

# Ever

Picture perfect.

**Jeff Crook**

It begins with a photo of a girl in a graveyard. She's clutching a tiny dog to her breast. She's dressed in rags and clothes she's made herself, knitting them together at night by the fire. She's leaning against a tomb as though she doesn't know who's buried in it. She's obviously been lured here by the photographer with the promise of a meal, a drink or a pipe of opium. The cemetery is merely backdrop. It may as well be a church or the gardens of Versailles.

He feeds the second photograph into the scanner. In this one, she leans slightly forward, displaying the plush white expanse of her Victorian bosom. A prostitute then, or perhaps a bone picker. It's impossible to tell her age: women of her class aged so quickly in those days, worn down by the impossibility of living. She has the eyes of a child orphaned by some hideous disaster.

She has the eyes of a woman sorely abused.

She has eyes the colour of a cold North Sea.

Her upper lip is cruel, insolently drawn by a pencil sharp as a pin. Her bottom lip is plump and childish as a baby's thumb.

The third photo is ravaged by fire. She pulls down her blouse to reveal the hint of a breast peeling from the charred uneven edge of the paper. Her face is utterly consumed except for the lobe of one ear. Her little dog licks its own nose. He hopes these will be enough, because they are the only three photos of her he has salvaged, and the machine needs at least three to regenerate her.

He leans back in his creaking chair and tosses the dregs of a warm gin martini past his beard, rises and retires to the kitchen to concoct a new one. Although he owns a Moonbeam Virtual Bartender with more than 10,000 recipes for perfect cocktails — a gift from a long-dead admirer — he prefers to mix his own, measuring out the ice, gin and vermouth by eye and instinct, peeling off a curl of lemon skin from a nearly naked lemon, and tasting that first exquisite sip while standing at the kitchen counter. By the time he returns to the living room, she's there.

Her little dogs wags its tail, yaps once,

and leaps from her arms to the floor. It follows him back to the kitchen. He pours out some kibble into a bowl while its claws frantically slither and skid on the tiles. He sets the bowl on the floor for the famished little brute and returns to the living room where she still stands, having not yet moved or blinked or even breathed. He stands before her silently, admiring the shape and softness of her breasts, the round red apples of her cheeks, sipping his martini, unable to detect a single flaw.



Finally he cups her dimpled chin in the palm of his hand and blows into her face, as you blow into the face of an infant to make it swallow. She blinks and turns her battleship grey eyes upon him for a furious moment, then grabs his proffered martini and sucks at it greedily, gulping and biting the glass, as though it is the first or perhaps last breath of life.

As she lowers the empty glass, she closes her eyes and begins to tremble all over. The glass slips from her hand and shatters on the floor, and in the kitchen her little dog gives a frightened yelp of pain. He steps close to her, slides his hand under her blouse and sucks her fleshy bottom lip into his mouth. She grabs his arm and

wantonly pushes her pubic bone against his hip. Then she shudders and shoves him back with the muzzle of a Derringer that was hidden in her homemade bodice. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she says.

"Kissing you," he says.

"You should be ashamed," she says. "You're old enough to be my grandfather." "Oh, I'm far older than that," he says.

"If you want to do that, old man, you've got to pay me first," she says.

"How much?"

"Two dollars," she says.

"Two dollars?" he says. "I don't know. That's a lot of money. Let me see." He turns out his empty pockets. The buccinator, labial tractor and orbicularis oris muscles of her face contract, whetting the stiletto of her already dangerous upper lip, but compressing her lower lip into a luscious pout.

"I'm no whore," she says.

"Of course not," he says. "But you're bound to be hungry."

"Hungry?" she says.

"Yes. Would you like something to eat?"

"Not really," she says.

"No?" he sighs. "Oh dear. That's not good."

"What's not good?"

He's seen it happen before. Without a set of three complete photos, flaws are introduced into the machine's genitive modelling. The flaws present as a lack of some basic human need — warmth, companionship, self-preservation, procreation, water: for her it is food. Unless he forces her to eat, she will eventually starve to death.

"What are you doing?" she says as he reaches for the machine.

"I'm very sorry," he says.

"No wait. Please don't," she says. But he shakes his shaggy grey head sorrowfully. The machine spits out her photos. They flutter like brown autumn leaves to the floor.

"What just happened?" she asks.

"I'll be damned," he says in admiration. He's been so lonely for so long. He takes her hand and feels its tender strength. "You're a survivor." Maybe he's been wrong all along to seek perfection. ■

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