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THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT

BY R. FREDERICK HAMILTON

Vaughn sunk deeper into the couch as the noise assailed him from all sides. A constant stream of chatter punctuated with the chink of glasses and explosive bursts of laughter. It surrounded him like an unrelenting physical presence, rising steadily in volume as more and more people were forced to shout to be heard above each other and the pulsing music. Once again, he could only wonder why anyone would bother holding a party in such a place.

It just didn't make sense to him. Why bother meeting with friends unless the intention was to talk to them? It seemed so very, very pointless. But that didn't surprise him. He felt that way about a lot of things.

But at least the bar was dimly lit. There were only a few standing lamps spaced around that spread a sickly, orange glow. Just enough light to recognise someone within arm's reach. Beyond that, everyone was reduced to swampy shadows. Not enough light for everyone to see how uncomfortable Vaughn was; dark enough to hide how pale he looked as he scanned around the crowd for her.

Faces loomed in and out of focus but none of them were hers. Vaughn closed his eyes just to reassure himself that she was still there, dancing away behind his eyelids. Despite how uncomfortable he felt, Vaughn smiled as he saw her on the stage. The shadows were thick and roiling but he could see enough to know she was there. Sweat was still trickling down his back beneath the thick, woollen suit he wore but he did feel better when he reopened his eyes. Even with the voice at the back of his skull, nagging him

about how overdressed he was. Whispering how people were staring at him. Laughing and pointing behind his back.

It was just another example of how out of touch he was with everything. He'd researched the bar before he'd ventured out for his first social excursion in three years. It had looked like an upmarket kind of place: expensive drinks, sumptuous setting. But everyone around him seemed dressed casually. He'd caught sight of more than one t-shirt in the gathered crowd and the sneakers most people wore made his immaculately polished dress shoes stand out like dog balls. He felt like a relic from another age. Which was probably fitting as both the suit and the shoes had, once upon a time, belonged to his father.

*Looks like you got it wrong again didn't you, just like you always do,* the voice nagged away and Vaughn felt his smile slipping from his face as the crowd pressed in around him. Suddenly it *was* just as the voice said and all the laughter in the room, all the infernal chatter, *was* directed at him. He could feel eyes on him as looked away, down to the table in front of his knees.

At least he'd arrived early – too early really, even before the birthday girl herself had turned up – and managed to snag a sumptuous armchair before the hordes had transformed the bar into a crush. It was one of four ringing a low table in the rear corner and Vaughn didn't recognise any of the people sitting in the other chairs. He didn't know if they were here for her party or not. He was doing his utmost to avoid eye contact. It made him nervous to have so many people

in close proximity to the present he'd brought her and once again, his eyes darted down toward it.

He'd sat it on the edge of the table earlier, when he'd first arrived, and had been glancing down ever since to check that it was still okay. That there were no leakages showing through the shiny, silver paper that took three hours to select at the newsagents. As it had been on all the other glances, the large box was unblemished. The paper crisply folded around it and secured with a white ribbon. An arrangement that had taken three false starts before he'd been perfectly happy with the result.

Vaughn breathed a sigh of relief and reached for his glass of absinthe sitting next to the box on the table. His hands were shaking slightly as he raised the glass to his lips and a nearby burst of laughter had him blushing to the core as he realised they'd seen and weren't about to let him off the hook this time. There was no way they were allowing this mishap to go through to the keeper. He ignored it as best he could and took a dainty sip of his absinthe while the voice giggled along with them.

As the strong aniseed flavour filled his mouth, he closed his eyes again for another brief glimpse of her sinuous writhings. It calmed him enough to allow his hand to remain steady on the glass' return trip to the table top. He definitely wanted more to drink. He was desperate for the numbing effect of the alcohol but he had to pace himself. At twenty five dollars a glass, the drinks were too far outside his usual budget to churn through as fast as he'd like to. And there would also be

the tortuous trip to the bar to order another. Pressing himself through the throng...

Vaughn shuddered and as surreptitiously as possible mopped at the sweat that plastered his brow with his sleeve, deliberately looking at the roof while he did so. That way he wouldn't have to see the pointed stares if anyone noticed. But the weird angles the roof jutted at – as though it had been specifically designed to reflect and amplify the noise – just made him feel strangely queasy. As a shatter of glass rose above the din followed by an outburst of shrieking laughter, Vaughn closed his eyes instead and breathed evenly in and out for a moment. The relief was instantaneous as he allowed the shadows behind his eyelids to give way; drew them back to reveal the stage with its highly polished parquet floor glittering beneath the bright spotlights as they trained on her dancing form.

'Rebecca...' He whispered her name aloud as she twisted and gyrated before him, that radiant smile affixed across her face as it always was. Everyone else at work called her Bec but to Vaughn she was always Rebecca. There just wasn't enough majesty contained in that single syllable.

Her name died on his lips as the last of the shadows retreated and he saw that her outfit had changed since the last time he'd watched her. His breath caught in his throat as the new one was revealed. It was the same outfit that had transfixed him when she'd stepped through the door of the bar that evening. Just before the floodgates had opened and the crowd had surged in to swallow her up, he'd had a brief moment of slack-

jawed awe as he'd taken in the glittering, sequined top and black jeans tight enough to have been painted on. And for a second he'd thought she'd been heading his way... but in the end all he'd gotten was a wave - which he'd returned, blushing furiously at the pathetic limp-wristedness of his own gesture - before she'd been thronged by a group entering hot on her heels.

A man he didn't recognise had caught in a bear hug from behind and Vaughn had hated him at that moment as much as he'd ever hated anyone. Even the BASTARD. But it was alright now. The fist clenching, pulse pounding rage was only a memory as he watched her dancing. Her movements free and easy, the sequined top that was so far removed from the usual staid blouses she wore at work. As he always did when he watched her dance, Vaughn wondered how she dared.

It was her dancing that had first caught Vaughn's eye. Before that she had been nothing but another one of his work colleagues: hazy figures, moving around in circles he could never comprehend. Things to avoid. To push past in a hurry, eyes downcast and lips mumbling a series of hoarded stock answers. That was until the work party three weeks ago when he'd seen her dance for the first time. Spinning and bobbing across the cubicle, its furniture pushed back to the walls to form an impromptu dance floor. So free and easy. So unconcerned that people were watching. It had made him uncomfortable but had been profoundly exhilarating at the same time. A beacon of light that, in comparison, overshadowed the stilted and awkward movements of

the few other co-workers who had either worked up or consumed enough courage to join her. He'd been transfixed as he watched. Even if at the time he hadn't known her name.

The outfit she'd worn was not a patch on the outfit she was in tonight but it had seemed perfect nonetheless; he'd never imagined a cream blouse and a long pleated skirt could be so arousing. For Vaughn a whole new world had been visible in the dance. As he sipped at his beer, his eyes riveted to her, he'd seen for the first time how different his life could be.

He now thought of it as the fateful office party even though it had been little more than someone's farewell drinks. Vaughn could no longer remember whose. He'd probably never even talked to them before anyway. And it was impossible for the colleague's face to form in his mind now. Not when she was dancing away in front of him, beaming the glorious smile. The smile that was now exclusively directed at him. Unlike at the farewell party. That grin *had* been turned in his direction then, across the makeshift dance floor and his heart had skipped a beat as he realised that there was hope. That he might learn the name of the lady. That he'd finally found a person whose name was worth learning. That things might grow from there.

Then he'd had the embarrassing realisation, moments after he'd half raised his hand in reply, that the smile had been in fact directed at the BASTARD Jeremy, who'd been standing directly behind him. She'd been smiling as the PRICK made his way past him and across to her and he'd only been able to blush and

lower his eyes as the new world he'd glimpsed shattered and fragmented in an instant.

He'd stomached watching them dance for a minute. Watched them laugh as though it was the most hilarious thing in the world. Watched her flushed cheeks. Watched the predatory glint in the BASTARD'S eyes. Then he'd had to leave.

And as he'd sat behind the wheel of his car in the parking lot - even though he knew he'd had too much to drink and shouldn't be driving - for the longest time, Vaughn just bawled his eyes out. He was certain having such hope raised and dashed so quickly was too much for him to bear. That this was something that he wouldn't be able to get over.

Until that night. When she'd first appeared to him, dancing behind his eyelids.

He'd been at the computer, his tears finally dried, pecking out a resignation letter when it happened. Just resting his eyes for a moment; the tears had left them gritty and exacerbated the screens stinging glow. And the confusion had been instantaneous as he'd realised that it wasn't just darkness that he was seeing behind his eyelids. That there was something else, glinting through the shadows. And the confusion grew as he'd realised that what he was seeing was a stage. A highly polished expanse of wood. The type that wouldn't look out of place in a school auditorium. But he didn't even have a chance to question its presence before one by one the spotlights snapped on, obliterating the shadow and revealing her dancing right in the centre of the polished wood. He was instantly hooked.

Even though Vaughn had only planned a brief respite - a minute at the most - before he knew it, it was morning and the alarm clock was chirping at him from its perch beside the computer. In a flutter of eyelids, his gaze fell blankly on the still unmade bed next to his desk and her name that had eluded him as he'd watched her dance at the party was burned into his brain. His tone was reverential as he'd whispered it aloud.

*Rebecca...*

And even though his back was stiff and sore from the night spent in the computer chair, the sloppiest grin of his life split his face as he'd stared around his cramped bedsit, seeing everything for the first time; as though it was all shiny and new.

He just couldn't stop saying her name, over and over as he hit delete and trashed the terse couple of sentences he'd drafted the previous night.

And he mouthed her name again now, under his breath, as he realised that his penis was stiffening and that he was going to have to open his eyes.

It wasn't the place for him to let the dance continue. For him to watch, as he had every night since then, her clothes slowly being shed.

'Rebecca...'

And as if he'd voiced a spell of summoning, she was there in front of him when his eyes opened. A brightly coloured drink excessively packed with umbrellas and slices of fruit in her hand.

'Vaughn, you made it...' It was clear from the exaggerated motion of her mouth that she was yelling but

what Vaughn heard was barely a whisper. Though it was loud enough for him to hear the undercurrent that was present. The unsaid, *oh God, you actually turned up, I only invited you to be polite because you happened to be present when I asked a few other colleagues. I didn't think you'd really show...*

It stung but Vaughn forced it down, reminding himself that the undercurrent would soon change. That it all would be different once she saw what he'd gotten her. Everything would be different then. Once she saw the present. He could see the shock giving way to happiness in her face. Hear her breathy, 'Oh Vaughn, it's just perfect.'

'I did,' he replied mechanically as his eyes drifted to the box on the table again.

He'd been terrified in the heady aftermath that it would smell. That she'd pick it up, her nose would wrinkle and the surprise would be instantly ruined. As the awkward silence descended he sniffed cautiously but all he could smell was the thickly roiling stench of deodorants, colognes and perfumes that permeated the air. He regretted the sniff seconds later. The smell seemed to make the crowd press in even closer around him and he could have sworn the temperature spiked a few degrees. It just didn't make any form of sense to him that people could enjoy being pressed in like this. *But at least there wasn't any odour from the box*, he thought in an effort to beat back the panic that was starting to claw around his chest again.

*Should he give it to her now?*

The idea left Vaughn a little breathless as he looked back up at her. He was still a bit nervous with his choice. He was pretty certain she would like it but what would he do if she didn't? What if all she did was look into the box, give a roll of her eyes and a phoney, 'Wow, that's really neat Vaughn, you shouldn't have?' Then all that effort would have been for nothing. Maybe the voice was right when it said it was a stupid idea?

Her body language alone was currently enough to make him hesitate. Vaughn decided he'd bide his time as he watched her jiggling restlessly from foot to foot, scanning around the crowd. Just wait a little longer until the moment is perfect.

He was used to that sort of reaction when people were forced to talk to him. It seemed he emitted some sort of nervous energy that made people instantly uncomfortable. The voice always told him that it was because they knew what a pathetic man he was but Vaughn tried his best not to think of it that way. He'd built up an elaborate explanation for it: that the pace of modern society was raising a bunch of egotistical go-getters who had neither the time nor inclination to actually listen and pay attention to what other people were saying to each other. It was why he was often quiet in group settings. It just seemed pointless speaking up when others were only waiting for their turn to talk. Even if his theory wasn't true, it did make him feel mildly better about himself.

But he was in a slightly different situation where Rebecca was concerned. With her, Vaughn wished he could carry out long and lengthy conversations but

just the sight of her left him tongue-tied and sweaty. He knew he'd have to rely on her making the first move and had high hopes that his present would be the thing that broke the ice. The thing that would make her notice him. Really notice him. Then it would always be like it had been two days after the farewell drinks. When he'd found her in the alley behind the office, sitting on the smoker's chair – a milk crate wedged between the door's alcove and the mesh cage containing the air conditioning intake.

There would be no more awkwardness between them, just as there hadn't been when he stumbled across her, eyes red and shiny, her face puffy. Clearly she'd just been crying. It was so far removed from the smile he was already becoming accustomed to seeing her wearing as she danced behind his eyelids. For a moment Vaughn just hadn't known what to do.

There was a hungry intensity to the way she'd sucked at her cigarette as she'd stared blankly at the wall in front of her. Vaughn was pretty sure she hadn't even been aware of his presence as he'd stood frozen just a few metres away.

And he'd almost just kept walking, the obvious emotion she was showing too much for him to bear. It was so different to the picture he'd built. She didn't care what anyone thought; didn't care how they perceived her. She was everything Vaughn wished he could be. Unshackled from the giggles and eyeballs boring into his back; the half-heard whispered insults.

*But imagine if you hadn't*, Vaughn thought as he glanced down at the present again, his eyes running

over the silver paper once more, searching for a hint of leakages. *Then you'd never have known the perfect gift to get her.*

Rebecca said something that Vaughn didn't quite catch; the words snatched away by the hubbub around them before they could make any sense. His sweating instantly doubled as he grinned and nodded, hoping it was an appropriate response. Another awkward silence descended and his cheeks flamed with embarrassment as he realised it wasn't. That he'd made yet another faux pas.

Suddenly he was gripped with a terror that burrowed right to the depth of his soul. He could barely stand to look at her; certain he'd see frown lines wormed across the expanse of her brow. Or worse. A stifled giggle. A flicker in the eyes that would show exactly her disdain for him. He knew he should just admit he hadn't heard her. All it would require would be a simple lean forward and an excuse me. Three simple syllables that he found impossible to voice. They just seemed like an admittance that he'd failed in some way. And the thought was arriving that maybe she'd said something bad anyway. Something derogatory that he was better off not hearing and the thought was setting off panic in his stomach, sending it radiating through his whole body and the voice was starting up again.

*Well what did you expect? Of course she finds you unpleasant. Of course she wants to injure you like all the others. The dance was just a seduction, lulling you in for the almighty sting in the tail. Of course she wants to ridicule you; to make you feel bad. Of*

*course she wants you to be sad. What on earth made you think she'd even want a present from you?*

*She told me she did. She told me what she wanted,* Vaughn countered but it wasn't working and a panicked glance at the neatly wrapped box only cemented his sudden dread. It looked so pathetic and paltry. So damn dull with its simple silver wrapping. He didn't know what he'd been thinking. Compared to the bright and cheerful colours he'd seen clasped in others hands, his present was the equivalent of a storm cloud in a bright, sunny sky.

And the voice was so unrelenting. Just as it always was.

*Not that it matters what it looks like, you've ruined it now anyway. You'll never get to give it to her. She probably wouldn't even accept it. That's if you could build up the courage. Not after that last little faux pas. That last one was the straw that broke the camels back.*

The urge to just get up, grab the present and run was overwhelming and for the briefest second Vaughn was certain he was going to do it. He felt just plain ridiculous as tears started to sting his eyes...

Then Rebecca leaned over and washed it all away in a single sentence.

'I said, I like your suit!' she yelled over the surrounding din.

And just like that his panic was gone and his breath was growing ragged for another reason. The realisation of how close her lean had brought her to him. The wonderful scent she exuded didn't help either but

he couldn't stop sucking it down in gulping mouthfuls. The dancing was never like this and that was exiting enough. But now with the proximity and the scent; the imposed distance of the stage removed, Vaughn was beginning to feel light-headed.

He could feel the vital heat coming off her in waves, radiating toward him; radiating outward from her...

Vaughn realised he was staring intently at the tight intersection of denim across her crotch and quickly looked up to her face.

*What will she think?*

*Fucking pervert, prick, creepy little man,* the voice was more than happy to supply options but it appeared that Rebecca wasn't even aware of his crotch-gazing. Instead she was peering above his head as she still leaned into him, scanning around the crowd.

It was just like history repeating and Vaughn knew he had to give her the present soon before she was snatched away again. Another BASTARD would make his way toward her and that smile would be gone and all he'd have left would be the dancing once more.

Vaughn started, realising he was letting the silence drag out too long. He mumbled something hastily in reply but didn't know if he used real words or if it was just a grouping of random syllables. Despite his best efforts, his eyes slipped down and burrowed into the cleavage proudly displayed by the plunging vee of her neckline. There was a solitary trickle of sweat snaking down to disappear into its depths. The sight of it had him licking his dry lips.

His suit felt soaked through at the back and he longed to shift position so he could pluck it free of his skin but Rebecca's presence was paralysing. And he was terrified that if he moved she'd see the bulging erection, tenting the front of his trousers.

'What?' She cupped her hand to her ear and moved in closer. Close enough that Vaughn could imagine she was going to graze his lips with a kiss.

*I love you*, he thought.

'Thank-you,' he said and was rewarded with a smile.

His heart nearly stopped as she plonked herself down on the armrest beside him. Her shirt had ridden up slightly and as she leaned into him again, despite his thick suit, Vaughn could feel her heat burning into his skin.

He was well aware of her arm draped across the back of the chair somewhere behind him. Not quite a hug but near enough for him and even as she said the BASTARD'S name, he was remembering the feel of those arms around him when she'd held him in the alley.

After he'd listened to her halting tale and realised just what had been done to her.

After the idea for the present had first arrived.

The idea that caused the smile on the dancing figure behind his eyelids to grow and grow.

'It's the fucking bastard Jeremy,' she'd said.

'No phone call. No nothing,' she'd said.

'Acts like he doesn't even fucking know me now.'

'Makes me feel like such a slut.'

'God, I wish I could just cut off his cock and shove it into that big fucking mouth of his,' she'd said.

'He's been blabbing it all over the fucking office. Just another fucking notch on that prick's belt.'

And, buoyed by the remembrance, Vaughn knew that it was time.

'Have you seen Jeremy?' Rebecca repeated as he reached out for the present on the table. Vaughn forced himself to ignore the hint of hope in her voice. 'He said he might make it along.'

Her eyes were scanning the crowd again and Vaughn felt the doubts lance in from every angle. Especially when he lifted the box and felt how sticky the bottom was. That the shiny, silver paper had been misleading. The liquid had been pooling all along, soaking through the bottom and allowing the top to remain unmarred.

His throat was painfully dry as his eyes drifted down and he saw the puddle welled on the table top. In the dim light the liquid looked black against the polished grain. It would be written off as just another spilled drink until the night ended and the staff turned the lights up for cleaning.

'He said sorry, you know.' Rebecca's voice lowered until the words were only just audible. As though she thought it was possible someone might overhear them in the hubbub of chatter.

Vaughn could feel trickles from the box snaking down his sleeves as he froze with the present poised over his lap. He could think of absolutely nothing to say and his head seemed to be locked in a loop, shaking itself side to side as his mouth gaped like a carnival clown.

'You know, about the other week.'

Vaughn dragged his eyes up from the box to see her scanning the crowd again.

'I've been meaning to talk to you about that actually. You see, it turns out that I gotten the wrong...'

Vaughn shrivelled inside when she looked back down and he saw it in her eyes. The twinkle that said all was now forgiven. He felt the wetness from the bottom of the box spreading across his crotch, wilting his erection as he wondered how the confident dancer he saw behind his eyelids could be so naïve.

The plip-plop of dripping moisture seemed ridiculously loud as he managed to close his mouth at last, swallowing once around the lump that had formed in his throat. The voice was ready and waiting.

*Yet another faux pas you foolish man...* He could hear it chuckling away as Rebecca turned to him and the smile lit up her face.

'Is that for me?'

And even though he was certain he said no, she apparently didn't hear him and reached across to take it anyway.

'You really didn't have to...' she started, her words trailing off as her fingers punched into the sodden bottom.

His hand were sticky with the liquid but Vaughn barely noticed as he buried his face in them.

He couldn't help the choking sob as the lights illuminated nothing but an empty dance floor.