

## **SUSIE BOWER** (an excerpt)

### THE SUNGLASSES

“Shit” mumbled Derek as he leaned back in his garage-sale kitchen chair with a wobbly leg. He stood up and walked carefully through the dim light over the Taco Bell wrappers on the floor.

“Don’t fall over, cause I don’t want to pick your ass up” Jules said in a lackadaisical way. Derek grumbled as he poured himself another shot of Captain Morgan. He sat back down and stared at Jules, she had a whimsical expression on her face. They said nothing to each other. A knock on the thick apartment door harpooned the silence between them. “I’m leaving” Jules said quickly and jumped up.

“Fine, don’t wake me up when you come back.”

“I doubt I could,” she said as she pulled the door shut and left.

Derek Stines flipped the switch on the remote for his TV he couldn’t afford. What was taking his sister so long, and did she take his money? Derek could see the dust on the TV reflected by the cheap high-wattage light bulb he replaced yesterday. Everything seemed dusty, covered over with time and idleness. He wondered how he turned out so well, or perhaps he wondered how he was able to lie to himself so well. He had to hide what little money he had left in a tin box that reeked of old cigars and ash filth. Last time Jules had “borrowed” money from his wallet she didn’t pay it back for two weeks. He was hoping it didn’t take as long this time, because he was itching for a cigarette. Addictive personality, he thought. He had gotten that from his mother.

She came in the door an hour later looking innocent but hiding her face as she slowly slid the deadbolt closed. Derek noticed that her face looked about three shades paler. “Hmm. Same clothes, same hair... but something’s different...” he said inflecting his voice higher at the last part. Her eyes met his then dashed to the frayed floor. Most might not have noticed, but Derek knew where to look. He caught a glimpse of fresh track scratches on her arm. “Listen; just pay me back, ok? I ran out of cigarettes and I’m tweaking” he said. No sooner had he looked down when a pack fell onto his lap.

“I didn’t think you’d still be up but I got you these” and she turned on her green and black converse flats and swiftly walked down the dark hall to her room on the right.

As he smoked, his finger circled the wood grain design of his worn end-table. At twenty-four, he was at the point where some of his childhood memories were starting to fade, but at no cost to him; he welcomed it. But he could still remember the time his father took him to the zoo that was over the state line. He stared, amazed, at the animals behind bars that looked nothing like him. Once his mother read the plaque saying that the monkeys were born into captivity, their eyes looked more familiar. Derek was a decent student in a high school that was dominated by drunks and ditzes. He was the only one who got in trouble for looking through the peephole and seeing Pattie Green in the girls locker room, mostly because the other guys had run away when they saw her, only after they yelled out in disgust (when Pattie realized someone had seen her with her XXL shirt off she had screamed) and partly because, Derek thought, the dikey gym teacher had it out for him since he aced the last exam. He remembered helping a special needs girl get on the correct bus each day following afternoon kindergarten. At the time, he was young enough to be embarrassed but old enough to know it was right to be kind to her. Now, looking back, he was pleased that his teacher had picked him for the job.

Once when Derek was about six and he, his father, mother, and sister still lived in the brick ranch on Fern Rd. his mother broke more than just his heart. His mother had just gotten home from the deli and was still wearing her grayed uniform. Once the babysitter left, who, in later years, would grow up to be very attractive to a man like Derek, his mother started vacuuming. Derek was in the white-walled living room sitting Indian style on the plum carpet his mother picked out. He was staring at the 'Happy Holidays' snow globe his father had gotten him from a rest stop. He remembered his mother nagging and calling him in to help her feed his sister, but all he wanted to do was watch the golden flecks dance around the tiny snowman in the center. His father had been gone for a week, driving a truck for a shipping company. After about the fourth call, Derek could tell his mother was annoyed and losing patience. Once the fifth call came with urgency and anger Derek grabbed the globe with his small slippery fingers and ran around the wall into the brown and white kitchen. He saw his mother's eyes widen in slow anger. His mother's pulse heightened. She snatched the globe from his hands. She threw it harshly against the country wallpaper. The globe's contents spilled out all over the carpet and the linoleum. "No," Derek cried out. In a quick and fluid movement his mother tugged at his collar and threw him against the railing of the stairs leading to the basement. Any harder and he could have fallen over; he most certainly would have.

The clock's hands spun around like a top, while Derek dozed on his rough tan chair. He awoke to one of the loose buttons digging into his ribcage, and

cursing it, ripped it off of its last thread and flung it against the space heater; it soared, bouncing back with a ding. He groped for the wall in the dark and stumbled into his room, the digital numbers on his clock the only light for his eyes to see. Waking up to those numbers every day only depressed him. He wished he could wake up for the rest of his life never seeing them, and not needing to. He did not count on his mood lifting in the morning after he reached the greasy dealership.

The morning light stung his eyes. He had to habitually take the bus to work because his car was having engine trouble and he didn't have the finances or the patience to fix it. The bus had the normal characters that morning. There was the man who always looked hung-over despite his navy business suit that was just a little too small. The short cuff exposed his naked wrist, which usually wore a Rolex rip-off but was forgotten this morning because of the rush to buy some coffee and take aspirin. The young woman with a little too much eyeliner on and a little less deodorant was hunched against the window. There was a woman he had never seen on the bus before, sitting quietly across the dirt-ingrained aisle. She was wearing black, thin-rimmed sunglasses that seemed out of place on her very round, pink face. She sat in complete silence and Derek did not see her move once. Then, about five minutes into his ride, she started to doze off. At least, that's what it looked like to Derek. "Ahhh" she made a devilish noise from deep in her throat. Nobody else in the bus noticed this incident, except Derek. For a second, he felt as though his eyes were on fire, seeing something surreal and alarming. It was like the killer suddenly popping out of the closet onto his certain victim. At first, she was unaware that he was watching her, and she stared into the glasses. Once the bus drove over some pothole the city hadn't fixed yet, she seemed to snap out of what had fixed her mind. Was she trembling or was she still? She gently laid the glasses down on the seat. Her pale ash eyes met Derek's, and he thought they were the oldest eyes he had ever seen.

"I want you to have these," she spoke.

"Why?" whispered Derek in a breathy soft tone.

"Sometimes, the only way to rid yourself of demons is to pass them on to others," she said slowly, locking her eyes to his. After a moment, she abruptly rose and hurried off the bus at the stop. Derek's mind was static; a TV without reception.

Once he had regained his composure, he realized he had missed his stop. Damn it, he cursed himself. What was his problem? He had seen drug addicts go crazy before. He had seen his mom shoot up before she left all those years ago. At that moment he had vowed not to end up like her, miserable, tired, and lonely. That was ten years ago. Now, he realized he was already there. In a flash, he grabbed the glasses and slid them into his beaten

leather coat. He rode the bus all the way home, forgetting about work and responsibility and rent payments.

Jules wasn't home; hopefully she is at work, thought Derek. He lit a cigarette, and inhaled deeply, his fingers shaking. He sank into his tan chair, trying to relax. He pulled the thin-rimmed sunglasses out of his tattered pocket with a violent tug, and they flew across the room to the off-white, dirt-stained carpet. Angry, he got up to pour himself a drink, passing the mirror on the wall above the rickety two-person table he found at a re-sale shop. His eyes appeared darker than usual. Once the alcohol had warmed his throat, and that comforting feeling set in, he retraced his steps and picked up the glasses and sat back down. Upon second glance, he realized that the glasses had a small engraving along the sidepiece of the frame: 'The Iron entered into his soul.' He put them on.

He liked the way they felt, and the way they made him feel devious. Then, he saw the darkness of the lenses start to blur, twisting and slithering like snakes. He felt paralyzed where he sat and did not fight what he saw. This black twisting started to form light and dark areas, like suns and graves. Flashes so piercing that he almost yelled out. Images started to form. First, the pink faced girl on the bus. Then his street sign battered with graffiti to form a curse. The next disturbing images made his legs tense and fists whiten. He saw dirty dishes piled high in a rusty kitchen sink, flies buzzing around messes on a counter. He saw a man in a t-shirt that said 'make love not war' strike a woman in spandex. He heard children screaming. He saw the man shoot up. He saw the woman tell her children to leave the room so she could snort coke. The children were dirty and thin, just like their parents. He saw bare cupboards and stacks of overdue bills on the floor beside the overturned table. He saw the woman was wearing too much eyeliner. He saw the man with the small suit being beaten by men with Dockers on. He saw this man crying in his shit-hole hotel room he rented by the day because his wife made him leave when he told her he preferred men. Derek saw him pound his fist into the mirror creating bloody rivers. The man was denied seeing his children, and was being beaten by coworkers. Then, Derek saw his sister with dead eyes. He saw himself through her eyes, and felt her sadness.

By now Derek was on the floor, he felt sweat drip down his forehead and saw it drop to his hand. He laid his head on the floor, and he couldn't fight his lids from closing.

(an excerpt)

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