

# AUNT CHLOE

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## Looking

by Kaitlin McLaughlin

“Hey, we’re all goin’ down to the Pub again, if you wanna hang,” a gruff voice spoke from behind me. I sat up from where my face lay flat on the desk in my cubicle. A faint warmth radiated from my cheek, where I knew an indentation had formed. Another monotone, predictable day had put me to sleep.

“Sounds good,” I responded, without turning to the voice whose owner I didn’t care to know. Did it matter? They were all the same. I had long begun to wonder why they invited me *every day*. As if somehow a particular day was different from the last. We went “down to the Pub” every night after work, I hardly needed an invitation. I knew where to find them, and in my constant state of boredom, I always did. But it wasn’t with my colleagues that I satisfied my apathy. To them, I was indifferent. But another group of Pub frequenters pulled my interest in a way that sent me almost into a trance. I gravitated unconsciously toward them like an obedient lap dog yielding to its owner’s hand.

The Brady Pub was the same; dimly lit, dust infested, harbinger of drunks. Various shades of brown filled the building—covering the walls in the form of scattered stains; dark on the floors in an almost mud-like, wet-looking wood; and, on the tables and stools it took up a light, almost beige-looking lumber.

They came in at about nine, that same group of restless people—the names of whom I learned while eavesdropping on never-ending conversations—who never seemed to miss a night out at the bar. I watched them from afar the way I always did while coddling a drink, talking with who I guessed were my friends, and trying to remain unseen in plain sight. They took up their respective positions at their quaint little spot in a corner of the room. It was at the front of the Pub—right by the entrance—and was complete with a small table and a raggedy sofa nearby. Bill, a six-foot tall, tired looking man who wore an emotionless expression at all times, sat at a table in a chair closest to the entrance. Almost as if he were ready to take flight at any given moment. I would have believed he would, had it not been for Carrie, who sat firmly on his left leg with a permanent drink in her hand.

They’d always said Carrie had an ass like an apple. Round, firm, juicy. And if she took off that tight black skirt she was always teasin’ in, I’d bet it was shiny like a nice, hard apple. Just like the rest of her caramel skin that was so smooth and clear it almost looked fluorescent, even in the yellow lighting of the run-down bar.

“Who are you staring at?” another voice in my group of predictables asked me, female this time. She squinted in the direction of my gaze.

“No one, no one,” I dismissed her with a wave of my hand, looking away only long enough to convince her and then resetting my attention to the group by the door.

Looking back to the group, my eyes fixed on Mike and Ash. Mike was tall but not as tall as Bill. His skin was tanned but fair and he wore a white Cubs cap—the name embroidered with red on the front—sideways on his head. Ash, who I assumed had a better job than the rest of the bunch, wore a navy blue button down with medium gray slacks. He sat next to Mike on the dingy sofa that everyone always argued over whether was yellow or a light orange. They sat, not too close so as not to be conspicuous but not so far as to give away that their separation was intentional. And then there was Rhonda who sat off to the right of the table with indignation. She hovered at the table in a chair near the window next to the sofa—whatever color it was—pretending not to notice Mike and Ash while everyone else in the corner pretended not to notice *her*. There was tension in the usually chatty group that night; the cause for which I yearned to know.

“Are y’all gonna act right tonight, cause if not I’d really rather just go home,” Mike addressed no one in particular. He just stared at the group of three at the table.

“We’re fine,” Carrie cooed, taking a swig of her drink.

“I don’t think it’s *us* that needs to keep our acts together tonight,” Rhonda responded pointedly, nodding her head in the direction of the dangerously close hands of the two on the couch. They jerked away immediately.

“I need another drink,” Carrie laughed, downing the one she already had and getting up from her position on Bill’s lap. While getting her drink, she got lost in conversation with the bartender. Bill got up and headed toward the restrooms. A few seconds later, Rhonda followed. The restrooms were behind a wall near my group of forgotten friends and me.

“No,” I heard Bill say plainly.

“So I guess you only take a bite out of the Gala when you can’t have the Fuji,” Rhonda said accusingly, but the hurt was evident in her tone.

“If you’re gonna make this difficult and something you know it’s not, then I’ll go take a bite out of a Granny Smith for all I care,” Bill responded, still with no emotion. I began to wonder if he was just a giant vessel that took the form of a human being. All I heard next were footsteps, some getting farther away and others getting closer. Rhonda appeared from behind the wall then. Carrie—who was still at the counter—looked in her direction and smiled to herself.

“You do it to yourself,” Ash told her when she returned to the table.

“You keep goin’ back, that’s on you,” he continued, now looking at her. Rhonda exploded then.

“Oh! *Really?* And what am I supposed to do, huh? Sit here *pretending* like the two of you? Well, let me tell you sweetie,” she said leaning close to him, her voice and smile menacingly pleasant, “you might as well go for it, ‘cause you going to Hell *anyhow*.” Ash stood then, now fuming. The subject was so personal, so deep, I almost felt like I was intruding. Even so, I couldn’t tear myself away from it all. This very moment was the reason I opted for the Pub every night after six hours of blah at the office rather than my own comfortable bed.

Ash was a quiet man, as was Mike. I supposed it was because of their poorly concealed shame. They seemed to always have their heads down. In conversation they hummed and grunted their agreements and their disagreements, not wanting to make waves or draw too much attention to themselves, for their connection would be obvious to the most imbecilic creature on Earth.

“And you think sleepin’ with another woman’s man don’t buy *your* ticket to Hell?” Ash asked in accusatory outrage. Bill returned then, still empty. Carrie approached their corner, fresh drink in her hand. She sauntered until she was centimeters away from Rhonda, looked her up and down and said with substantial confidence,

“She can *sleep* all she wants. She ain’t never gon *have* him and he ain’t ever gon *want* her.” Rhonda had no response. They returned to their normal positions after that, more tense now than when they entered. That night, Rhonda assumed an envy that was so furious it could suffocate them if they acknowledged it all at once.

But how could you blame her—I couldn’t—when Carrie, even in a constant state of heavy drunkenness was still so incapable of imperfection; an apple that would never rot. And how Mike and Ash, even in their never-ending act of a Shakespearean tragedy of a life, could somehow still *belong* with each other. And how Bill could sit there, unconcerned, even when they lay together on nights when Carrie was too busy working and drinking to be a lover. Where was her love story, tragic or otherwise? Her forever, for better or for worse?

“Guys! Let’s take a picture!” came a voice from behind me. The same one that had interrupted my gazing earlier that night. I was forced to extract myself from the now-bitter world of the group in the corner of the bar and return to my excuse for being there. I got my phone out, they gathered behind me—our backs to my nightly entertainment—and we posed. And even with the cheating and envy and pride and pretending that scourged the pub more than the dust that littered every square inch of it, the room was still a backdrop of affable beauty. Now that room and Bill’s cheating, Rhonda’s envy, Carrie’s pride, and Mike and Ash’s pretending, sits framed on the corner of my nightstand. Waiting to fall over the edge.

**Kaitlin McLaughlin’s** passion is creative writing and she aspires to become a novelist. Her work is often inspired by her own experiences as well as historical events that she dramatizes into fiction or condenses into poetry. She is a native of New Orleans, Louisiana, focusing on English and comparative women’s studies at Spelman College.