

Alfonso

He smelled like store-bought musk. The kind that comes in stained-glass bottles, overpriced by the fluid ounce. His was strong and it stung my nose. A gold-tooth gleamed in the front of his otherwise flawless, mustache-rimmed smile. It glinted like sunlight off a diamond yet offered no reflection. Dark, like the brown pigment of his irises which matched his skin. His hair was even darker. Most of his hair was hidden beneath a maroon ball cap. What little peeked below his cap, I could tell matched his full, yet well-kempt eyebrows. His maroon polo shirt was belted into khaki shorts. It looked like something a golfer might wear, except for his sandals. Those were dark brown, too; leathery like his skin.

When he approached my counter, I greeted him with a customer-service smile and a willingness to help.

“Hello, sir. Is there anything I can help you find?”

“No Ingles,” he responded. His gold tooth flashed, competing with the glass countertops and bridal diamonds displayed neatly inside.

The store had a Spanish translator on-hand, but the man began gesturing towards what he wanted. His smile never faded from his face and he tried his best to communicate. His finger tapped the glass above the watch case. He pointed repeatedly at a gold, men’s Seiko watch.

He managed a little English. “Automatic? Automatic?”

“No, sir. None are automatic.”

I spanned my hands over the watch case, hoping that he understood that he wouldn't find any automatic watches there. I assumed he had not when he began pointing again.

"Automatic? Automatic?"

"No, sir. None are automatic."

He pointed to nearly every watch in the case and asked the same question about each of them. His smile faded slightly, and his shoulders shrugged.

"Be back," he said. "I come back."

I nodded and smiled. "Have a good day, sir."

I didn't think he'd be back.

Exactly one month to the day had passed. I was bent over our center display case, balancing on tiptoes to reach. I was positioning our newest ring on a fake display finger with a price-point attached. Three-karat diamond, white gold, \$7,000.

"Not on this salary," I mumbled under my breath.

As I was tucking the price tag neatly under the ring band, I heard a whistle behind me. I didn't know who it came from, but it sounded like any other catcall. I swiveled around on the heel of my black pumps. It was that man again. His gold tooth smiled along with him and his left-eye winked, revealing his age in crow's-feet. I returned another half-fake, customer-service smile and started over to him.

"Hello, again, sir. Glad to see you back. Is there anything I can help you find?"

He went right to the watch cases and began his incessant pointing.

“Automatic? Automatic?” he asked.

This time I felt it appropriate to call the translator, but to my frustration, he was off for the day. I hoped the man didn't notice my likely eye-roll in his direction. I settled in, preparing to debunk that no watch in our case was automatic. I didn't have to this time, as he let up very quickly. He propped his elbow up on the door to the jewelry counters. I hoped it was for comfortability and not to trap me inside. It was the only door. His heavy arms looked even tanner when coupled with his yellow polo shirt. His hair looked darker too. I wondered if he had a matching hat and ball cap in *every* color.

“Very beautiful. Your smile, beautiful.”

I pretended to be flattered, though to be quite honest, I was annoyed that my job had become a breeding ground for suitors.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Really, beautiful. Sexy. Your body, sexy.”

His English had certainly improved, though my ease around him had decreased.

“Thanks,” I said again.

“Be back. I be back.”

I really wasn't sure what his purpose was for coming in. A sense of relief washed over me when I heard the jingle of the door closing behind him. His strong, masculine scent lingered in my nose for a while longer. This time I really hoped he wouldn't be back.

To my dismay and disturbance, he arrived, exactly one month to the day from his last visit. I instantly hated that our dress-code required a dress and heels. I regretted that the black dress I chose that day was so form-fitting. Reluctantly, I approached him.

“Hello again. You here to look at the watches?”

He smiled but cut right to the chase this time.

“You sexy. Your body sexy. So, so sexy,” he said.

Sweat beaded on my forehead and clamminess engulfed my palms. I tapped my foot anxiously and tried to avoid eye-contact. He had once again cleverly trapped me inside my glass prison with his muscular arms. The store was dead, and the other cashiers had wandered off to put merchandise away before closing. I was surrounded by counters too tall for me to easily climb over, but short enough for easy access by a man of his size. I questioned calling a manager, but I was scared for him to overhear my plea for help. He sensed my tension and leaned in closer, forcing my eyes to meet his.

“It’s ok, baby. I don’t hurt. You beautiful. Sexy.”

I wasn’t sure how this was meant as a comfort. His hot, minty breath surrounded my face. Mixed with his cologne, the smell was overpowering. Angst and disgust consumed me as I backed away.

“I need to get back to work. Have a nice night.”

I turned to walk away, though kept him in my peripheral vision. His hand fidgeted around in his shorts pocket for a while. I was hoping he’d pull out some paper to scribble down his name and phone number. I never thought I’d say something like that

about a man his age, but it would have been better than a knife or something more sinister. My stomach tightened as I anticipated the worst. I heard something rest on the countertop and footsteps getting further away. I didn't have the nerve to see what it was until the jingling door bell confirmed he was out of the store.

When I finally looked over at the countertop, I noticed a small cup with a lid. It was something similar to Tupperware, about the size of a Dixie-cup. I examined it more closely, trying to decipher its contents through the clear sides of the container. It was filled to the top of the blue-plastic lid and didn't move much. My virginal, naïve mind failed to figure out what it was. I simply tossed the vile into the trash. It wasn't until years later that I figured out what was in that cup and realized that I should have been very afraid.

For the next three months he didn't miss a visit. Exactly one month to the day, he arrived without fail. He spoke less and less on the visits. Sometimes he didn't approach the counter at all. When he was in the store, though, I felt his presence. His eyes rested on my shoulders like a weight, and his scent threatened to consume me like chloroform. I felt no safer knowing he was in the store, regardless if we had spoken or not. I felt like he was watching me from afar, like he had some type of wire on me. It seemed as if he knew where I lived, where I went to school, my favorite color. It seemed absurd and paranoid, but the thought of him so much as looking at me made my skin crawl. Itchy hives broke out over my body like an army of fire ants attacking my flesh. Knowing he was nearby was like a parasite eating me from the inside out.

Before my shift the following morning, I stopped at the store's security office. Chill bumps bristled on my arms from the coldness of the room and the unsettling feeling of

the cameras eyeing every crevice of the store. The jewelry counter I worked at was part of a larger, failing department store. Customers were few and far between, but the cameras wouldn't have missed any. I expressed my concern to the guard and was met with complete insolence.

"I'm sorry, there isn't anything we can do. He's a paying customer. Can't ask 'em to leave just cause he's said a few odd words to ya. Has he threatened you?"

"No, but he's creepy. He makes me uncomfortable. I don't want to come to work anymore," I said.

"Well, some people are creepy, that's no reason to ban 'em from the store."

Tears welled up in my eyes. Not tears of sadness, but hot tears of searing anger. I should've expected such a response being a female in the victim-blaming 2010s. Still, I was dumbfounded. Being an avid shopper in the store didn't seem like a reason to defend stalking. I guess when customers are that scarce, you have to keep them around at all cost. Maybe I was being paranoid. Maybe he was just creepy and bad with English. The unsettling feeling brought an acid taste to my mouth that I struggled to keep down. I clocked in.

A month after my failed report, like clockwork, he returned. I had been expecting him; I knew it had been close to a month. He returned with a gusto and a stronger confidence. It frightened me. I had a plan to pick up the phone as soon as I saw him approaching the counter. I was going to call the manager and let him overhear everything the man said to me. Unfortunately, that plan failed. As he got closer, my hand dialed Ext.472, but the man detoured and took the escalator upstairs. There would

have been nothing to report to the manager at that point; he camouflaged as any other shopper.

The army of fire ants returned to my body and sweat cascaded down my neck and settled into the fabric of my dress. Everything I picked up slipped from my clammy grip. The lump in my throat made me forget how to speak altogether. Goosebumps coated my body and my blood coursed through me both hot and cold at the same time. I was in full fight-or-flight mode yet was too afraid to do anything but cement my feet to the ground. My back ached from the weight of his invisible eyes and my breath seemed to come slower and deeper while somehow quicker all at once. I tried to push him out of my mind and go back to my job. I focused on putting one foot in front of the other until I had crossed to the other side of the jewelry cases. I organized some new merchandise, rearranged, the usual. I looked up, expecting to see an empty store in front of me, but my face met his. I gasped and stepped back. I was at the furthest point from the phone and even if I ran to the door, he'd surely have beaten me to it. I was trapped.

“Baby, my sexy baby. Don't be afraid. I'll help you. I'll get you some tequila for your nerves. Get you drunk. Make you forget. I can wait by your car and pick you up. I can bring you to my love nest and make love to you all night. Keep giving you tequila. We'll make a beautiful baby. Keep giving you tequila. Make more love to you. I'll keep you in my love nest. Never let you out. Make drunk love to you forever.”

His smile had turned wicked and the wink in his eye was of the Devil. It was at that moment that I realized he had known English all along. His accent dripped from his mouth like the lies he told me. His fiery hot breath stung me like his words. I was too scared to move. I realized that I had been right all along. I wasn't paranoid. He was

crazy. I wasn't ok. I was in danger. My brain forgot to tell my throat to scream. I just stood there and cried.

He stared into my soul. I felt naked and exposed. My trembling legs wouldn't carry me away from him. Eventually, with a smirk on his face, he left the store. I could breathe again. I ran from behind the counter and into my manager's office where I collapsed into a heap of flesh and bones, floating away in a pool of tears. My manager watched from a distance, waiting for me to cool down.

"Are you ok" he asked. "Who is watching the counter?"

That is what he cared about? The counter? My exasperation was drowned out by a second downpour of tears. I couldn't believe nobody cared at all about me.

"Nobody, sir."

"Get back to work! That's too much money to leave unattended."

His voiced boomed around me, the thunder to my tear-rainstorm. Quitting my job wasn't an option being in debt up to my eyeballs with student loans. I knew he had left the store, though, so I had a month until I would have to see him again.

I sulked into the bathroom to splash cold water on my red, puffy eyes. I needed just a moment to compose myself and extinguish the fire spreading over my body. The parasite inside me had traveled to my brain to slowly unravel my sanity.

The bathroom door closed behind me with much more force than anticipated. A hand quickly covered my mouth, and the arm attached to it slammed me against the door. The man had followed me.

The more I writhed about and fought to scream, the tighter his hands pressed into my face. The taste of iron filled my mouth from where my teeth had caught hold of my lip. Tears warmed my face as my arms were pinned against the cold, mint tile of the bathroom walls. The room got smaller and the three stalls in front of me became one. I couldn't tell if his hand sliding from my mouth to my throat was what was suffocating me or not. The quickly shrinking room was confining me by the second.

I once again despised the dress-code. My dress left me exposed with only a delicate layer of lacy fabric between my innocence and his power. His strong, tan hand sat rigidly under my chin. His other hand migrated to places that had yet to be explored by a man.

The fabric separating us tore under the force of his hand. His fingers felt cold and dirty. They probed me like I was some kind of experiment, not a lady. The parasite really did exist inside me, gnawing away at the innocence that was gradually being pulled from me. His hand ventured up my dress where the last bit of cloth covering my body was ripped from me. His hot breath once again encircled me as he pressed himself against me. His stone-like hardness hurt my hips. My back was a kaleidoscope of purples and blues from the door knob pressed too tightly into my skin for anybody to come to my rescue. I was at the mercy of him and his iron fists.

A clinking, rattling sound, like that of keys, echoed through the bathroom. For a moment of false hope, I thought somebody may be coming in to save me. It was only the sound of his belt buckle falling to the dull, blue tile floor. I closed my eyes. I had never seen a man before and I didn't want to see him. But I felt him push on me, driving daggers into my abdomen.

“Just relax, I’ll be gentle.”

There was nothing gentle about his touch. I was sore, and his hands were unrelenting. He squeezed, and prodded, and grabbed at me like I was a piece of clay. He was a sculptor making me into the most hideous, tainted piece of art anybody could ever see. He scratched at me, bit me, treated me like an animal. My legs burned from the pressure of him against me and from the blood trickling down them. He had numbed me, yet it seemed like the sound of my blood splashing the floor was amplified and rushing through my ears. I went dizzy, startled back awake from hitting the tile floor. When he was finished, he threw me down like the unwanted garbage I felt that I was. The re-buckling of his belt is the last thing I remember hearing. He left the bathroom seeming not to care if he was seen coming from the women’s room.

My legs fought to stabilize as my arms drug my limp body to the sink. My neck was a greenish-purple hue from where his hand branded me. I was afraid to look down. I just splashed water on my face, wiped off my bloodied limbs, and threw away my now tattered clothes. My hideous dress was the only thing left, hanging on me like a sorry, dirty rag.

I left the bathroom and the store like a zombie. At this point I don’t know if I walked or crawled. I may as well have been dragged out by my legs. I got to my car, not caring if he was out there waiting for me or not. Maybe I should have told my boss. Maybe I should have told the police. Maybe I should have gone to the hospital. I don’t know what I should have done. Part of me had just died in that bathroom. All of me wished that I had.

