

## The Beat by Samuel McAlpine

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Right before he removed his bright red pants, Mickey Mouse gave Karl a quizzical sort of look.

Karl stared back, jaw slackened, frozen midway through the motions of his shelf-packing job. He felt the air leave his shrivelled lungs in a gasp and then it was like falling. He couldn't move, he felt compelled to watch.

Aisle five was the washing powder aisle, and running parallel to the shelving was a wall of unpacked boxes. Mickey lifted one and placed it atop another that was lying close by.

As he did this, Minnie Mouse appeared suddenly. Looking unusually tarted and gaudy, she passed him and primly bent herself over the stacked altar he'd just prepared.

Karl shut his eyes so tight it stung. I'm awake. I'm wide awake. I'm at work. It's a Monday. I'm awake. One-two-three-four-five-six-

"Gosh, Minnie, you're a loosey goosey! It's a regular glass of water down there!" Mickey's voice rang helium-pitched and shrill.

Karl opened his eyes and swatted the glasses from his face. Mickey was fucking her from behind, violently. Her outstretched hands gripped the shelf in front and the whole thing shook with each thrust.

Karl's heart fired like a cannon. He bolted up and backed away, bumping a customer who was browsing behind him. She was, apparently, unaware of what was happening.

"Uh... Miss?" Karl managed, his eyes darting from the old woman back to Minnie and Mickey.

She looked up, gesturing to a box of Surf. "Do you have this in the bigger size?"

Karl turned to the mice again. Mickey had now lifted Minnie like a wheelbarrow and was pumping her on an angle. Her legs flailing awkwardly on either side of him, her polka dot dress was inside out and halfway up her body.

"Miss..." Karl's voice wavered. "Are you... I mean, is—"

"Oh! Fuck me, fuck me, Mighty Mouse!" Minnie called out in the background.

"Are you—are you hearing this?"

"Hearing what?" The old woman put down the carton and pushed off down the aisle with her trolley. Karl watched her go, passing right by the animated mice like they weren't even there.

*Oh...* he thought dismally. Then it clicked. Karl took slow steps towards the mice. His hands trembled uncontrollably. He'd been struck with the sudden desire to touch them, to see what might happen. He was within an arm's length when he halted.

Donald Duck had stopped mid-waddle. Already in the process of discarding his jacket—though as a peculiar afterthought, deciding to leave his hat—he cracked his knuckles and continued down the aisle, ignoring Karl, stopping again just shy of Mickey and Minnie.

“I'm here for the roast!” He announced in a squawk.

Karl backed away. Mickey pulled out and left Minnie slumped on the floor while Donald positioned himself. They lifted her, each taking an end, and began working her over like a spit roast.

Another customer passed by, Like the old woman, he paid the orgy no mind at all.

Karl felt his insides lurch and heave. The bitter tang of bile crept into his mouth.

Minnie was slaving with a mouthful of Mickey. Donald, taking her steadily from behind, removed the hand he was using to stimulate her and began high-fiving Mickey. Their laughter filled the air over her cries and the soothing store music.

Then it all started to fade.

Karl squinted. His vision had suddenly become very hazy. Everything seemed to melt and run together. He found his glasses on the floor, yet replacing them did nothing for his sight. The last thing he caught was Mickey's face, twisted in mid-climax. The image burned into his memory and stayed long after everything else had faded.

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Mayweather put the silver pen down on his cluttered desk. “Tell me how you mean exactly.”

“Well, I mean... just what I told you, exactly that. They looked right out of the television. Exactly the same.” Karl sat forward in his chair bringing his elbows to rest on the mahogany.

“Okay, so, what'd they do when you saw them?”

He was silent a moment. “They stood there... mostly.”

Mayweather nodded. His eyes stayed on Karl. “You ever done any drugs?” he asked casually.

“No.”

“I mean ever. What about as a kid?”

“I’ve never done drugs.”

Mayweather gave another nod. “Are you sexually active?”

Karl took his elbows off the desk and folded his arms.

“We’re just trying to rule some things out. Sexually transmitted diseases... it’s perfectly standard.”

“No,” Karl began, shaking his head. “I’m not... active, no.”

“When was the last time you were?”

“Actually,” Karl started, taking his eyes off the doctor, “the only change I’ve noticed is in my sight, it gets worse all the time. My glasses don’t work. I have trouble doing my job—the cartoons, or whatever—I don’t really know about them.”

“Was that the first time you’ve seen things like that?”

Karl didn’t say anything. Mickey’s orgasm face was still scorched in his mind. He folded his arms in a pretzel.

“And has it happened since?”

Karl’s gaze drifted over the doctor’s shoulder. Top Cat was in a corner of the room, busy with a line of alley cats. They were taking turns blowing him while he sat watching Karl watch him. Karl looked back at Mayweather.

“No,” he lied.

The doctor squeaked back in his expensive chair, taking his note pad with him. His eyes remained on Karl just over the horizon of the book. “Your vision comes and goes...” he said, as if to himself. “I think we’ll need some tests done.”

The next three weeks were busy and they went by quickly. Visions continued to crop up randomly around Karl. He did his best to keep them to himself. No doctor he saw had any answers.

On a Monday he was sitting with the Ophthalmologist. She was talking, explaining macular degeneration, and he spewed his breakfast up in a geyser all over her desk. Pebbles and Bam-Bam—somehow rendered in the clutches of sudden adolescence—had appeared just behind the woman using Bam-Bam’s wooden club like a telegraph pole dildo on one another. That regurgitation had him enduring several further

tests under the new theory that his hallucinations and eyesight problems could be viral. When these proved futile, he was back where he started: reading the ultra fine print on charts of gibberish and explaining his long dead family's history with diabetes.

Almost a month later, he was back in Mayweather's office. The doctor was holding up a cross-section diagram of an eyeball that was almost humorously cartoonish.

Karl sat rigidly, trying hard to follow the jargon. Porky Pig was off in the furthest corner with a Penthouse Magazine, masturbating frenziedly.

"You see this line here?" Mayweather asked, gesturing towards the back of the eye with a pointed finger. "That's your optic nerve." He ran his finger along it and then stopped. "And this is the retina, just here."

"Alright..." Karl was nodding, trying to block out Porky's incessant stuttering and stammering. His pink dome head had flushed a deep scarlet in his exertion.

Mayweather continued, pulling down the chart. "When you open your eyes, normally, the nerve cells in the retina send a stream of impulses to the visual parts of the brain. That's how you can see, right?"

Karl nodded.

"If the retina's damaged, or the optic nerve, that stream being sent to the brain isn't as strong as it should be." Mayweather stopped a moment, watching Karl's expression. After a pause, his face set solemnly. "I'm afraid that's why you're losing your sight."

"I'm going blind..."

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that's the case. It also explains the hallucinations. Only a fraction of patients with macular degeneration experience these. There's not a lot we know about it, but it has something to do with those signals not being sent. The brain, it rewires itself, and starts sending signals of its own. The Disney characters you saw, that's your mind trying to compensate for the lack of visual stimulation."

"But why cartoons? Why not something else?"

Mayweather shrugged. "Just something that was stored away in there. Like I said, we don't know that much about it."

Porky, having just finished, was rolling in the puddle of spunk he'd shot onto the floor.

"How can I get rid of them?" asked Karl.

Mayweather opened a drawer and produced a small black screw top bottle. He put it down and slid it across to Karl's side. "Three a day, after meals or whenever you experience a vision."

Karl reached out, as if to take it, but his hand stopped short at what the doctor said next. "But," Mayweather continued, "what the pills are doing, essentially, is blocking those signals that create the visions in the first place." He paused as if to let the idea sink in. "With no visual stimulation being created by the mind, your sight's going to degenerate faster. It'll speed the process up."

Karl was still for a moment. He reached out and took the little bottle. He held it to an angle at which he could still see clearly and turned it over in his hand.

"Catch twenty-two," Mayweather remarked.

"Can I ask your opinion?" Karl put the bottle down. "If you were me..."

Mayweather sunk back in his chair and the expression on his face melted. He was silent for what seemed a long time. "Well, if I was going blind," he said quietly, "I'd probably go and do something I could remember for the rest of my life. Something I could take with me. Something I hadn't done before."

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The pills in his pocket rattled wherever he went, but the sound of them soon had Karl feeling in control and assured. It was the first Friday since his decision and he left work focused and purposeful. He couldn't remember ever having felt this way about anything.

He pulled up at a corner where an immaculate green BMW was parked close to the curb. Something had caught his attention. He squinted hard. In its polished reflection, Karl saw that Magilla Gorilla was lolloping up behind him. He extracted his pills.

Like that, the great ape was gone.

He walked another block before his limbs started to burn. Stopping to rest a moment, there was a hiss and a squeal, and Karl turned to find a bus pulled up. He boarded, gingerly taking a seat. The bus started off down the road. Outside the jostling window, the sun was setting. Tall buildings on either side cast long, deep shadows. It soon grew very dark.

Magilla leaned forward from his seat behind Karl. His great simian arms, thick and brown as tree trunks, hung easy over the hand rail. Again, Karl reached for the bottle. This time, Magilla spoke.

“Hey, c’mon now, buddy boy! You’ll need me for this next bit.”

Karl thought about it a moment. He put the pills back in his pocket.

“Yeah, see, that-a-boy!” said Magilla.

The stop button pinged and the bus slowly came to a halt. Karl stood and followed the monkey down the aisle and onto the street. The wind had come up and was howling. All about them was lonesome and saturnine save for the street lights. Magilla started off down the street and Karl, not wanting to be left alone, shuffled after him. They hadn’t gone far when Karl gradually became aware of people standing with their backs against the buildings.

Each hooker was of varying age and cleanliness. They all looked somewhat dejected as Karl and Magilla hitched by. Karl passed them close and they stayed silent, some looking away at the ground. He found the experience not unlike browsing the aisles at his supermarket. In his head, he gave them names and made up little stories for each of them. Vicky wasn’t a real blonde. She was from some sun-fruit state. She loved taking it from behind, long walks and stormy nights. Megan was an absolute animal and she loved buying shoes, the smell of leather and the colour red. She’d seen plenty of it.

Magilla suddenly returned into view, lumbering arm-in-arm with Snow White: tall and elegant, prissy-looking, like a porcelain doll. They exchanged brief glances in passing and then crossed the street away from him. Magilla led her hurriedly down an adjacent alleyway, black and foreboding, like a road to another dimension.

Karl watched them disappear, and then a voice spoke to him.

“Do you need those glasses for real?”

He spun around. Half expecting some animated, promiscuous sprite, Karl instead found himself face-to-face with a young woman. She was standing questioningly, her arms akimbo. Her age seemed impossible to determine. She was petite, shiny and slender, nothing like those others lined up for purchase. Karl thought she was beautiful. She seemed unaffected and oddly unaccustomed to her hardened surroundings. Everything about her sang to him in some way. Without any hesitation, he knew that she was the one.

“I do,” he managed. He felt flustered and self-conscious staring at her.

“Yeah, I only asked ‘cause I knew someone once who just wore theirs just for show. The lenses weren’t even real.”

“These are real... not that it matters much.”

“Are you lost around here?”

“Not tonight.”

“Then you’re here on business?” she asked with an indistinguishable tinge to *business*.

Karl flushed a hot pink. He removed his glasses gingerly and pretended to clean them on the corner of his shirt. “Is this an easy thing? How does—how do you go about this?” He exhaled heavily. “Jesus, do I have to...”

She smiled, and Karl felt the foolishness wash from him. For a second, he almost forgot why he was there.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said. “I’ll make this easy for you. Real easy. I’m just gonna walk that way,” she gestured with her eyes off behind him, “and then you can follow, and we can get a taxi. How’s that sound?”

Karl nodded stupidly. She seemed to have some hypnotic quality about her. The way she watched him, the way she spoke. It was something Karl couldn’t quite put his finger on. She almost started off when he remembered something.

“I forgot to ask your name.”

“I’ll tell you later.” She kept her pace.

“Tell me now.”

“Let’s just go.” She kept walking, her heels clacking on the bitumen road. Karl ambled after her.

“No, really, can you tell me?” He huffed, suddenly out of breath. “Just so I know, because—”

“You like sweet things?” she asked him, not looking back.

“Sorry?”

“Do you like sweet things?” she repeated, more slowly.

“Not really—I mean, I can’t have them. I’m diabetic.”

“Okay... that’s new. Candi,” she said. “With an ‘I’”

“Okay, Candi... Candi,” Karl let the word loll on his palate. “That’s a—that’s a really...” then he trailed off.



They'd crossed the street and were now in front of the alleyway Magilla and Snow White had disappeared down earlier. Candi was still a number of steps ahead. Karl stopped, turned and peered down the stretch.

Snow White was lying on her back, her legs apart, her dress upturned. Her eyes were closed and her back arched. Sitting cross-legged, at her feet, was Magilla, fisting her slowly from wrist to elbow with a vacant look on his face.

Karl swallowed hard. He could hear something: a rustling amid her laboured breaths. He peered hard, and as his eyes adjusted, he saw all the vermin-life skulk from their stinking dens and hollows. Rats and moggies, flea-bitten, dancing like baleful marionettes, free of bonds, of strings. Like a musical number, they moved in lines that broke and reformed as they cart wheeled about her, removing articles of her clothing as she lay there, rigid. All of them snatching and clawing, she was soon left mostly naked, and as Karl backed away, they all turned suddenly to face him in a crescendo end number. All of them stood posing for him, frozen, eyes amber and glassy, each holding a scrap of what was once Snow White's silken dress.

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Karl's apartment was meagre, sparsely kept with furniture of different eras, all of it drab and dreary.

Candi wasted no time exploring and Karl backed behind the couch, watching her stalk the little space like a cat. Her eyes scanned the empty spaces on his bookshelf, the worn surface of an old chest-of-drawers. She ran a finger over the dining table, tracing her name in the dust.

"Kitchen," she announced, finding the adjoining room. She made her way around the cluttered space stacked high with dishes, then circled back into the entry and stopped by his old Magnavox, sitting idly in the corner.

"Lounge," she said, and then crossed to the window. The light pouring in was pale and ghostly. "Where do you sleep?" she asked after a long silence.

Karl stopped watching her a moment. "Candi..." he said quietly. "Very pretty."

She left the window and came towards him. The couch stayed between them like a barrier. Karl took a step backwards anyway.

"I don't want to burst your bubble but Candi's not my real name."

“Okay,” he said earnestly. The thought hadn’t occurred to him, and now he felt childish.

“You seem different for a guy your age.” She said, dropping to her knees on the cracked leather cushions.

“I’m going blind,” said Karl, removing his glasses and putting them in his top pocket. “A doctor told me.”

Candi nodded. “Sorry. That’s not what I meant though. Are you nervous?”

“What’s your real name?”

“It’s different for a guy your age to be nervous.”

“Tell me your name.”

“What difference does it make what my name is?”

Karl moved around the couch, keeping a hand on the back to guide himself. He took a seat next to her. “If there’s no difference you could tell me and it wouldn’t matter.”

Candi swivelled her body around. “Aurora. They—my parents...they called me Aurora, after a sunrise.”

“I don’t go by it though, obviously.” She got up and returned to the window. “I was really different from them. Probably a good thing, but still, maybe I was just born funny.”

“I think I was,” Karl admitted softly, straining to see her. His eyesight was dwindling again.

“Or cursed.” She fell silent. “Is this your first time, Karl?” She asked him.

He was silent a moment. Without looking, he replaced the glasses on his face. “What difference does it make?”

“Maybe you’re cursed too.”

Karl shrugged. So much in his life had seemed random coincidence yet he had never believed it as such. He was sixty-seven years old and he had never touched a girl. Not intimately. Not once. As a boy, young through to strapping, there had been no sweethearts, no hand holding. Later, as an adolescent: no kissing. No baseball analogies. Later still, and finally, as those salad years slowly bled away, sex had remained a mystery, like an unopened door in his life.

“Yeah, maybe,” he said at length. “I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“Me neither,” Candi agreed. “My Godmother was a right-royal fucking bitch. I mean, I think she cursed me. Y’know, waved her wand or whatever. My parents didn’t invite her to my christening but she showed up anyway and things were said. I guess she got back at them through me. I fucked everything up when I turned sixteen, right to the very day. Just like she said I would. Stuff like that can’t be a coincidence.”

As she spoke, an image cropped up suddenly in Karl’s mind. It was an old rickety spinning wheel. Looking like an upturned bike, fashioned crudely from dark ebony hardwood, its spindle was sharpened and dangerous looking. The wheel turned slowly. Karl had never seen one in his life. It looked macabre. He shut his eyes till the image left him. “What was the curse?” he asked her.

Candi was silent a moment. She left the window and started back towards him. Karl’s eyes were bad on this angle and her approach was bleared and shapeless. She stopped and he looked up. In the dark of the apartment she loomed over him like a raven.

“Needles,” she went on, taking a seat next to him and tucking her legs up under her. “I ended up getting pricked by a bad one.” She mimed this for him with a finger and an imaginary needle. “I fell asleep... coma or something, whatever. I just vacated my own head. Must’ve been for a long time too, ‘cause no one remembered me when I woke up. I was this different person. It sucks being a disappointment. You can’t run from fate, right?”

“No,” said Karl, and his hand found the bulge in his pocket made by the pills. He felt a strange feeling of completeness flush through him, sitting there in the dark, next to her on the couch. “Are you real?” he asked her, suddenly.

“I’m going to take a shower,” said Candi, standing and making towards the bathroom. She stopped at the door and turned back to him. “Do you want to watch?”

Karl watched her disappear, not moving till the sound of running water rang through the air. He stepped into the bathroom and stood by the recess, watching her through the open door. Steam snaked about him in ribbons, fogging his glasses. He took them off and dropped them on the tiled floor. He watched the water cascade down her body, flowing over her breasts and down her stomach. He watched it bead on her skin in tiny droplets. He saw every part of her as she turned under the flow of hot water, hands drawn up to intercept the beam, eyes closed and cheeks flushed from the heat.

Reaching into his pocket, Karl took out the pills. He turned them over in his hand, letting them rattle, then unscrewed the lid and knelt down by the toilet. Holding them over the bowl, he let the tablets rain out until the bottle was empty, and then he flushed.

The little pills spun and tumbled in the torrent of water, churning, and then were gone. He closed his eyes and all that was left in the warm dark inside his head was the gushing of water, and the gurgle as it disappeared down the drain.