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Soulmate

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Cover Page Footnote

My thanks to a well-dressed man I met at a party in Petaluma, California for providing the initial inspiration. He really wore that dress. How about a brief bio? I am a writer of short fiction living in the city of subdued excitement while pursuing an MFA. My work has appeared in Zymbol and Alimentum: the Literature of food, as well as a few others. And my thanks to you, oh noble editors, for your consideration.

SOULMATE

ZACHARY DANIEL KAPLAN-MOSS

In the window of small shop in a compact city on a foggy bay, an orange dress lay dreaming of a perfect fit.

Drawn by the swirling color, humans would come inside to finger the material, to try it on, to see how it felt against their skin. But the dress was particular in its desire. So it lay skewed, bunching and twisting as they tried to cram their breasts into its slim top, the straps slipping off their narrow shoulders, the hem dragging on the floor.

They didn't know why it looked wrong on them, and neither did the girl who worked there. Who took it down from the window for her customers and put it back up again when they left, once even murmuring to it, "don't worry, it will happen for you one day."

Claire didn't love her work. She hadn't studied fashion, never wore dresses. She only had the job because her aunt was the owner. Her aunt, it seemed to Claire, was hoping that Claire would take it over someday, but she didn't want to. She didn't know what she wanted. Just that she was ready to get out of the store and out of San Francisco, where every dollar went to rent and all anyone cared about was her career. Or the lack of it. And she didn't like bike-riding or rock climbing. She didn't belong here. She was just like the orange dress that everyone thought they wanted until they tried it on. And it was a bad sign that she'd started talking to it, wasn't it?

It was another hour before Claire could close. Her aunt's things were strange and expensive. If she did three sales in a week, she was content. No one was getting rich here. Certainly not Claire. And the store stayed open too late.

Her phone buzzed on the counter and she turned it over to see a text from her friend Alaster. They had plans to go to an anarchist warehouse party later.

Where you at? he said.

The store, she said. *Where else?*

Wanna get high first?

Def. But I've got an hour to close.

No worries, he said. I'll come to you.

Alaster had been by the store plenty of times, but not recently. Now he was a mile away and walking fast, having grabbed some edibles from a dispensary. Alaster was tall and slim with long legs. It didn't take him long to cover ground when he wanted to. Soon, he was stopped outside the shop, struck by the display: a tall, black, headless mannequin wearing a fabulous orange dress. There was something garish about it, but something subtle too. The ragged hem. The thick straps. An Escher-esque black spiraling that he couldn't follow. A self-referential quality, a strange loopiness. He wanted that dress. And he knew he'd look good in it. Because the mannequin looked like him. Not that he was black or headless, but the way it stood or the length of its limbs or just something about it. The dress would fall just right. It was a flat-chested, masculine, headless mannequin, and he knew this was an androgynous dress. No. A man's dress.

Finally, he went inside and Claire was laughing at him.

"What were you doing out there?" she said. "Are you high already?"

"No," he said. "But that dress. Where did it come from?"

"The orange one? Pretty cool, right? Everybody loves it, nobody buys it."

"Why? Is it super expensive?"

"Well, yeah." She rolled her eyes. "Everything is. But it's not that."

"Is there something wrong with it?" He turned to look at it again, from the back this time, and he felt like it looked different. Maybe the pattern was going in reverse.

"I don't know," she said. "It just doesn't look right. It's a weird dress. Are you ok? What's up with you?"

"Do you think..." he said. He turned, but he didn't make eye-contact. "Would it be

weird... could I try it on?"

"Since when are you a cross-dresser?" she said.

"No, it's not that." He licked his lips. "I just want to try it on."

"Yeah," she said. "Sure. You bring the other stuff?"

"Oh yeah," he said. So they ate some drugs, and then she went over to the window to grab the dress.

"Maybe I'll try some stuff on too," she said. "You want anything else. I think blue might be more your color."

"No," he said. "Blue's great. But just the orange one."

She brought it to him, and he went into a changing room. He stood with it, holding it in his hands. A sort of comfort flowing through his fingers. And a greedy grasping in his chest. He needed this dress. He wanted to own it. And he wondered what this meant about him. Whether he was now a certain kind of person.

But it wasn't that he wanted to be a woman. Or that he wanted to be a man in a dress. What he wanted was to be himself, wearing this dress. Or like somehow, he might be able to be himself only in this dress. Like up until this moment, a part of him had been locked away or held back, and now, as soon as he was inside this orange dress, it could finally be realized. And he didn't want to think a lot more about it.

He stripped down to his underwear. He'd never put a dress on before. Over the top like a t-shirt seemed the way to go. There wasn't a zipper or anything. Probably not something you stepped into. So he pulled it on, and it fell over him like warm water in a nice shower. Then he was looking in the mirror with a sense of recognition. Like a superhero finding the right costume. Not just clothing, but the very fabric of identity.

"Let's see," Claire called out. When he emerged, she actually gasped.

"Holy crap," she said.

"I know, right?" he said.

"It all makes sense," she said. "It's a man's dress."

"No," he said. "It's my dress."

And they smiled with a giddy joy that faded as she thought about it.

"What?" he said.

"You can't afford it," she said.

"Are you serious?" He fumbled around at the back for the tag.

"It's marked at \$850," she said. "I can get you 15%, but that's still like..."

"Whoa," he said. "For a dress?"

"Well," she said, "it's one of the less expensive. People pay thousands for shit like this."

"What if I stole it?" His eyes grew wide. "I overpowered you and ran out."

She laughed.

But maybe it'd be enough to get her fired. And maybe that was exactly what she needed. Because seeing him in this dress, how right it was for him, how he glowed and preened, she wanted to feel that way. She wanted to find just the right thing and have the crazed desperation to grab it and run.

"Go," she said. She looked at the door. "I'll meet you up later. At the warehouse thing."

They had a moment of eye-contact, searching if it was serious. If it was happening. It was.

He took off, racing through the store, blasting out of the doors with the dress flowing around his legs, fluttering free.

He'd left his jeans and t-shirt on the floor of the dressing room. She went in and looked at them. His remnants. Smells and skins cells. His wallet and phone were in the pockets of his pants. Not the best move. She sighed. He was going to need a purse. She tucked his valuables into her own pockets, feeling overloaded and left behind. Now she had to deal

with the fallout. She called her aunt. Thankful when she didn't pick up.

"Hey," Claire said, "had kind of a weird day. This guy I know, I mean, uh. He wanted to try on the orange dress, you know the one in the window? And he sorta ran off with it. I'm so sorry. I think maybe I can get it back? Anyways, closing up for the night. Just thought you should know."

This was going to come down on her. A big fat nothing for her next check. Alaster would owe her forever.

She thought about texting him and then remembered that she had his phone. She wondered if he'd go to the warehouse thing alone like that. They were in San Francisco, but still.

Her phone starting ringing. She somehow thought it'd be him, but it was her aunt. She considered if she could get away with ignoring it. Probably not.

"Claire?" her aunt had a hoarse voice, always scratchy, probably a smoker, though Claire had never seen her with a cigarette. Still, her aunt had this smell about her, like maybe she cooked over an open flame. "I've heard your message."

"Oh yeah?" said Claire.

"You must get that dress back immediately," Aunt Linda said.

"Well, yeah, maybe. I just don't know where it is," said Claire.

"The thief is a friend of yours, yes?"

"I mean, friend. I don't know. I didn't think he'd run off. He's normally very, you know, stable." Claire gestured at the empty store, wondering why she was gesturing.

"No," said Aunt Linda, "I don't know. Don't go anywhere. I'm almost there."

"Almost where?" Claire jumped off the stool. "Don't come here!" She raced around the counter, looking for what she needed to do. The edibles were gone. Alaster's stuff was in her purse. His clothing was still on the floor of the changing room. What could she do with it? Why was she so scared? Had she been silent too long? Should she say more things? She

shouldn't have gotten high.

"Wait," she said. "I'll find it. You don't need to come. He's just playing. It's fine. I'll fix everything. Hello?" Her aunt had already hung up.

Maybe if she could get out fast enough, she could disappear into the city and just avoid Aunt Linda. Never pick up the phone again. She grabbed her purse, running for the door. But she fumbled with the keys as she tried to lock up, trouble getting the right one, and then she smelled woodsmoke, deep and sweet and dusty, her heart jumping around like a drill skittering across a metal table.

"Well," her aunt said. "I'm glad you at least have the presence of mind to lock up. Considering that you've already allowed us to be robbed once tonight."

Her aunt was tall and broad with short grey hair. She was intimidating, off-putting. She stood too close.

"But it's just a dress," Claire said, looking at her aunt's big black lace-up boots. Like she was going to kick down a door. Or stomp on a niece. "Nobody liked it anyways, and it's not the most valuable, and he's not going to do anything. He loved it, and besides I couldn't have stopped him." She clenched her jaw to shut off the words.

"Wrong," her aunt held up a long white hand. "You know nothing of the value of things. No one was ever supposed to buy that dress. It should never have left the shop."

Her aunt's eyes were dark, her face pale and lined. "Now you must tell me about your friend," she said. "We'll track him down and take back my dress."

"Why didn't you tell me about it before," said Claire. "I don't understand. I don't feel good."

"No, I imagine not," said Aunt Linda. "Your pupils are dilating out of your head. You're clearly high. Do you often get high while you mind the store?"

"No," Claire said. "Dear," Aunt Linda placed a cold hand on her cheek. "You are of course fired. And if you don't want me to press charges, you will take me to your thieving

friend.”

“He’s not a thief.” She moved back, seeking escape from the cold hand, the condescension.

“Did he or did he not steal my dress?”

“It’s his dress,” Claire mumbled.

“Excuse me?” Aunt Linda was craning her neck, looking around the street like she might spot Alaster behind a trash can or something.

“Nothing,” said Claire. “Let’s go look for him.”

About a mile and a half away, Alaster was walking to the warehouse, drawn in by the sound of thumping base. There was a little group smoking outside, one of them holding the door open with her foot. The bass spilled out through the crack, lights and fog creeping around into the narrow street. Everything felt unfamiliar.

Alaster was ordinarily very careful. His last girlfriend had called him boring and uninspired while she was dumping him. It was his own fault for pushing her, demanding that she be honest about it instead of placating. Her words had stung and festered though and he wondered why he’d wanted her to be honest. He’d have been upset either way.

So he marched right up to the smokers, said hello like he knew them. The girl holding the door informed him that she was the welcoming committee. He expected her to ask him for the invitation or at least some money and he realized with a sickening lurch that he’d lost his wallet and his phone and his dress didn’t have pockets. But she smiled and held the door for him, and when he went in, the music was loud enough that all the thoughts were blasted from his head.

His body felt long, smooth, alien. Possibly, he’d become a mannequin. An incredibly fluid mannequin. He was the spirit of music, the essence of dance. He was smoke and water.

At first it was wide and empty, but soon it filled with hands, arms, vibrating torsos, solipsistic and orgiastic. The incongruity of a rave. Like an amoeba that spreads and consumes, an amorphous blob of human movement and emotion. And still he was also singular, selfreferential, eyes closed and self-orbiting.

Awareness crept back in as he noticed two women looking at him. He appeared to be dancing with them. Or sort of in a circle with them. They weren't touching, but they were smiling and he was somehow no longer a part of the greater party, but a smaller group of just him and these girls. They were ballet dancers; they were birds; they were briefly robots; and also, no matter what they played at, graceful and sexy women. They were working with each other too. A wordless, body connection. And then, he didn't know how, they started touching him. Hands on his dress and on his arms. Reaching up to brush across his face, his head, his hair, their fingers leaving ghostly trails. His head spinning. His feet hurting.

Suddenly, the dress constricted on him, squeezing rigid. He stumbled, gasping. The girls grabbed him, held him up, shouting questions. Was he ok? Did he need to go outside? His ribs hurt. His eyes weren't focusing. Outside. Why was the dress so tight? He couldn't breathe.

He blinked into the night. Quiet and ordinary. The dress still clung, but only fabric. These women were looking at him.

"Are you like, overdosing?" one of them said.

"No," he finally said. "Just a little out of breath."

"You don't look real good," the other said.

He pulled at the dress. Something apologetic about the way it responded, slinking back to its former shape, a little tighter than before, a little stiffer. As if the material had changed, the strands thickening and hardening.

"Shoot," said the first girl. "I thought you were gonna lose it."

"We totally saved you," said the other.

"Thank you," Alaster said. But he didn't feel saved.

"Your eyes looked like they were gonna pop out of our head. Like those dolls you squeeze you know? And their stuff, their face pops out? That's what you looked like."

"You don't look that way anymore though. I'm Penny. She's Jenny."

"I'm the thing in the doll," Alaster said. "You guys are good dancers."

"Thanks!"

"We love your dress."

But he just thought about how it had tightened up. How maybe there was something wrong with it. How maybe he had been a little out of control, and even now, he was on the edge. His own fear and exhaustion warring around with things he wasn't sure were his. A sort of mania in his limbs, his torso, a compulsion to go back and dance, ditch the girls, run away into the night. Or how, when he considered maybe taking the dress off, he felt tight again. His chest turning in on itself, his heart wrapped in layers of orange cloth.

"Do you smell something?" he said.

"Yeah," said Penny, looking around.

"Smells like burning," said Jenny.

"I don't see any smoke," said Penny.

Neither did Alaster, but he did see two figures coming towards them. One tall and dark, the other slim and familiar. The dress drew back against him, a tail trying to tuck between his legs.

"Alaster," said Claire. "We found you."

"You've stolen my dress," said the tall woman.

"This is my aunt," said Claire. "She owns the store."

"But actually," said Alaster, "I think your dress is stealing me."

"Look," the aunt said. "I'm supposed to be playing Bridge. I just want my dress back in my shop. And honestly, you do too. You don't think you do, but you do."

"I can't," he said. The dress was tightening again, slow and powerful as a python. His ribs hurt. He had to breathe shallow. He was trying to pluck it with his fingers but it was like pinching his own skin. "I can't," he repeated, his eyes going wide, panic shivering through him.

"I was worried about this," Aunt Linda said. She reached into her purse and came out with a pair of long silver scissors.

"Whoa," said Claire.

"What's going on?" said Penny.

"Is that a knife?" said Jenny.

"It's scissors," said Aunt Linda. "Why don't you girls go back to your party?"

"I think I'm going to call the police," said Jenny.

"Do it," said Penny.

Alaster muttered to himself, still plucking at the dress. His legs were shaking now, wobbling like a drunk. "I don't know," he said.

"Ok," said Claire. "It's fine. Everything is fine. Put the scissors away. Time and place, ok?" Aunt Linda looked at her for a moment, the scissors long and dangerous in her hand, and then she put them back in her bag. "My aunt," Claire addressed Jenny and Penny. "She made the dress. It's a funny thing. And my friend, well, he stole it. He's not feeling so great. Thank you for your concern. We'll be ok though, really. He's just had a little too much tonight. We'll take care of it from here."

"Yeah?" said Penny.

"Maybe we should go back inside," said Jenny.

They touched Alaster, looked at him. "Are you going to be ok?" they said. His eyes rolled around in his head. "I don't know," he said.

They didn't know either. They'd just liked the way he moved, and liked his dress, but now it was clear that he needed some kind of help that they were not equipped to provide.

It was a relief, actually, to let it be someone else's problem. So they went back into the party.

Alaster gazed after them. "I don't know," he said again.

Claire took his arm, steered him across the street to where her aunt had parked the car.

"What's going on," she whispered to him.

"It's squeezing me," he said.

"The dress?" she said.

"It hurts," he said.

In the car, they sat without moving, Claire and Alaster in the back and Aunt Linda in front. She looked at them through the mirror. Her eyes dark; her voice calm.

"This is the problem with your generation," she said. "You just want all the time. And you think you deserve everything you want. So it's never a problem to take. You don't believe in consequences. Everyone has to be special. No idea that you might not deserve it or even what you'd do with it if you got it."

"Really?" said Claire. "This is a commentary on our entire generation? I mean, isn't what's really going on that you made a fucked-up dress?"

"We're still Beta-testing," said Aunt Linda. "And actually, I meant to say. You handled that situation out there very well. I was impressed. I might be willing to reconsider how I fired you."

"Please," said Claire. "Don't. I'm not working for you anymore. I'm getting the fuck out of this city. I'm going to go take whatever I want regardless of the consequences. Can we just go back and fix whatever you've done to my friend?"

Aunt Linda started the car. "I didn't do anything to him," she said. "It's just aggressively bonding."

They went back to the shop, dragging a limp Alaster through the doors, his head lolling

around. He made noises that weren't speech. When they let him go, he crumpled up on the floor and lay there, pale and shaking.

"It's so unpredictable," said Aunt Linda. "That's why it was for window-shoppers only."

"Well you should have told me," said Claire. "What if I'd tried it on?"

"Trying it on is fine. That's the point. It would never have gone for you."

"Why not? How can you be so sure? Why are you always so sure about everything. Look where it's gotten us."

"The question, Claire," said her aunt, "and really a good one for you to think about another time, is why aren't you more sure about anything. But let's address the matter at hand. We're going to have to cut it off. It'll take months to make another one." She shook her head, reaching into her bag to bring back out the long silver scissors.

Alaster looked up, awareness sharpening along the edge of the twin blades. It was the end he saw up there, rapidly approaching, and he tried to crawl away. He wanted to go back to when he'd first put on the dress. That feeling when he'd looked in the mirror. The perfect display, the ideal form. How it'd been when he was dancing. But the dress was a solid thing now. Petrified. Ossified. Nothing would ever be ok again.

Aunt Linda knelt down, rolled him onto his stomach. He felt like a fish. About to be gutted. At least fish didn't know what was coming. The cold touch of the scissors on his spine, the bony fingers of death. And then he heard the long smooth tearing, the cutting, the agony. It tore something out of him, some part of himself that he would never get back and then it lay on the floor around him in pieces. He was in his underwear in a store. Claire and her aunt were looking down at him. Cold and exposed.

He coughed. Rolled out of the carcass of the dress and climbed up. Conscious of his bare red skin, suddenly ashamed of how healthy he was. Like he'd been hamming it up, play-acting, and now it was over and they'd seen through him all along.

"Are my, um," he cleared his throat, "are my clothes still here?"

An hour later, he was still in the store. Aunt Linda had taken the remains of the orange dress, draped the limp halves over her arm, and walked out. She'd told Claire to lock up when she left. That they should talk in the morning. Now Claire sat on the floor next to Alaster. Shoulders touching, facing the same direction, backed up against the wall.

"So," he finally said. "Made a real fool out of myself tonight."

She reached over and took his hand. Held onto it.

"I guess we're stuck this way after all," he said.

"It's the problem with soulmates," she spoke softly, her voice a cool balm over his burning shame. "We put too much of ourselves into the myth. And when it isn't what we expect, we can't recover. Ruined by happily ever after. Because life keeps going, and soon, we know that we haven't escaped ourselves or become better versions or found the one true love that will fit next to us forever. Nothing takes away the pain of uncertainty, the terror of making choices and never becoming the thing we wish we would. But you know what? You almost had it. Maybe even did for a minute or two. I don't know whether that makes you better off or not. It was inspiring though, and a little frightening, but no, it wasn't foolish."

She squeezed his hand.

"Let's never settle. Let's not give up. Let's go out into the world, be weird and unexpected and unashamed. You looked fucking good in that dress. You were happy. And I was happy for you. We'll get it back. Some semblance. One way or another. Or we'll never stop looking."

They were quiet a long time together and he was glad she was there next to him. Glad she was his friend.

"But you're contradicting yourself," he finally said.

"Fuck it," she said. "Things don't always have to make sense."