

The Blind Tattooist

by Alex Delve

The fair had left, and the field should have been empty. Only it wasn't. Instead an old tent stood proudly, tiny in the vastness of the space.

A faded wooden sign stood in front of it:

Enter with an infinite maybes. Leave with a single certainty.

Andy stood unwilling outside the tent, his hand gripping the rain-slick canvas of the doorway. An indefinable wrongness fizzed in the air like radio waves.

"Go on, you're not scared, are you?" called Lucy from a few steps behind.

That settled it. Couldn't turn back now. Andy stepped across the threshold and allowed the canvas to fall closed behind him.

The tent was tiny. If he laid down and stretched out his arms, he might have just been able to reach the other side. In reality, however, he wouldn't have been able to do so, because of the two chairs in the centre of the room. One was large, reclined and empty. It was covered in dark brown leather, frayed in a number of places so that a wooden skeleton peeked through. The other was smaller, a standard chair as one might find at a dinner table. An old woman was sat in it. She said nothing, nor did she look at Andy. In fact, she didn't seem to be looking at anywhere in particular.

He shouldn't have been able to see her. There were no sources of illumination in the tent, and the canvas was completely opaque, no spots of leaking light. It should have been pitch black. Instead the tent was lit with a warm, dancing light, as though candles were ringed around

the outside.

"Please," the old woman said. "Sit down." She didn't look up.

"Excuse me?" asked Andy.

The old woman didn't reply. Just continued to sit with her infinite patience. Andy moved as though to leave, but thought of Lucy outside, her taunts of cowardice. He walked over and lay in the leather chair. It felt somehow comfortable, like the embrace of a loved one, or a log fire, only not quite.

"So, then," asked the old woman. "Have you made your choice?"

"My choice?"

The old woman took Andy's hand and turned it so his palm faced up. She began to trace her finger along the ridges and lines in his skin. He looked over at her, trying to read her face, understand what might be going on. Instead, he drew breath. Her eyes were irisless, the colour of sour milk.

"A-are you blind?" asked Andy, feeling ridiculous as the words tumbled from his mouth.

"No, dear. I just see differently to you. Like, for instance, I can see great potential for you."

"You what? What is this, some kind of fortune telling scam? Next you'll be telling me to cross your palm with silver."

A little smile creased the corners of the old woman's face. "No scam."

"Prove it."

"I can tell you that just outside this tent is a woman whom you have a great interest in."

"All that tells me is you have someone on the outside, watching."

Again, the old woman smiled. "How about that you almost kissed her last night, but didn't, or-" Andy moved to interrupt but the old woman held up a bony finger and stopped him. "-or that you are planning to invite her over for pizza tonight and try again?"

Andy had no reply. That was in his head, nowhere else. With little other option he slumped down and nodded some form of consent to this woman.

Something started to buzz. It seemed to be coming from under his chair, but it leached into his bones, into his teeth, into his consciousness. Something bit his arm, just below the elbow. Andy looked down and realised with sour horror that the old woman was tattooing him.

The need to move blossomed in his mind, but before he could the old woman touched him on the forehead with a single finger and he found that he couldn't. Or, more accurately, that he had no desire to. As he watched the old woman work, a tree of black ink blossomed along his arm. It had three curving branches, ripe with monochrome foliage. It must have been spasming muscles under his skin, but Andy could have sworn the leaves were swaying.

"So then," asked the old woman. "Have you made your choice?"

"Wealth," replied Andy. His voice sounded as though he was underwater, slurred and slow. "Wealth. With money, Lucy will be mine anyway."

The old woman muttered something to herself, but Andy did not hear what. She bent down and began to tattoo again. Andy watched as an apple, red as Lucy's lips, bloomed into being on the middle branch. He hadn't noticed her change to colour. As the last drop of ink seeped into his skin, he felt his phone buzz. He was too dazed to answer it.

"OK. Done," said the old woman. As soon as she had spoken, Andy felt his awareness rush back to him like a tsunami. Terror quickly followed. He shot up out of the chair and stumbled out of the tent, not looking back at the old woman, not even for a moment.

The sunlight burned like fire. He shouted into the tear streaked blur. "Lucy? Lucy, you here?"

No answer.

As if as an afterthought, Andy pulled out his phone. He had a text message waiting, so he read it.

His mouth turned dry.

Sorry to love you and leave you but just got a msg from that hot guy I was telling you about. See you tomorrow, assuming I make it home ;)

Andy slumped to his knees as the world span around him. He dropped his phone, but didn't realise. The only feeling was the pain from his new tattoo. He glanced down.

It was a tree, with three curving branches. The middle one bore an apple, red as Lucy's lips. The other two rotted away as he watched.