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Pineapple Head

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Carl's school dated back to the turn of the last century. While much of it had been updated in the last decade, the east wing was a sad mix of misguided seventies facelifts over moldy mid-century modern over basically ancient broken useless things.

The keys to the mythical bathroom in the mostly unused teachers' lounge were a coveted prize for a student. For years, Carl had heard tell of this far removed room with clean stalls and walls and no waiting in lines. Now that he was a senior and a teacher's assistant for Mr. Walcott's Advanced Placement History class, he had the keys in his hand at last.

Because there was only one teacher's assistant allowed per period, the bathroom was all Carl's this morning, the first day of the new semester of his last year of high school. And he was going to enjoy it.

So Carl was surprised that someone was already inside the first door when he clicked it open with the old key.

The boy lounging in one of the threadbare chairs wore ill-fitting clothes. Not in an "I don't care" way. But in a carefully slouchy, calculated, oversized fit way. The canvas jacket was

an ill-advised shade of not-quite-olive that sloped off the boy's already slender shoulders so much that the seams were almost to his elbows. The rolled sleeves at the wrist gave the impression that his forearms were strangely truncated. On his arms were a mishmash of black rubber rings, leather straps, and what looked like shoelaces tied amongst copper, silver and cheap imitation gold bracelets. The boy's hands were covered in rings, including one with some kind of Celtic knot, and one with an oversized blue stone that was probably plastic.

The T-shirt the boy wore under his jacket was black, faded, and loose at the neck because it was probably at least three sizes too big. His pants were a clashing shade of not-quite-green with seams sewn into them vertically, adding fabric to create a ballooning effect that again dwarfed his already slight shape. The only thing form fitting on him were the bottoms of his pants, which were tightly bunched and rolled to show a bit of leg over enormous yellow socks that were sticking out of surprisingly small black boots. The overall effect made the boy look like some kind of overgrown wraith-like elf.

And then there was the haircut, closely shaved all the way round the sides and back, but leaving the top an unkempt stalk of sandy brown weed-like hair.

That ridiculous haircut was why Carl eventually found himself calling the boy, who never did tell Carl his real name even after all that happened, "Pineapple Head." Facetiously at first, as a comment on the boy's unfortunate style choices. And then, as things progressed, affectionately and without irony or malice.

But that first time, the day they met, all he could muster was, "Hey."

"Hey," the boy said without looking up at Carl.

"Um, are you a teacher's assistant?" Carl asked, eyeing that important next door, which led to the fabled bathroom stalls.

“Not anymore,” the boy said.

“Uh, ok.” Carl walked past the boy to the next door, the one to the actual bathroom, and clicked it open. The bathroom was all he could have wanted and more. Small and spare, but clean and best of all, pretty much unused by the unwashed masses of the student body or even the teachers.

He was going to get to go to the bathroom in clean serene peace for an entire semester. It would be the best thing about high school.

Only it wasn't. Though that lounge did bring about what was...

Pineapple Head wasn't in the lounge when Carl came out of the bathroom. The dilapidated velvet chair was empty, though it did show an indentation where Pineapple Head and countless other teacher's assistants had killed time before going back to their paper grading and coffee getting and pencil sharpening for exams. Carl almost sat in the chair himself, but he didn't. Not that first time, anyway. Not alone.

A full week passed before Carl saw Pineapple Head again. The fact that he was wearing exactly the same clothes as before was not as strange as their conversation. Carl had not been able to stop thinking about the odd boy all week. But though he had gone to the hidden room a few times, he'd never run into him again. Until today.

“Right on time,” said Pineapple Head.

“For what?” asked Carl.

“Conversation with a lost soul.”

“Oh.” Carl had thought about what to say to this kid for a week, but now that the opportunity arose, he was at a loss.

“I’m not a Goth,” the boy said before Carl could say anything or walk away. And for the first time, the boy raised his eyes to lock onto Carl’s. “I’m not. It’s not a thing for me.”

“I wasn't going to...” Carl’s voice trailed off.

“I’m not though. In fact, I didn’t even know what that was when I got dressed that morning, or any morning. It wasn’t a thing at all.” The boy was adamant.

“I guess with your haircut I’d say you were more alternative anyway than just Goth, if you want to label yourself,” Carl said helpfully.

“Alternative’s not a thing for me either. Or Industrial. Or Progressive. Or Indie. Or Emo. None of it.” Adamant again.

“What’s Industrial?” Carl asked.

“What year is this?” The boy looked a little worried.

Carl started to worry too. Maybe this kid was on something. Could he be dangerous?
“Uh, I have to pee and get back to Mr. Walcott’s room.”

“Go,” Pineapple Head said, looking away. Carl hadn’t realized how intent their locked gaze had been. When the boy finally looked away, Carl let out the breath he’d not even realized he’d been holding, seeing stars. “We’ll get to this another time.”

So Carl went. And this time it was almost three weeks before he saw Pineapple Head again.

And, yes, Pineapple Head was wearing the same clothes again. But this time he opened the conversation with a new topic.

“There are other people who dress like me, you know.”

“I didn't...” Carl started. Man, this guy was hung up on labels.

“I didn’t make this up. I copied it,” said the boy. “It’s what different people dress like. I’m different. I’m not like the other people here. I’m not like you. You’re a normal. Right?”

Again with the eye-locking.

Carl was suddenly intently aware of what he thought of as his ‘uniform’, his easy to match jeans and t-shirt and hoodie combo that worked well with either the white Adidas or the black Adidas, depending on which he grabbed.

“It’s how I show people I’m different, you know,” said Pineapple Head, staring hard.

“I get it,” Carl said. He really did have to pee. And this talk was really not making a whole lot of sense.

“Do you, Carl?” Pineapple Head asked.

It wasn’t till after Carl had gone to the bathroom and made his way back to Mr. Walcott’s room that he realized he’d never actually told Pineapple Head his name. And that it was rather odd that, even though there were hundreds of students in Carl’s graduating class, he’d never seen Pineapple Head before. Not even once. And with that haircut, he’d have remembered.

The next day, Pineapple Head was in the lounge. No waiting time between appearances this week.

“How do you know my name?” Carl asked.

“You told me the first time you came here,” Pineapple Head said.

“I really didn’t,” said Carl.

“Didn’t you?” Another gaze from Pineapple Head. But this time Carl didn’t look away.

“You’re not a teacher’s assistant. And you’re not as mysterious as you try to be.”

“I’m not trying to be mysterious,” Pineapple Head said. “I’m being careful.”

“About what?”

“About you and what you’ll do if I tell you certain things.”

“Well, since you seem to be magic and know my name, why don’t you just *see* how I’ll act and don’t be so weird.”

“It doesn’t work like that.” Pineapple Head paused. “You think I’m weird?”

“No. But you think you’re weird. So there’s that.” Carl turned to leave.

“Don’t you have to go to the bathroom?” Pineapple Head asked.

Carl turned back around. “No, I came here to talk to you, but I think I’m done for now.”

“Whatever.” Pineapple Head was staring at the rings on his hands.

Pineapple Head wasn’t in the lounge for a whole month.

When Pineapple Head showed up the next time, Carl just said it. He figured he had to.

“You know I’m gay too, right?”

Pineapple Head just stared at him.

Carl went into the bathroom, did what he needed to do, and when he came back into the lounge, almost jumped.

Pineapple Head was still there sitting in the chair. He’d never still been there when Carl came out of the bathroom before.

“You’re brave to just say stuff like that,” Pineapple Head said. “What if I freaked out and got all weird?”

“Uh, I’d tell Mr. Walcott an asshole was in the teachers’ lounge and he’d make you leave so you didn’t bother me,” Carl said.

“You’d tell your teacher you like guys?” Pineapple Head asked.

“I mean, yeah, I guess, but I mean... they just know by now. I’ve gone to school here for three years,” Carl said.

“You...” Pineapple Head seemed unable to get out the words. “You just, like... You just tell people?”

“Well,” Carl said. “I don’t, like, wear a sign or anything, but I’m on the mentor committee for the group home and I liked Adam Lambert more than the rest of America, apparently.”

“Is he a politician?” asked Pineapple Head.

“Who?”

“What if your teachers tell your parents?” Pineapple Head ignored Carl’s confusion.

“Tell them what?”

“About you...”

“Well,” Carl said slowly. “They are my parents. So they kind of know me better than my teachers do.”

Pineapple Head looked scared and fascinated.

“Are they hippies?”

“No, but my grandparents probably were,” said Carl. “But to be honest, they are weirder about it than my parents. My mom is actually a teacher, but at an elementary school. And my dad works at a tech company. He’s kind of a nerd. My mom’s much cooler. Or she used to be. She doesn’t wear her nose ring anymore, but she still has some tattoos. Though it’s kind of embarrassing. I think she used to be in a band, but they never really got famous. She still goes out with her friends once in a while. I call it old lady dancing, but not to her face. She’s alright. They are alright.”

“Your parents sound cooler than any parents I’ve ever heard of. Are they young?”

“I don’t know, like 55?” That sounded old enough to Carl so it was probably about right.

“Wow,” Pineapple Head said.

“Yeah, not young.” Carl shrugged.

“That’s not really what I meant.” Pineapple Head looked a little confused. Carl wasn’t sure what he meant, but Mr. Walcott had a lot for him to do today so he needed to get back.

“I have to go,” Carl said. “But if you’re around tomorrow I can come earlier and we can keep talking.”

“It’s got to be the right time,” Pineapple Head told him. “I mean, I can stay later though, if you want to talk more. But you have to come at the right time. To start...”

“Okay...” Carl said. Whatever. The kid enjoyed being mysterious. It was definitely a thing.

So Carl came at the right time, over and over and over, and that’s how he started to get to know Pineapple Head. And to realize that he never saw him outside of the lounge, or if he was a little late for their meetings. It wasn’t long before Carl developed a very crazy theory about Pineapple Head, who seemed out of time, trapped forever in the lounge where he had hidden from other kids, from his parents, his teachers, his fears and most of all himself.

Pineapple Head was fascinated by how much things had changed since he was in high school. But Carl would also point out how much certain things had stayed the same. And how while people weren’t allowed to be as outright hostile as they were when Pineapple Head wandered the halls of this place, that didn’t mean people still weren’t cruel. And there were methods now of being anonymously cruel in a very personal way... which made no real sense to Pineapple Head in theory, but as a practice, he understood it far too well.

Pineapple Head asked Carl one morning, theoretically, if he thought it was actually less acceptable now to tell people he was spending his mornings with a ghost than living his life truthfully.

Carl told him that it probably was.

And then he said, "It'd be even weirder if I told them I was in love with one."

"One what?" Pineapple Head wasn't the best at following trains of thought.

"A ghost," Carl said, staring straight at him to see what he'd do.

Pineapple Head looked concerned.

"You can't do that, Carl," he said very seriously. "Because it doesn't turn out well. I've heard about this."

"You talk to other ghosts?" Carl asked.

"It's not a term we use amongst ourselves," Pineapple Head said.

"What, 'ghost'? Or 'talk'?"

"Either, really," said Pineapple Head. "But that's not what's important. What's important is that I'm in love with you too... and we can't do that."

Carl's heart hurt.

"Whatever." He turned to leave.

"We can't, Carl," Pineapple Head said again. "It ends us both when it's over. And you're alive. You're alive in a world I can't imagine. With a future that's brighter than I could have thought."

Carl turned back around to face him. Pineapple Head had tears running down his face.

“This could be your world,” Carl said, voice shaking. “You killed yourself, didn’t you? You ended your interesting, beautiful, weird, stupid haircut life because of what other people thought of you.”

“I would not have grown up in your time, Carl,” Pineapple Head said. “I came to terms with my decision a long time ago. I’ve had a lot of time to think, to regret, to understand, and to find calm.”

“Is it that simple?” Carl asked.

“It’s not simple,” Pineapple Head said. “But it *is*. And you *are*. And we’re *this*.”

“But maybe this is okay,” Carl dared take a step closer to Pineapple Head.

“It’s not okay, Carl,” said Pineapple Head. “But you are. I never was. I never was. Please know that. I wouldn’t be now either. But the brightness that you see ahead of you is real. I am not that brightness, Carl.”

“I don’t really care.”

“You will, Carl.” Pineapple Head gave him that gaze. “You’ve taught me so much and now I’m able to do something I couldn’t do before.”

“What’s that?” Carl asked.

“I can come to terms with what’s going to happen next.”

Carl had never watched Pineapple Head leave the lounge. Usually he just left first and when he returned later Pineapple Head would be gone. Or he’d go in and use the bathroom and come out and the chair would be empty. But this time was different.

Pineapple Head didn’t shimmer or glow, or god forbid, sparkle. He just seemed to get dimmer... till he wasn’t there anymore.

Carl stifled a sudden sob, but he didn't actually cry. He just walked over to Pineapple Head's beaten up chair and, for the first time, sat down. It was not warm like he'd expect after a person had been sitting in it. But it was, well, the only way to describe it was this: happy. With just a hint of hopeful.

Carl sat there for a long time. Just feeling. And then he got up and walked out of the lounge. He never went back. He knew Pineapple Head wasn't going to be there. And he knew that Pineapple Head was right. The world was out there, waiting for Carl. And it was going to be so much more mysterious, and strange and frightening and beautiful, than sitting in a dark old teachers' lounge with an interesting ghost.

--THE END--