12-1-2000

Don't Call Me "Baby"

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Recommended Citation

Slack, Nicole (2000) "Don't Call Me "Baby"," The Promethean: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol9/iss1/16

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The entire scene was a blur, as if I were looking through the eyes of an old man with cataracts. The sun was shining with its own blinding brilliance, adding to the watery effect. I gulped in deep breaths of air, like a drowning man, and felt the rest of my meager lunch rush past my lips and spill on the grass before me. My shivering body heaved a few more times before subsiding to a silent sob and an overwhelming feeling of fatigue.

“Oh my God! Miss? Are you all right?”

I lifted a heavy hand to ward off the man, but he still took hold of my shoulder, gently, and again asked how I was.

_Do I look all right?_ But the words would not come yet. I struggled to pull my senses back together, like the pieces of a stubborn puzzle. I was finally able to look into the dark eyes that now searched my face for any more signs of illness. After apparently determining that, yes, the lady was all right, the man’s features relaxed, and to my relief, so did his hold on my shoulders.

“Is there anyone I could go get for you? Are you here with someone?”

I reined in my tongue not a moment too soon. _He means well,_ I told myself. _Just be patient._ Unfortunately for him, patience was not something I could muster out of the depths of my pain at the moment. I attempted a sincere smile and stood up as straight as I could. I braced my hand against the tree I had taken refuge behind just moments before the wave of nausea hit me full in the stomach.

“I was just taking a walk, and, well, I suppose it must have been something I ate,” I lied. _Oh please just leave me alone,_ I pleaded silently to the stranger who was showing absolutely no signs of leaving.

“Let me help you. Do you have a car here? Mine is just over there. I could give you a ride to your home.” Again the man took hold of my arm as I tottered a bit while trying to take a step. Damn. No real delicate way out of this one.

“Actually,” I cringed inwardly knowing what my next words would lead to, “I walked here.” The man paused and looked at me quizzically.

“Walked? From where? Do you live in the apartments near here?”

“No exactly. I came from a restaurant.” The stranger tipped his head in a way that was almost endearing.

“Which one?” I gulped hard as back flashes of the events in that restaurant that led me to this stop burst forth, and felt that going over the situation with this stranger would be like bending down and slurping up what my stomach had just rejected. I gave a moan and pretended to once again bend over in agony.

“Oh geez, I’m sorry! Come on, I’ll get you home.” He put his arm around my shoulders and carefully guided me toward the parking lot.

Once he had set me inside the passenger side and shut the door, I was gripped with reality. _Did I just let some strange man put me in his car? What the hell was I thinking?_ Too late. He got in, started the car, backed up, and we were off. I leaned my head back against the head rest and let the low rumble of the car slow the racing of my mind. Slowly, almost seductively, the scent of the car’s leather, exhaust blowing in the open window, and something else, like after shave, all mingled together to tease my nose. I closed my eyes even tighter, as if that would shut out the smell.
"I'm afraid that if you don't give me some kind of direction, we'll just be driving around until I run out of gas." I opened my eyes and looked at the stranger who was now displaying toothpaste commercial tooth set into a slightly bronzed face.

"Oh, take a left up here at the light, then down to 44th where you take another right. I live in that neighborhood." He nodded, then looked back at the road, and we drove on in silence for a few more minutes.

"By the way, my name is Will." "Alice." Will smiled almost intimately as he glanced sideways at me. "Well, Alice, I just happen to have a plastic bag in the back seat if you need it." I pursed my lips and looked out the window.

Real valiant of you. I'll help you, babe, but remember my car is more important here.

"Thanks." When we pulled up into the driveway, it was only temporarily relieved to find that Sara's car was not there. (Good! I have some time alone... with Will. Oh Lord.) Will got out before I could even speak, walked around to my side, and like a perfect gentleman offered me his hand to help me out. All this kindness was starting to wear me down, and I gave him a genuine smile as he escorted me to the door. When there, I thought what the hell, and invited him in.

Will took my jacket and went straight to the kitchen (all a person has to do is look to the left to see it from the door), rummaging something about getting me a glass of water.

"Make yourself at home," I teased slightly. He threw me one of those smiles that I was finding he had an abundance of. He let out an oh and stretched out on the couch and slept fitfully, dreaming of devils in the forms of angels, and Jason.

Three weeks later he had been dead in the restaurant. We both sat there for a few minutes, and I could feel Sara's arm tensing up.

"I'll be back." Sara rose, picked up her keys off the wood floor, and was gone. Great, now she's ready to smash his head in. I had no clue what she planned to do, but I was hoping it would be deadly.

I put my head in my hands and concentrated on breathing regularly. The scream started out deep within me, from my heart, working its way up until it filled my entire being and burst from my lips. It didn't stop until my eyes watered and my lungs and throat burned. Then I stretched out on the couch and slept fitfully, dreaming of devils in the forms of angels, and Jason.

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"Alice! Alice, wake up." I moaned and opened my eyes, only to close them immediately as the bright light shot in painfully.

"Where have you been?" I asked Sara sleepily. She sat on the coffee table, and when I was finally able to open my eyes and see her through the blur, she was smiling.

"Nuthin' really. I just went over to Jason's place and told the landlord I was here to pick up my five pounds of crack from the guy in 314. The landlord got all red in the face, then asked me if I was an undercover cop, and I said no, but if I didn't get my buzz real soon I wasn't sure how stupid I would act. He called the cops on me, so I hauled outta there. I believe we can rest assured that Jason will soon be sleeping in that pretty little car of his."

At first I was horrified that she could do something so terrible. Then I laughed so hard I fell off the couch. Sara smiled, then went to the kitchen, coming back with a cup of coffee. She handed it to me, and I sipped it thankfully.

"So it's Friday, and the night is still young. I'm taking you out." I looked up as Sara walked out of the room, calling over her shoulder that she was ready when I was. I swished the coffee around in the cup, then set it down on the table. There were only two things that I found worked well as universal cure-alls: sleep and dancing. I was not sure I could take a night out on the town at the moment. I still felt overwhelmed by the day, and a bit tipsy. A rave. That's what I needed. It was the best thing to get my mind off of everything, since sleep obviously wouldn't solve this one. Though I was never really too fond of them—all the smoke, strobe lights, and feeling like a sweaty sardine—it just sounded like a good idea, being the best distraction in town. You did not really go to a rave to meet people. You went to get stoned, plastered, whatever, and to dance. We left for the downtown warehouse an hour later.

It took an hour just to get in, and in that time I had been pinched in the butt, whistled at, and some idiot even tried to make a grab at Sara's (meagerly clad) cleavage. Let's just say he now sounds like a 13-year-old going through puberty. The rave was, well, a rave. Nothing much happened out of the ordinary. Some guy fell at my feet, and at first I thought he had passed out. Then I realized he was just trying to get a peck up my dress, so I gave him a swift kick to the head. Now he's unconscious. The night passed more quickly than I had expected, and when the party finally started to break up, it was
nearly four-thirty. On the way home I fell asleep in the car, and barely made it into the house, only to fall asleep again on the couch, not bothering to change.

I had survived.

For the next month I was in a mental coma. I went to a cafe every Sunday with “the eccentrics,” one of Sara’s nicknames for those people who I only enjoy talking to because they get me thinking. I would never really be friends with them, however. I considered calling Will, just to tell him I was all right, physically. I only got as far as picking up the receiver and dialing the first few numbers. Instead, I ate an entire pint of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream. I went to other raves, to dance ‘til I dropped. I even took up cooking again. But inside I was just empty. Like my body was walking around doing everything without me thinking about it. I wasn’t sad, angry, ashamed. A black nothingness seemed to cover me, freezing everything inside me. Then, I found a way out.

* * * *

“Alice, I found it! But... Ack! Stupid spider! I hate those things. Alice, where are you? I found the suitcase!” I sat up and called to Sara so she could find me in my room. Spread around me was every piece of clothing I currently owned, neatly folded and separated into piles. Sara walked in and dropped the suitcase by the door. She stepped over the piles of jeans and sweaters, landing on top of a stack of old papers I was throwing out. She nearly slipped, causing me to giggle. Sara glared at me but her annoyance quickly faded into amazement as she glanced about my room.

“Gecz, Alice, I had no idea you had so much junk!”

“Hey now, only half is junk. The other half is trash.” I picked up a faded tee shirt and sucked on my bottom lip as I contemplated what to do with the thing.

Crazy as this may sound I actually remembered that it was the same tee shirt I was wearing when I first met Jason. A Hard Rock Cafe shirt from Orlando, given to me by a friend, was now just a souvenir to look at.

“Burn it.” I smiled at Sara, and we took the box of things I had set aside as “Jason memoirs” out to the back yard. We toasted marshmallows over the fire fueled by the memoirs and made s’mores for dinner. I have never tasted anything so satisfying. When the fire truck showed up, we claimed that some punk kid had gotten into the yard and started the fire. Sara flirted with them as a distraction while I snatched up any remains of the carnage that used to be favorite memoirs. Two of the five fire fighters left their phone numbers. Sara and I blew kisses as they drove off. Men can be so easy, it’s awe-inspiring.