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DERIVATIVE EMOPUNK BULLSHIT

BY VALERIE Z. LEWIS

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The best thing about Sasha's funeral was seeing everyone from the old neighborhood. I showed up with Ezquerra, and everyone was psyched that we were still together after all these years. They said he looked exactly the same. Ezquerra was wearing a black tank top that showed off the blue vine tattoos that wound down from his shoulders to his wrists. He had on girls' jeans that were too tight, a black fedora, and there was dark pink lipstick smeared around his eyes. He was the best-looking guy at the wake.

Whenever someone is in the hospital, the first thing they say to you is how everything is okay. I remember when I was a kid and my grandma had a heart attack. My mother came into my bedroom, where I was playing with matchbox cars on the floor, and said, "John, I have to tell you something. Grandma's going to be okay." It hadn't occurred to me that grandma *wouldn't* be okay until my mom assured me that she would.

It was the same with Sasha's car accident. I was reading my Art History textbook in the living room, and I had my headphones on super loud. (Dirty Water Addicts. If you haven't heard their new album your life is totally lacking.) Ezquerra answered the phone, and then came up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. I popped out my ear buds in the middle of "Fortune Cookie Suicide". Ezquerra was looking as somber as a boy can look while wearing black eyeshadow. "Sasha's going to be fine," he said. Five hours later, she died.

"Do not speak to the dude dressed like a vampire," Ezquerra whispered to me as we stood by the entrance and surveyed the room. He stuffed five Mass cards into the back pocket of his tight jeans and nodded toward a guy on the other side of the room wearing a red cape. "He writes derivative emopunk bullshit." Coming from Ezquerra, this is the ultimate insult. He'd rather talk to a convicted sex offender than someone he considers derivative. Which is actually how he met his drummer.

I was Sasha's cousin, and everyone else related to us was either dead or in Florida, so I got to speak first. I walked to the podium, and Ezquerra moved to the wall beside me, where he leaned next to a flower arrangement, absentmindedly picking off pieces of it and putting them in his mouth as I spoke. I gripped the edge of the podium and looked down at the Bible in front of me. Its pages were so thin they looked like rolling papers, and if Sasha was here, here but not in a coffin behind me, she would probably laugh at my joke even though it wasn't really funny. Sasha was nice like that.

I wanted to talk about how nice Sasha was. How our parents weren't around much when we were kids, so I used to hang out with her a lot, and I was a skinny, nervous little boy, and she looked out for me. She fought a kid two years older than us once when he was picking on me. She taught me how to play guitar. She took me to my first museum and got me into art. She bought me my first watercolors. I wanted to start crying and say that when we all grew up and got jobs and degrees and boyfriends and bands, I stopped calling Sasha every night to talk about what TV shows we'd watched, and we stopped going out to clubs every Saturday, and sitting at a table in Denny's for hours in the

middle of the night drinking coffee and laughing, singing songs we didn't know the words to, punch drunk with exhaustion, and I wish I could go back and call up Sasha last weekend and invite her out to a show and hug her under the blue and red lights of the stage and tell her I love her a thousand times.

Next to me, Ezquerria stuffed an entire snapdragon into his mouth. He would hate it if I did that. Crying at funerals is even more cliché than bad vampire emo.

So instead I picked at a corner of Leviticus until it tore, and I said, "Once a few years ago, Sasha and I went to Unlimited Stage & Grill to see Ezquerria's band play. Since I had the car that day, I'd brought Ezquerria's guitar for him, but the bouncer wouldn't let us in early. It was only an hour before the show, and they couldn't even do sound check until I got the guitar to him. The bouncer was this huge guy with a shaved head and neck tattoos, but Sasha wasn't scared. She got up on her toes and said, 'If you don't let us into this club, I am going to skull fuck you. That means I'll kill you, decapitate you, melt the flesh off your head, and fuck you in one of the many holes in your skull.' And the bouncer let us in." I lowered my eyes so no one would see them getting wet. "I love you Sasha, you crazy fucking bitch."

My speech set the tone for the afternoon, and one after the other, everyone got up to tell a funny Sasha story. There was the time she was in the band Mad Girl Riot, and she wanted to trash a hotel room so she could feel like a rock star, but they were staying in a Motel Six in Wayne, New Jersey, and the lamps were all bolted to the table, so she settled for writing "Sasha Was Here" all over the walls with a ballpoint pen. There was the time she hired a male prostitute for my eighteenth birthday, but he ended up being a cop, and Ezquerria had to come bail twenty kids out of prison because they arrested half the party. There was the time Claire from Cincinnati Spiderman got breast cancer, and Sasha arranged a massive benefit concert at the all-ages club to help pay for her treatment, and then hooked up with Claire's boyfriend in the men's bathroom. Even the derivative vampire had a nice story about how Sasha danced with him at a party once to cheer him up after his girlfriend had dumped him for someone she met at a Magic the Gathering convention. After the funeral, we all went out to the bar where we used to go every weekend. It had gotten new hardwood floors and a jukebox full of adult contemporary music, but we didn't care. We all had drinks and toasted Sasha.

The next day I sat in front of the TV with my Modern Art textbook, listening to Sequin Salvation's Bury Me Deeper (not as good as their first album, but still worth it, if just for the live tracks) while Ezquerria watched MTV2 and flipped through a thick black book. It took me a minute to realize that he'd stolen the Bible from the funeral home. I lowered the volume on my iPod and watched him. He was only half paying attention the TV, his eyes flickering back to the tissue-thin pages of the Bible every few seconds as he took in a sentence or two, and then moved on to the next page. His eyes were elaborately lined in black and red. He must've spent a half hour doing his face, but he hadn't brushed his hair at all, and it hung in dark, messy clumps.

The next morning he had to work, and I had an early class, and then he had a show at night. But I still wanted to take him out. I wanted to go to a club where no one knew us, grab him underneath the blue and red lights, kiss his mouth, bite his ears, mess up his make-up, and say I love you until my mouth was dry, and my sweat smelled like alcohol, and in the loud windowless concrete room of this fucking worthless existence we would dance and live forever.

Ezquerria turned another thin page, careful not to tear it, and gently smoothed it out. "If the Bible is canon," he said. "Does that mean Evangelical Christian beliefs are fanfiction?"

I wanted to tell him that that exact moment (his eyes, his hair, his skin through the torn knee of his jeans, the melody of his voice, the rustle of the pages) was how I would remember him when he was dead, but it sounded too much like the lyrics to a Running Through Bridges song, and Ezquerria hated derivative bullshit like that.

"Let's go out," I said.

Ezquerria looked up, surprised, but only for a moment. "Cool," he said. "Let me just go put on some mascara." And he went into the bathroom, leaving behind his Bible and the scent of wet flowers.

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