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Quid Pro Quo

by Ali Giles

I am a madman. Crazy. That is what she tells me. This little bundle of bones with scared but defiant eyes staring up at me. She fights me with surprising speed and precision; a punch lands squarely in my eye, and then she lays there trembling, her knees drawn up, pathetically trying to hide herself with her hands. As if I am going to hit her back.

“It’s a hot day out there, Mary,” I say, “shall I get you some of that rum and raisin ice cream you like?”

“Piss off,” she whispers, and turns her head to the side.

One seldom was able to do her a good turn without some thoughts of strangulation.

I have photos of Mary from before, and they’re like the windows to another world, as cliché as that sounds. Looking over her shoulder into the lens, those huge brown eyes and just the very tip of her tongue showing as her lips part. This is my favourite; I can never make up my mind if she was about to speak or whether she was about to smile.

I look at the pictures while I eat lunch, and it leaves me a little dizzy and dry-mouthed. All that life, all that energy, trapped forever on a piece of glossy Kodak paper. It feels dirty and furtive, as if I’m being unfaithful. As if I’m grieving for a different woman.

Mary refuses my kindnesses just as she used to refuse the gifts and letters I sent her when we first met; she was stubborn as a mule then although she was perhaps right to be, in that no gift or good deed is truly altruistic. The giver always expects some sort of reward or return. Nobody is truly selfless; there’s always an ulterior motive.

We are all selfish; we are born selfish, it's hardwired into our psyche. We have to be shown as children the art of empathy. That we should share; that we should play nicely together; that we should care about others. When actually to be selfish is not really a bad thing. We shouldn't be made to feel guilty if we don't want to play nice.

But still. One good turn deserves another, as they say.

And I finish lunch and go back down to the cellar.