Please Fear Me

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Fairlight Books

First published by Fairlight Books 2024

Fairlight Books
Summertown Pavilion, 18–24 Middle Way, Oxford,
OX2 7LG

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

ISBN 978-1-914148-61-3

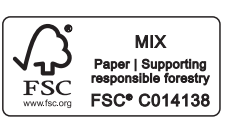
www.fairlightbooks.com

Printed and bound in Czech Republic

Cover Design © Emma Rogers

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Please Fear Me

1

'Stay still.' She stretches the skin of my eyelid tight with one finger. 'If you twitch again, I'm giving up and you can paint your own eyes on.'

I would nod, if not for the acrylic nail pressing into the flesh beside my left eye socket. I hold my breath, block out the familiar smell of cigarette smoke, hairspray and bubblegum shimmer body mist. She paints thick, careful strokes.

'Okay. Open.' She leans back to inspect her work. 'They aren't even.' She snaps the compact closed, wipes the tiny brush with an already lipstick-stained Kleenex. 'But no one's gonna look at you up close. So whatever. You ready?'

I can only see a sliver of myself in the mirror on the far side of the room. Blink my affirmation with a heavy, unfamiliar eye.

2

Violet treats everything like a threat. She opens both doors to walk into the audition room, green-lidded eyes scanning and darting to every corner, one-two-three-four.

Auditions are easy to get, which I suspect has something to do with the perverse satisfaction of watching other people fail. They're easy to get, and hard to believe in after a while. Violet has dragged me all over the coast to auditions in theaters, dive bars, performing arts collectives and a converted school bus whose owner told us he was cooking up the next big thing, the next great big American traveling showcase with pirates and cowboys and pixies.

Even he didn't want what we had to offer.

Violet stands before the three men sitting behind a fold-up table. There is absolutely nothing on the table.

'My name is Violet Laborde, and this is Smidge. We are living dolls.'

We always perform without music, because neither of us wants to put a target on our backs by carrying around a jukebox, and you never know if these places will provide one.

Violet says it improves focus and coordination to perform without music, anyway. That it adds drama and suspense for the spectator.

I volunteered to be the tied-up one for our new performance. Violet has become adept at the crosses and knots of wrapping my

body in a secure network of rope, quickly enough to get the show on the road, and with enough flourish to draw admiration and intrigue before we have even begun.

When she first recruited me, I asked what it meant, which proved to be the wrong question.

'It's performance art,' she had scowled. She'd been filing her newly applied plastic fingernails into sharp little claws.

'But what does it *mean*?' I had persisted. In my head I was thinking, *but what is the* point. I would never say that out loud, though.

'It's about fragility. It's about being bound.'

'Bound to *what*?'

'Bound to rules that someone else made up for you, some people you don't even know, and they're probably all dead by now, and yet here we all are, still listening to them. No one thinks about that, Smidge. They've only come up with the words so far for bullshit like religion and free will. And they don't think about it because they don't have to think about it, and I want to make them. But I don't want to burn shit down to get people's attention, you know? I want to make it beautiful.'

Sometimes I just let Violet keep talking, even if I don't follow. Somehow I always understand the feeling behind what she's saying, even if the words don't make sense to me.

'And tragic.'

'What?'

'Beautiful and tragic. Like Shakespeare.'

*

We finish with elegance and grace, something that Violet will inform me of later while we shop for defective plastic-wrapped sandwiches that we can ask for discounts on at the corner store. The three men behind the empty fold-up table are not impressed.

'Listen, ladies. This isn't a strip club. That's not what we're trying to do here. Why don't you take it to the Poodle? That's down on 14th.'

One of the other ones whacks him with the back of his hand. 'Man, they're like thirteen.'

Sixteen, I correct him. Only in my head.

'Do your parents know what you're up to?' the second one asks. 'Where are you girls staying? Are you local or what?'

'None of your concern.'

'Come on. If you're really underage, this isn't cool. Now you've made us responsible, doing all that, not telling us you were minors beforehand, I don't know. We could be implicated for some shit.'

The first one snorts. 'Yeah, and what are we supposed to do about it? Call the cops?'

Cops. That's the magic word to secure a quick exit from Violet and me. This isn't the first time someone's threatened the cops on us, citing concern and the goodwill of their hearts.

No one has caught up with us yet, though. Sometimes I wonder if anyone bothers actually calling, or whether speaking it into existence is enough to soothe their consciences. Maybe they don't know how to describe what to look for, although it feels to me as if we stand out no matter where we go. Two girls, could be anywhere from thirteen to twenty-five. One of them in a floor-length gown, big hair, big muscles, big eyeliner wings; the other a beanpole in fishnets. Both of them a little ratty, maybe a little smelly depending on their current situation. Bulging backpacks. Makeup smeared on thick. We look like trouble on purpose. Flash our poison in obvious neon-sign signals, just like insects warning predators away. We aren't trying to hide.

Violet doesn't untie me before leaving, just leads me by the wrists out the back door and into the alley. I watch tiny bulbs of sweat populate the space between her wrinkled brows as she yanks

me free. She's giving me rope burn. It feels kind of good in the sudden sting of a January evening.

'They didn't get it.'

I shrug. 'I don't know. Didn't you call it "live erotica" once?'

'No. Yes. Yeah, I did, but I was just trying to make you understand that it tells a story, and the point is the story, and the message, not the fact that we're tied up or whatever. If people can't get past that, then they don't get it. You know?'

I nod. I don't know. I just want her to calm down so she can remember that she is hungry, and we can go to the corner store. I want a Slim Jim.

We are accustomed to our act being met with revulsion, confusion and occasional concern. 'Where are your mothers?' someone asked us not three weeks ago, hard-jawed on the word *mothers* so that it only just slipped out between nearly clenched teeth.

Mine is in California, where I left her last year.

I wonder what she would think if she saw our performance; whether she would be horrified or impressed. On the one hand, she was always critical of proper society and mistrustful of the institutions upholding it – she might appreciate the subversiveness of our art. On the other hand, she might say I was a slut.

Slut was what she called me when I wore a pleated skater skirt for the first day of seventh grade, a thrift-store score that I had been so proud of and then never wore again. *Trash* is what she called me later that year, when I bleached stripes into my hair and dyed them pink.

Liar is what she called me when I later reminded her of these moments. 'I would never say that about you, beautiful girl. You're perfect. You know how to take care of me.'

This is what is difficult about loving an addict.

They will assign you nouns and adjectives: *liar* and *slut*, *ungrateful* and *selfish*. They will accuse you of not caring about

them, of only wanting to feel like you have control over something. Of using them to feel needed. They will tell you that they don't need you, that they were better off before you. They will cry and remain able to talk through their tears to say that they hate you – no, they will correct themselves, that's not what they meant, they just hate that you exist when they've already been ruined; they don't want to raise another fuckup like them.

The next day, they will say they don't remember anything.

It gets increasingly difficult the older you grow, the more you learn about the world outside of your house, the more acutely you realize that there are other options beyond continuing the endurance trial of loving the addict unconditionally. It becomes so difficult that once those options come into focus, it feels impossible *not* to choose one – so in order to survive, you escape.