

Red Skies

by Alice Reagan

I work in a bakery on Saturdays. It's a decent job, I guess. I love how the bread smells, fresh and warm out of the oven. I have to wear a blue uniform, and I always manage to get flour all over it by the end of my shift. Most of the people who come in are nice, unassuming types. Occasionally, though, we get your garden-variety weirdo. Take last Saturday, for instance.

It was almost 3:30 and I was just cleaning up around the store—wiping the counters, spraying the glass cases—when this man came into the empty store. He wasn't very tall, and he had dark hair and a thick Greek accent when he opened his mouth to order a birthday cake for the following week. I took the order, asking what color frosting and what name to write on top.

When I was finished, he leaned his forearm, which was very hairy, across the counter and bent his face right next to mine—so close that if I just inched forward our noses would touch. I didn't know quite what to do, so I didn't do anything. He lowered his eyes to about my midsection, opened his mouth and asked me, all bedroom eyes and Greek ac-

cent and about 45 years old: “Are you in love?”

I remember thinking, *Uh-oh*, and then, for lack of something clever to say, just smiling at him, and then kind of spacing out and forgetting he was there. I saw myself on a winter night two months ago with Paul. He and I decided to go ice-skating at the lake near his house. We walked down without talking, our skates tied over our shoulders and bouncing slightly against our backs, holding hands through our gloves. We skated and laughed and fell down on the hard, snowy ice for a while, the sky a strange red color over our heads, the air cold and at the same time not cold, until we got tired. Then we danced together, holding each other with our whole bodies touching through layers of sweaters and jackets, our breath coming warm out of our mouths. I thought I loved him. The thought was so sweet, so real in my mind, that I could hardly bear it.

Then I flashed to a scene from less than a week ago—me sitting on my bed, curled up in a little ball, talking to my best friend Terry, telling her about how Paul had dumped me for Karen O’Shea, a cheerleader. It was stupid to cry so much, I realized later. Paul was very nice about the whole thing, but at the time I felt angry and hurt.

I must have been daydreaming for only a second, because when I came back, the man was still looking at me expectantly, waiting for an answer.

“No, not today,” I said.

I knew right away that it was a good answer, one that he hadn’t heard before, because he smiled his alligator-tooth smile at me and had to think for a moment.

“Maybe tomorrow you will be in love?” he teased.

Slight pause. “Maybe.”

The man smiled again, searching my face, having met his match. When I turned away to continue cleaning, he finally left. I thought about him for a while, and then I thought about his silly question. I don't know what made me say 'maybe,' but it sure seemed right. The world is full of wonderful possibilities, even for a temporarily boyfriendless, non-cheerleader like me.

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