

Michael Cartmell

Madeleine

All the teachers loved her. She was the sort of girl that would hand in a 10 page essay for an optional piece of homework, while the rest of the class couldn't be bothered. She never bragged or showed the intention of trying to impress, though. In fact, she was one of the quietest in the class. It gave her that modesty, which I imagine was what kept her classmates from taking exception to her. No, she wasn't disliked, envied or made fun of. She just sat there attentively, every week in the same seat in the corner of the class, with a cute sort of smile that pushed her cheeks so high they almost covered her eyes. I'm not sure anyone really noticed that. Nobody seemed to pay her much attention at all. But Christ, I wanted her.

It wasn't long before we started going out. I'd sit in our Business Studies room early, before the class started; she was always the first there. I even used to sit with her in the library between classes, while my mates were busy getting stoned by the bike sheds or nicking stuff from the science labs. She didn't seem to mind the distraction and usually offered to help with my work before starting her own, which no doubt she'd already finished anyway. We didn't talk about much else besides school work, but I didn't particularly mind. I enjoyed being with her.

She was quiet and never really mentioned any hobbies. Occasionally she'd talk about her mother, or her cat, or the book she was reading at the time. Other girls would speak to her but she didn't have anyone that she'd hang out with. I loved her innocence. Even the white suit she wore to college was spotlessly clean, perfectly complementing her red hair and freckled face. She was pure, in her own way. I couldn't resist being attracted to her.

We stayed late in the library one night. It was dark and she didn't protest when I offered to walk her home. I walked in casually and took off my shoes, which she considered for a moment before belatedly inviting me in. Her house was small, old-fashioned but tidy and uncluttered. School portraits in antique frames hung on the wall. They were all of her. I touched her hand and we went upstairs. The sex was quiet and polite.

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For months, it was perfect. I'd gone off my mates and spent most of my time with Madeleine. She enjoyed walking in the countryside. It even snowed a couple times and it always seemed to settle neatly on her hair. Other times we just stayed in and played board games. I've no doubt she'd beat serious Scrabble players if she wasn't so modest. Competition didn't appeal to her. There was a noticeable improvement in my grades, too, and my teachers definitely approved of our relationship. Always knew I had potential, they said. 'You make such a good team.' I smiled and nodded.

It all went a bit weird after that.

My cousin Paul was in town, visiting some friends after a year or two in Germany. He was a mechanic, or something; I never really worked it out. We used to get on when I was younger, so when he said he was going to a gig and it'd be cool to meet up, I figured what the hell, and took Madeleine along with me.

The venue was a grotty back street rock club, with a beer-and-piss stained floor that was like tar to walk on. Layers of paint peeled off the walls which the owners probably thought gave the place its 'character'. Some gothed-up kids were bouncing angrily into each other near the

front of the stage, while the lanky, greasy-haired vocalist spat out something about pain and torture to an absurdly distorted guitar riff. It was shit.

Madeleine didn't seem to mind the place. She might have even liked the music, though I doubted it. She rarely expressed an opinion one way or the other, so it was hard to tell. I took the initiative and led her to the chairs at the back, where the seats were only slightly torn. When we started to kiss, my tongue caught on something inside her mouth and I stopped. 'When did you get that?' I asked.

'What's the matter?'

'The piercing. When did you get it?'

She giggled nervously. 'I don't know what you mean... I don't... are you all right?'

I knew she was lying then, but I didn't press the matter. The band still had an hour to go, and there were better ways to pass the time.

I couldn't stop thinking about it that night. The obtrusive, obscene ball, jutting out of her tongue. It just wasn't like her. I imagined them all over the inside of her mouth like a tiny metallic army going to war, cruelly penetrating her smooth cheeks until her face was an atrocious mass of blood and jarring steel.

I don't think I ever really recognised her after that.

She did start to look different, definitely. Sometimes she'd wear black dresses to college, and I wondered if she just was just trying to fit in around my mates. I didn't want her to be like that. Whenever I asked about it, she just acted playfully ignorant, as if she didn't know what I was talking about. Like I hadn't noticed her change. Even her perfectly soft hair was now messy and bedraggled. Of course I noticed. Who wouldn't?

My friends were useless. I tried talking about her to Tim once, who sat next to us in Business Studies. 'I'm worried about Mad,' I told him. He just laughed. 'Don't think you've got anything to be worried about mate. She's not that sort. Never looks at another guy.'

'No, I don't mean that. She's acting different recently. You've not noticed?'

'Seems the same to me. Still makes us look bad when she hands in a ton of paper for her essays, like.'

I told him about the piercing.

'Heh hey! Always the quiet ones eh mate? Wish my girlfriend would get one of those. Supposed to be better, y'know. Is it then? Eh?'

I gave up after that. The teachers were still the same towards her, and she continued to turn in excessive homework pieces. It seemed like I was the only one that really knew her. I felt alone.

We were in my bedroom watching *Dune* on DVD. I always rented crap films when she was over. She never caught on. We were only about 20 minutes into this one when I pulled her on top of me.

She started to undo my shirt with one hand while keeping my shoulder pinned with the other, rocking us backwards and forwards. The soundtrack coming from the TV wasn't ideal, but I couldn't reach the remote. I put my free arm round her head as she nuzzled into my shoulder, then I ran my hand softly down her back. Before long my shoulder started to get uncomfortable, so I nudged her gently. She didn't get the hint. The discomfort turned into pain, which gradually became so sharp that I clenched my teeth and turned my head into the pillow. Then I felt a trickle of something wet on my arm as the pain grew intense. I groaned and sat up, pushing her away.

'What the.. what were you doing?' I gasped.

'I'm sorry, didn't you like it? I thought..'

I grabbed my shoulder with my other hand and felt damp. 'Shit, I'm bleeding. What the hell Mad? What the-'

'I don't see anything. Come here...'

I felt again. Flesh. My hand was covered in blood. I stammered, 'You bit me? Jesus, Mad, what's going on? What's happening to you?' I got out of bed clenching my wounded shoulder and fumbled for the light.

'There's nothing there... really there isn't. Please, you're scaring me.' she said. There was a tremble in her voice as she pleaded with me. I turned on the light and to my horror saw that she was right. The blood had vanished and the pain was gone.

She had started sobbing. 'You're scaring me,' she said again, 'I don't know what to do any more. I thought you liked me.'

I was frozen as I watched her cry into the bed, her fine red hair flowing over her immaculately pale skin. She looked like an angel in prayer as she knelt on the pillow with her head down; innocent and afraid. Afraid to look at me, at what I'd become. I didn't recognise her.

I didn't recognise her.