. “It is vacation.”

You smile back, keep scrubbing, and stare at her little nipples. She pulls a loose-fitting blouse over her head, then turns away quickly when she catches you again. You turn off the water, reach for a towel, and look into the mirror as she steps out of her panty hose.

Her sex is covered with tiny matted hairs, even more fine and silky than the bundle on her head. She turns around, bends over to get something, and you stare straight at her backside. Tiny mounds of gooseflesh rise on her cocoa skin. You lose yourself for a moment as you imagine running your hand from one end of her dreamy hips to the other.

Then she gasps.

You see her reflection in the mirror; she is looking at your crotch. You glance down to see the betrayal in your pants. She stands quickly, presses her change of clothes directly over her midsection, and backs against the wall.

“I’ll scream,” she says.

You cover yourself with your purse and scramble out the door.



You hurry down the hall and hide inside a tiny bookstore near the lobby. A woman in a sundress rifles through the rack of novels on your right, and a guy in a business suit reads a magazine against the doorway on your left. A kid about twelve years old salivates over a *Playboy* in front of you and, fortunately, the boy looks up constantly to see if someone is watching. You use this gesture to appear as if you, too, are expecting someone. But when the little geisha you just undressed dashes out of the bathroom over to a tall, military-looking man with two kids in the waiting area, you really start to sweat.

She whispers into her husband’s ear, then points toward the bathroom. He scowls, then scans the terminal to find someone with the authority to send you back to The Big House. She pulls on his arm, apparently disagreeing with him. She points to her watch, then out to the tarmac—you imagine she’s telling him to drop it and just get on the plane. But the man seems determined to find you, to hunt you down and punish you for trespassing on his precious Asian property.

You look at the exits and wonder which one to take. You imagine trying to catch a cab,

a bus, or steal an empty car idling by the curb. You drag the back of your hand across your eye, leaving a streak of mascara across your brow.

Idiot, you think. *Women use tissues.*

You see your reflection in a window and dab a Kleenex around your eyes. You stuff the wad into your pocket and wonder again how the hell you're going to escape.

"May I have your attention, please," someone says over the loudspeaker. "This is the last boarding call for..." As the operator completes his message, you look back at the couple. The woman has gathered her kids and headed for the gate. Her husband remains fixed in his spot—standing, tall, like a tower, his eyes searching, scanning, seeking—and suddenly you are back in prison, caught in the middle of a poorly-planned escape, the man's eyes like scopes of a rifle, ready to take you down.

Finally, the man shakes his head and follows his wife and children onto the tarmac.

You take a deep breath, lean against the bookrack, and exhale.

"Hey."

Shit. You turn around and prepare to surrender.

"Are you going to buy something or what?" An old man walks up from behind you and puts a sign on the window. "I need to close up."

You look around the little store and realize you're the only one left. "I guess not," you say, breathing again. "Sorry."

You walk upstairs, take a seat at the bar, and think about your next move.



You approach the porter out by the curb. "A good day?"

"In a big way," he replies, intently counting his money.

You notice a row of taxis. It's dusk; the travelers from the last flight into Santa Barbara have gone. "Student?"

He nods, still counting. "But on days like this, who needs college?"

You smile, look toward the coast, then toward the university. "Live around here?"

"Isla Vista," he says, referring to the ghetto of students next to the UC Santa Barbara campus. He smacks the stack of bills against his wrist. "Yes!" Then, almost as an afterthought, he asks, "Why?"

"I need a ride."

"Sorry."

You hand him a ten-dollar bill.

"Shit, lady." He looks around. "Put that away. Those taxi guys see me give you a ride for money—they'll have my ass canned." He glances at his stash, then up the hill. "It's only a couple of miles," he says. "Walk."

You slip the money back into your pocket. "I'll give you something else."

"What?"

“You know what I mean.”

He stares at your chest, then glances at the taxi drivers and then the counter inside the terminal. When he is done with his survey, he looks back at you and says, “My car’s over here.”



It isn’t easy being a woman.

Your first clue was the erection at the airport. The next was the Neanderthal way you removed the sweat from your brow in the bookstore. But when your gentleman friend opens your door, you have to bite your tongue to keep from laughing. And when your new friend says, “Here you go, baby,” you have to stop yourself from grunting and saying, “Oh, please.” But when the guy grabs your ass as you slip into your seat, you see white, stand back up, and summon every form of possible restraint to keep yourself from ripping off the guy’s face with your new Nordstrom nails.

“What’s wrong?” he says.

You glare at him a moment, then break into a smile while slapping him lightly on the side of his face. “You’re cute.”

The guy laughs like Beavis and Butthead, then moves to his side of the car. Once he starts driving, he talks—mindless chatter about how he could’ve gone to Stanford, but couldn’t justify spending all that money. And about how he could’ve gotten straight A’s this quarter but, gee, the weather was so nice, and he likes to hang out on the beach, smoke a little weed, “you know, chill.” And he talks about his women—how many there are, when he can have them, and in what way. But it’s when he begins describing the new little accouterments he plunks into college girls’ cocktails you decide you’ve had enough, and say, “Turn here.”

“But the library’s down there,” he protests.

“It’s quieter down here.” You point to the eucalyptus trees lining the narrow road. “Less conspicuous.”

“Right,” the Porter says. “I hear ya.” He pulls into a spot across from a dark building. “Okay, baby,” he says, as he turns off the engine. “Your turn.” He swings his body toward you, opens his legs, and points at his crotch.

“Whoa, Quick Draw,” you say, sliding closer. “Warm me up a little.”

He makes that same, stupid laugh and leans into your face.

“No kissing.”

He frowns, then looks at your generous but inflated chest. “Take off your top.”

You chuckle, and say, “Eat me.”

“Hey,” he snaps. “I give you a ride, I talk to you, I’m nice to you and shit. Now you give me—”

“No,” you say as a smile inches up the side of your face. You lean toward him, place his

hand under your skirt, and whisper, “You do me first.”



You couldn’t help but howl when you saw the horror on Little Big Man’s face when he pulled down your panties and stared straight into the eye of your penis. The guy nearly gave himself a concussion when he jerked back his head and slammed it against the dashboard. You thought guys like this were in prison. Now you know they’re everywhere; the only difference is the institution.

It’s been nearly ten years since you left UC Santa Barbara; the campus shows little change. Eucalyptus trees still envelope the streets, and the smell of tar is everywhere. As you walk up the library steps, a swift sea breeze whips your hair, reminding you you’re not a man. You think it’s time to check your face, but first you decide to check the schedule.

“We’re open all night,” the Reference Desk guy politely says. “It’s finals week.”

“Oh...right. Thanks.”

You walk toward a corner of the room where the big, cushy couches lean against huge glass windows. As you pass the elevator, you consider riding it to the eighth floor to take in the view. But the idea doesn’t appeal to you anymore; nothing appeals like it used to.

You lie down on one of the couches, remove the file from your bag, and begin reading about Rick Ruiz and Camarillo State Hospital. It’s hard to concentrate, however; you’re too distracted by the past. How, four years ago, the psychologist’s tests said you were a pedophile. How his court testimony landed you in prison. And how his collection of mistakes made the guards turn away while you thought you were alone in the shower. Finally, you give up and close your eyes to rest.

The couch is softer than your bunk; the voices around you are soft, too. Some of them are even female. It’s been a long time since you slept to the tune of a woman’s voice, and you settle into the sofa certain you will sleep better tonight than you have in years.

Then you bolt up. You look around the big room, wondering why you can’t sleep. Electricity runs down your arms and legs; images flash in your mind.

You hear a voice. But when you listen to what it’s saying, you realize you hear yourself.

You’re rehearsing your lines; that’s why you can’t sleep. Plus, you’re too excited—for the second time today, maybe the second time in years, you’re looking forward to waking up.

You lean over, retrieve Ruiz’ file, and resume making plans for the man who infected you. 