

Spring 2023

From Here - To There

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Recommended Citation

Palmer, Meadow A., "From Here - To There" (2023). *Senior Projects Spring 2023*. 85.
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From Here - To There

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Written Arts
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

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Wisteria (The Forgetting)

My parents told me that on my birthday, the clouds parted, and light streamed into the hospital to hold my mother while she brought me into the world. I didn't cry, they said. In comparison to the birth of my twin brother, who had the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck, I was a wave of relief. After he was finally taken care of, sobbing, kicking, screaming for his life, I came like early spring. *I knew at that moment*, my mother would say, *that you were Joy*.

So, I was Joy. I am Joy. Joy Delansky.

When you're given such a name, there are expectations to live up to it. Whether or not you choose to meet those expectations (or drive them into the ground) is entirely up to you... and me? I was born to be an example.

When I walk down the street, I make an effort to smile at at least three strangers. I try to mix it up a little bit, choose people that I'd never speak to, reach for some kind of understanding of their world. Three out of four times, I'm met with a straight face, or a grimace, or a raised eyebrow. That fourth time, though, I feel that sunshine on my face again, the reason that I am *Joy*. That makes it all make sense. That makes it all worthwhile.

My brother calls. I don't answer. I check my makeup in the mirror of a parked car. My lips are plump from my first and only round of filler. I chose a pinky, coral orange gloss shade called blossom. I look at those lips and imagine a drifting flower. For a moment, I am at peace. My lashes cascade, dip and curl, frame my crystalline gaze with nutella brown smiles. I say some affirmations...

I am the esoteric enigma.

I am the face of everyone's dream.

I am always meant for more.

What belongs to me will always find me.

“Excuse me,”

There he is. The man of the hour. The owner of the 2015 BMW I'm borrowing for my ritual.

He's tall, lanky, but he smells like almonds and warm clothes.

“This is my car,” he says, skeptical.

It's time.

There's this story I heard once, long ago, I can't remember who from- but it was about Marilyn Monroe. She could hide in the city, blissfully tucked in between the hundreds of passers by. She could shed her celebrity skin, and breathe the life of a New York native. She was with her photographer somewhere, and she said to the photographer ‘Do you want to see me become *her?*’... and then, just like that, she lifted some secret veil and the city belonged to her. People stared, cars stopped, whispers and shouts swarmed like flies. By her hand, with sheer power of will, she became a legend. One that people remembered.

“Oh hi there, doll!” I smile, truthfully, honestly. I stand up straight. I push back my soft curls. I know he can see they are soft. That I am soft. “My bad, I was just making sure my hair and makeup were in order... I'm on my way to a shoot! It's my first one in this part of town, I'm so excited!” This is always my favorite part of the encounter: the way a man's demeanor melts, crumbles, breaks away into something softer, soft like me. He wears a blue knit cardigan that makes me assume he's well read. I

particularly like his brown, dressy shoes. They remind me vaguely of my father's leather chair. For a wistful moment, I wonder how he is doing.

"I say this in the most respectful way, but I'd assume you were a model right off." He beams. His teeth are straight other than one. I love a snaggle tooth. "You're brilliant."

Brilliant. That's new. I get beautiful. I get gorgeous, stunning... but brilliant? It makes me feel like there's something beneath me.

"Aw, you're just saying that..." I gush. If I could blush on command, I would.

"How could I be? Anybody would say that about you... sorry I- I don't really know what's come over me." I do.

"Oh, don't be sorry at all! You're too kind! I really appreciate it... are you from the area? I need a little help finding where I am supposed to be." Maybe I can score a ride.

"Yeah yeah, I'm here for work, where is it you're going?"

"Some apartment complex called Bungalow...something...I have the address in my messages, hold on hun..."

"No need, I know where that is! It's just called The Bungalow. It's uptown, seems a bit far to walk and I wouldn't want to make a woman like you take the subway."

"A woman like me? You think I can't take the subway on my own?" I lift up a brow. I puff my upper lip. "I take it all the time. I'm perfectly capable." I want to see him break.

And I do. He stutters, his face flushes, he's worried he's ruined his chance. I like watching them squirm.

“No no! That’s not what I meant at all! I just meant... well- what I was trying to say was- I was trying to-”

I pull out one of my favorite stops. I laugh. I laugh like the breeze. I laugh like an old movie, like a lover girl with a transatlantic accent clinging to a monochrome screen, I laugh like *Joy*. I watch him morph from defensive to flustered. He scratches his neck, not because he has to, just so he can do something with his hands.

“A ride would be lovely, but only if you’re offering... I was just teasing you.” I coo, and I put a hand on his shoulder. I give it a light squeeze. “I’m Joy.” I smile. “Either way, ride or not, it’s lovely to meet you.”

He opens his passenger door. I am spared the uncomfortable stare of a subway car, or an uber fee. My knight in shining armor, who smells like almonds, and warm clothes.

I won’t remember him tomorrow.

“I’m William, but you can call me Will, or Billy. Whichever one you like better. I’ll respond to both.” He says.

“Two names?” I ask, littering my tone with amusement. Even more difficult to remember. I definitely won’t remember WillBilly tomorrow.

“It’s more fun that way.” He says. “Say... you look mighty familiar. Have I seen you? I must have seen you...”

“Most have in this city.” I watch him buckle his seatbelt. It’s interesting, the way he leaves it twisted up. I can tell he’s in a hurry. That he wants to take me, chat with me, anyway.

We exchange pleasantries for twenty three or so minutes. I check my golden watch. I watch the big hand tick. I put my feet up on his dashboard. He doesn't mind.

Of course he doesn't.

~ ~ ~

"Eyes up, Joy."

Anders minds. No matter what it is, he minds. He always has a complaint, something more interesting to say, or the obsessive need to take up space- yeah, he has that too. He has a little hoop earring that clings desperately to his ear's thin excuse for a lobe. It glints under the studio lights. Champagne gold.

"Joy."

I like it when he says my name. Commandeering: a failed effort. I notice his stubble like the green of a sponge when you first take it out of the plastic. There's something satisfying and dissatisfying about it at the same time. That's exactly what every session with Anders felt like.

A thick, dark hand lifts my chin to a caramel gaze. His lips are pressed firmly together. His other hand adjusts my frilled, purple dress. It's light, buttery, like a flower petal. I could tell that even in his dissatisfaction with me, he liked the material in his hand. The way it felt under his fingers, while his eyes brushed my brow bones.

"Joy," he says again, "You need to give me face. You need to let the dress wear you, but if the dress is to wear you, you have to consent! Without your presence in the scene, without that consent for the dress to adorn you, the shot is lost. Again. Hear me this time."

He's greek. I like the way he speaks when I close my eyes. When I open them, I remember how much of a fool he is. Without me, he would have nothing. Without my shots, he wouldn't be anywhere close to The Bungalow, even if his studio was Anders treats me the way most people do.

I breathe.

I am the esoteric enigma.

I open my eyes. I've returned. *I'm here.*

"There she is." he coos, eyelids falling, hands clutching his camera like a human heart. When I pose, I think of everyday objects, or sometimes nouns. Cup. Gate. Slide. Wheel. I improvise, I ride the images into somethingness, into the lens, imagining a netherworld on the other side. Maybe it can see me. I want it to see me. "Not too much," he says, "you're wearing the dress..." right. I am wearing the dress, when the dress should be wearing me. In these moments, I think of my Grandmother's porcelain doll collection. I let my face fall, not blank, but vast. I tell myself I contain multitudes. I display the garment. The wisteria folds are my safety net under yellow beams that fade to icy blue. I am warm. I look cold. I alter my expression. "I've got it." Anders sighs with relief. "I got the shot. Thank you for coming so last minute. I didn't expect Mary-Anne to cancel... I should have stuck with you, seastar."

I hate the nickname seastar. I know I earned it because I once clung. I don't cling anymore.

"Just, please... make sure to get my money to me."

"Always do." He always does.

~~~

I escape The Bungalow and begin my walk to the subway station. I look back at the building before I go. It's one of those buildings that curves inward, that looks like it's leaning, like it could fall

down at any second. I grew up in the mountains when I was a girl. My brother and I would roll around in the dirt, eat things we shouldn't have. When I came down to the city I was overwhelmed by the way concrete carries noise, by the lack of birds in the early morning, the smell of exhaust. Now, I look up at buildings like this and I wish I were tall enough to hug them, to whisper thank you.

Even with a face like mine it's easy to hide in a city. People become ripples in a stream, bobbing and weaving and losing themselves in the amalgamation. I like that feeling of oneness. Every day I can get away and still feel so known. It's the perfect place to lose yourself.

I fish in my purse for my marlboro shorts. I take a few puffs before I embark. When I walk past a hot dog stand, I watch the setting sun catch an elderly man's face. He appears to work the stand in deep thought, eyes glazed over with that far away look people sometimes get when there's something underneath they can't shake. I think we all share that, but don't know how to break through. Whatever that thing that causes that stare is.

"Can I get somethin' for ya ma'am?" His voice carries a tobacco scratch that reminds me of home. The nights my father would sit on the porch after splitting wood, chain smoking and singing gentle bluegrass songs. Before I can answer, my phone vibrates in my pocket. It's my brother. I don't answer. I respond to the man instead, making sure to be quick mannered.

"Nothing for me, I was just admiring your far away look." People either love or hate forwardness. "You can tell a lot about someone from the way they look when they think. You seem very kind."

His crows feet thank me while his lips curl to pull in open air through missing teeth. Sweat gleams in the sun like little beads. He makes me a hot dog with just ketchup. I don't know how he

knows, but mustard has never been my favorite. Maybe we're kindred souls. Maybe he's out of mustard. I don't need to know. "Kind people say kind things." He mutters. I give him a short from my purse, and we part ways.

When I walk through a city, I think of the street in top down view, like a children's maze you might get on a place mat at your local diner. My brother used to try to eat the crayons when our parents weren't watching. He knew they didn't taste good, he just wanted to see their reaction. Typical of him.

As I was saying, I follow the sidewalk like children follow thin spaces with that cheap wax. Sometimes, I pause to look around, to ask myself sensory questions. Well- I call them sensory questions. I know when to ask them when I get a certain feeling. It's like a tingle. A tingle in your legs, in your arms, a subconscious indication that there's something to be noticed. I stop in front of a chocolate shop with a huge orange sign. The orange is jarring. It isn't a comforting clementine orange, or a sunset orange, it's more of a 'road work ahead' sign orange.

And I sure hope it does.

You know, work... the road? I'm sure you get it. I'm sure you laughed, or smirked inside.

Anyway.

That's the first step of my sensory questions. The most obvious one, the one we arguably pay attention to most: sight. The orange sign keeps me grounded, but I look around at the rest of the street. I notice a group of men playing music on the corner. There are three. One is very tall, one sits on the ground, and the other leans up against the tall one, lips hugging a glossy trumpet that catches the sun in the kind of way I wish was humanly possible. Two of them wear these old looking hats. I don't

know what era they are from. I don't know much about history, or even if these hats are old hats at all. Sure, I'm a model, but I'm not up in the haberdashery checking out the latest releases. Hats aren't really my area of expertise. In fact, I don't even think I even have an area of expertise. I'm just good at convincing people that I do.

That's all you really need to know how to do in life, honestly.

Remember that one.

There's something about these men that really catches my attention. It isn't their midnight skin, or the clothes they wear, but the way they move together. You could take a look at each of these men individually and see a story. You could notice tiny things on their persons, make careful assumptions... but you would miss out on the collective. You would miss out on the way that they understand each other, the way one man moves right after the other synchronously before blowing his horn. Yes, it's music. Yes, there's a beat. But there's something more than that. There's something between them.

On my way towards the group, I pass the reflective surface of a trash can. Surprisingly it's very clean. I can't help but look at myself. *Joy*. It flows through me instantaneously. I love that sullen, winter blue. I blink. It looks like I've seen things, which makes people think that I have. And maybe I have. Seen things.

I have a single freckle on the left side of my nose. My left, your right. It's small, barely noticeable, but enough to pass as a beauty mark for anyone looking closely enough at me. Enough to be considered a unique feature. The bridge of my nose is angular. Sometimes at home I like to take a ruler to it, just to smile at how satisfying the angle is. I thank my mother under my breath, turn my

head slightly to the side to check out the design. The jaw, the high cheek bones, my feathered brown curls. *Joy*. It bubbles in my stomach. A pot of milk on simmer, meant to find its way into a sugary treat.

A man passing by lifts the lid of the can and I'm met with the scent of hot garbage.

Bummer, because I'm not even on that step of my sensory questions yet.

I skip ahead: sense of smell. I consider the garbage. I smell rot, but also street food, and soda. It's bad. I'm not a fan. I don't know why I'm still here, or why I'm trying to excuse it. Maybe it's my loyalty to the process.

I guess some things weren't made to be appreciated. There's only a little bit of my hot dog left. I toss it, and try to move on.

The air also smells like that chocolate store. It doesn't mix well with what lingers in my nostrils, but I try to pretend for a second. I smell gasoline. Indian food, from the shop on the far right corner of the block. I smell sunshine. Some people say you can't smell the sun, but it infects everything the same way rain does. It blankets the world, alters everything just slightly to be different.

I inhale. Long, hard.

Suddenly I don't feel so *Joyous* anymore. Where did I go? How do I find *her* again?

I think I find it the minute I take my first step to the music of the trio. Sound. Trumpet. Keyboard. Sax. My head bobs against my will, and I shut my eyes, lean against a corner. The way they physically move translates into their sound. I get a sense that they're improvising. Or maybe I'm just assuming that.

The few trees here and there are green. They contrast the dull gray towers, the random blotches of color on various signs. City streets, in my eyes, weren't made to be aesthetically pleasing as a

collective... and yet that's exactly what's so pleasing about them. The game of Ispy. The way you become a part of it.

I start walking again. From my purse, my arsenal, I fish out a five dollar bill, and when I pass the musicians, I toss it into the sax players' case. They stop for no one. Not even me. I like that about them.

"You're looking for the subway station, aren't you?" The eldest man on the keyboard calls before I cross the street. Forget what I said. He knows. Maybe it's because I slipped my card between my fingers before grabbing the five. Maybe I just don't look like I'm from around here. It could be both. I wonder which it is, but I won't ask.

"Why, yes I am!" There she is. I push my fingers through my hair, pull down my skirt a bit. I definitely should have thought through my outfit a bit more. The good news for me is that it seems luck is on my side.

"If you make a right, there's an entrance that way for the orange line... I take it you're going up town, Mary Jane?" Mary Jane? Ah. My shoes. I liked my black mary janes. The shine. The buckle. They looked good with most things. I make sure to cup my cheeks as if i'm calling out to him, rise up on my tip toes ever just so.

"Wow, you see right through me!" I say. He grins, and gestures his head to my right. If you tell yourself things will go your way enough times, they do. My mother at a certain point called it being delusional... but then I moved uptown, and now I send them a few checks every month. I prefer the term calculated. Calculated for the greater good. I think so. I wave goodbye and smile into the wind. I have my hair trimmed in such a way that it will catch a breeze to frame me like a renaissance woman.

After I tap my card to get into the station, I feel my phone vibrate yet again. I know it's my brother. I don't even want to check my voicemail. I don't know how many times I'll need to change my work phone number before he gives up. If I were to pick up, his scruffy, whiny voice would meet my line to say something like *Joy Joy Joyfulllll, hate to hit you up again but do you maybe have a couple hundred bucks I could borrow? My car's busted... I can bring over a bottle of wine tonight? I can train in? Just let me know what you need from me and I'll be there.* That. He'd say that. He'd convince me it was my idea, that me giving *him* money was *him* doing a nice thing. I bet right after that he'd leave my apartment and head right back down town to his favorite dealer. I know him better than he does.

I sit on a bench next to a woman who looks businesslike. She wears a blazer. All of her jewelry is gold. Her shoes are pointy. She's on a phone call with someone for a while, but when she hangs up, she turns to me. "Excuse me. I'm sorry to bother you... but is that you on that wall? That perfume ad?"

This is one of my favorite kinds of interactions. While I can certainly hide in a city, sometimes a careful eye is all it takes to notice a pattern. I don't even look at the advertisement. "Most certainly is!"

"You have such lovely hair. I've always wanted to go ginger... but my eyes just wouldn't look right with it. You're lucky that way."

I stiffen. I have done many ads and campaigns, lots of big and small jobs, but never once had I dyed my hair red for any of these shoots. Not once. I think she is mistaken. I look across the way to the ad she's asking about, and am blown away by the woman I see. A red head. Her hair falls in thick luscious waves, eyes a bright, hypnotizing hazel. She is covered in freckles like flecks of gold. It was the highlighter that did that, had to be. Her dainty little hands held a large, jewelike perfume bottle.



Everest. I did that campaign. Recently. Very recently. I remember this shot. “That isn’t me-” I lower my voice, “my bad, i’ve made a mistake.”

“Oh darling don’t be so humble, of course that’s you. If you were to go stand next to that photo I’m sure people would want to take pictures with you. How long have you been modeling?”

For now, I ignore the stressor. “I’ve been at it for three years now ma’am, i’m not a huge name yet but I hope to someday be.” I could survive the rest of this encounter, but the next cars roll in, and I sense the perfect opportunity for pondering.

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Only twenty one or so minutes on the subway, I’ve found the photo I’m looking for. I’ve sifted through enough emails. The shot was taken three weeks ago, with Anders, actually. The minute I remember that I text him. Then, I open my email app again to look at the photo one more time. My curls are brown. Nutella. My eyes are that winter blue I’ve come to know. This is the Joy in every school photo, right next to Clement, who shares with me every feature I haven’t bought. The perfume bottle is very gemmy, purple, just like the dress I shot that day. Wisteria. I hold it in my hands, displaying it, smiling slightly as if the bottle had anthropomorphized and told me a secret. I can’t quite remember what nouns I was thinking of when we took this one. After a certain amount of time, they slip my mind, unless the experience is very memorable. I think back to the red haired girl. Her gaze was captivating, and not quite mine. No, not mine at all. Did Anders take the same shot with someone else, use her promo over mine? Were multiple campaigns shot? All of that aside, in what world did that woman think that we were the same?

For a brief moment, I wish I looked like her. I jerk my head up to look at my reflection in the dark pool of the subway window. Looking like me is enough.

I am the esoteric enigma.

I am the face of everyone's dream.

I am always meant for more.

What belongs to me will always find me.

I sigh through my nose. My perfect nose. Usually, it's easy to be her. Me, I mean. Recently, I've been all shook up, a little piece of ice in a cocktail shaker. Who is that woman? Anders texts me back. He says that I was the only one who did the shoot for Everest that he knew of. That he didn't see any models with red hair recently. The puzzle only gets worse, and worse. My phone rings. It's as if Clement is sat on the floor with our Mother's expensive pair of haircutting scissors specifically to cut every single piece of my puzzle in half. For good measure, he'd toss them all together in the box before giving it back. *Have fun.* He'd say. I decline the call yet again, and schedule myself a few sessions with my favorite photographers to take my mind off things.

Sometimes, I excuse things away by telling myself that we live in some sort of life simulation game. Some little alien kid is sitting in front of his Universitopia277 using his expansion packs to send human civilization to the end of the line. Maybe, he zoomed in on me and decided it would be a 'funny haha' to mess with my perception. I've had several moments like this in my life, where it feels like there's been a glitch. You know, like when you experience intense deja vu, a mandela effect, or something is just off and you're the only one who seems to be noticing it? Why not tell myself that this is a universal experience, a sense of normalcy, a confirmation that yes I am alive and I am a

consciousness separate from whatever the fuck this little tiny box of precious metals and pop up advertisements has to say about human nature.

Don't get me wrong, by working in this industry I'm directly feeding into everything I resent, but I feel like that's a part of my tragic backstory and makes me more interesting to the people that bother to peel back the layers. I love being Joy Delansky, the *Joy* they all know, crafted and brought to life through my art. The art of being. The art of seeing, believing, deciding, and knowing when to ignore things or not.

For example, when I lift my eyes from my device for a brief moment, I notice I am the only one in this subway car. I treasure that, but it seems that right as I make that observation, the world has to swing back like a boomerang with someone else trotting through the sliding doors. She's young. Younger than me, at least. She's dressed too skimpy for this time of day. A thin, puke green fabric clings to her figure in strips. Every single little accessory screams sweatshop. I wonder how many children go home after a 10 hour work day just to bring home thirteen U.S. cents after making fifty or sixty of those little body wraps.

"Hey girl! I love love love your skirt, is it thrifted?" Her voice is low, but charming. She has that thing in her eyes. Suddenly, I feel something akin to comradery rumble in my stomach.

No. Not yet. It's too soon.

"No, not thrifted, the designer pays me to wear her pieces out and about." I take out a cig from my purse and light it. My hair bounces as I struggle to get the lighter to work. I don't notice her get up from the seat across from me to cup her long hands around my efforts. Her nails are neon yellow,

adorned with tiny red gems. Her choices are interesting. When my cig lights up, she gently grasps the end with her nails and brings it up to her own mouth to take a drag. Typical. I suppose I owed it to her.

“That’s incredible, good for you,” she passes the cigarette back to me. “You’re on the orange line? Do you live here? Are you going uptown?” She grabs her bags and moves her whole station to my side. God dammit.

“It is not wise to talk to strangers, what if I told you there was something dangerous in these cigarettes, or offered you something you shouldn’t have without telling you... all because I told you a designer pays me to wear this skirt.” When I take another puff, she is stunned. Dare I say it, she may be in disbelief. I speak once more: “Neither of those things are true, but they could be, and in the end you would be the fool. I remember those days. I remember when I moved out here. Darling... don’t be reckless.” I offer her the cigarette again. Olive branch. “Be calculated.” I wish someone had told me this sooner. In my opinion I’m seriously saving her a lot of time.

“...thank you.” She takes a drag, “...I don’t know what I’m doing sometimes. I’m taking the orange line n’ then i’m hopping on the red to go to the big train station, i’m actually from three hours up north. I just come down on the weekends. I’m trying to network- nobody’s really told me how to do anything, gotta teach myself.”

“Well i’m gonna tell you right now babygirl,” I coo, putting the thing out after she returns it to me, “Go to college. I can’t stress this enough. Have your youth, don’t rush ahead into something you do not really want to be a part of. Everything on the outside is so enticing. The money, the drugs, the men, the women, the lights, the cameras, the drama... all of it, but it’s all a trap, and you get trapped out here with no way out. No education, and too much on the web for anyone to want to hire you for

anything other than modeling, or whatever it is you get into when you're out here. Take it from me... find something you love, and take out a loan. I'm not gonna do it for you. But if you're asking me, networking in this part of the city is only a waste of time for you. If I were you, I'd become a part of something and establish yourself before you come out here. Be somebody people want to network with. Find yourself first... put on that show, and then everyone will want to be a part of it."

We share a silence. I put a piece of gum in my mouth. In my purse I am always prepared for most situations. In this case, my breath starts to smell like some obscure lemonade. It doesn't quite tear away the scent of the tobacco, but it's enough to keep me safe. I've ashed into the box, like usual, and I tuck it away.

"...are you Joy?" I wait for her to say it, "Joy Delansky?" There it is.

"Why do you ask?"

"I saw you on instagram- read an article about you. Are the rumors true? You don't address them in the interview..."

"What makes you think that I'm going to answer any questions differently if they're coming from a teenage girl when we're alone on a subway in the early evening?"

She shrugs, "it never hurts to ask."

"I won't be talking about my brother to anybody but my parents, nor do I appreciate ill doers involving themselves in my family's business. He's doing well and I love him very much, why can't that be enough to suffice?" I wasn't A list, B list, or even C list, but if you do enough work... people know your name, and people want to know about your business, it distracts them from their own.

Unfortunately for me, I'm just known enough to end up in those stupid DailyMail snapchat stories.

What she's on about is another photograph. It wasn't taken by me, or by Anders, or any real photographer... just some little slug looking to make a paycheck. I brought my brother to rehab for the first time one summer from now. I try not to think about it, but girls like this one never let this kind of thing go. "So yes, it hurts to ask. If someone were to ask you about something like that and they knew not a single thing about you, you too would find it invasive."

"My bad... when you put it like that- yeah, yeah my bad i'll take the fall here."

"As you should." My eyes drift to the little screen displaying the stops. I'm almost to mine. I remain mindful of that.

"... I appreciate the advice."

"If you want my honest truth... this industry can be fun, but not if you walk in with no know how. People take advantage of girls like us. Keep your spark, but hone it in, ya know? Find you, and hold onto it."

"It?"

"...yeah." Yeah. I stand up.

"Can I-"

"No pictures. I don't want to be a story, no more stories. Just remember what I said." I dash off, in some sort of quick 4/4 time. A strut, purse in arm, skirt tucked right. I sport a tiny red tight knit tee with a heart cut out of the chest. A friend of mine made it in fashion school. Sure, so many designs look alike, but when you have a piece from someone you care about? I think it changes the value. Fashion is often about public perception, about letting a dress wear you... but the wearer plays arguably

the most important role. Is fashion for the self, or for the perception of self, and must we lose the way a piece touches us personally in favor of societal desire?

I love this shirt. I love remembering Mayella sitting at her sewing machine, drawing little pictures of my face. I haven't spoken to her in years. Maybe three. I cling to these little bits and pieces of memory. I wear them, and I love that they uniquely belong to me. There's a keychain on my purse. It's a little dog, and when you press the button on his head, a flashlight beams from his barking mouth. Little sounds break free. They sound kind of like barking, but it's too old now. It was Clements. I keep it. It's complicated, with him, it always has been straight from birth.

I press the button while I round the corner to my apartment complex. Walking up town is different. It's cleaner. There's less people on the street. I consider smoking again, but I look down a bit when I remember my father. The few packs he'd smoke a day, the butts on the ground in front of the door and the way my mother would complain in subtle ways about the mess. I got my eyes from her. She'd squint at me and sigh through her nose, that perfect nose, before gathering them from the dirt in front of our door to toss them out. A day or two later, the entryway would look exactly the same again. We'd rinse and repeat this cycle all the way until my first gig, until I hopped on the train and everything with Clem sprung loose.

I stop in front of a bus station. Another ad. Me. Again. Only he's young, well chiseled in the face. Men would kill for his jawline, but his youthful appearance would probably make them assume he was boyish. Perfect for modeling though. Perfect for a buy one get one 50% off lingerie ad. I blink. A lot. I keep blinking. Nothing helps. His brows are thick and blonde. Sculpted. Painted, nearly. I

remember these photos too. I don't have the time for this. I press the little button on the dog keychain.

The dog whines. The light flickers.

I should call them. My parents. I transfer my father a few hundred bucks. I love you, I say.

He'll probably hear the message. This is the extent that we'll talk, until Clement gets his screw back in.

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My apartment building is white. I can't tell if it's paneling, or marble, or plastic, but somehow it shines. When I first moved to this place, I thought it looked like a doctor's office. It lowkey still does. Luckily, when you get to my floor, the 13th floor, it transforms into something more vacation home-y. There's lots of plants. Greens. Brown walls, big windows, tall doors. I open 696 and immediately breathe in my lavender candles. They say not to leave candles lit when you leave the house, but I've honestly never had a problem. I kept the decoration modern. Clean. Black and white, but not like a doctor's office, don't get it twisted. I decorate with splashes of color. Unique pieces, antiques, whatever you wanna picture hugging my space. Whatever makes me seem exciting, but more so refined.

I have a call with my therapist at 8:30 PM. I know I need to settle in, get myself ready to unpack. Figuratively unpack. I change into something more comfortable. Sweats. A little white ribbed tank. My skin routine easily takes 25 minutes. In the middle of it, my phone makes a twinkling sound. That can only mean one thing.

I rush to the bathroom to get my emails open. Anders. He always sends the results on time. I'm excited. I close my eyes. I should be paid soon, I can get everything together, in fact, everything is together. Things were never apart in the first place. It takes quite a bit of time to load. I massage an oil into my skin while I wait. I always turn everything around.



This time, she's old. Her hair is gray, but her eyes are amber, feisty, warm. The wisteria wears her. I hope to age like her one day. Like me. Wait.

I have to be missing something. Maybe I hadn't slept enough. There's always an explanation. In this case... It's every photo. Every single one. He's so happy with the way these came out, and apparently the designer is too. I should be. I want to be.

How could I be? Who is she? Am I still there?

I make the smart choice, and put my phone in my bedside drawer. Every screen is off. Every Alexa unplugged. All I leave for myself is my laptop, patient portal open and ready for my session. I make myself a little coffee in my kitchen. I truly believe that in moments of stress and uncertainty, it's important to give yourself a little treat. For me, it's a french vanilla iced latte in a pretty wine glass. I couldn't tell you what your treat is. Only that you should figure it out.

I'm disappointed when the espresso tastes too burned. It's still a nice sip, but it isn't quite everything I imagined. Things never are. That's why expectations should be completely averted whenever possible. They lead to disappointment. Instead, build on the moment. That's what I'm doing. I'm sure there's some sort of logical explanation for everything. Everything always adds up.

"Everything always adds up?" Dr. Parker pushes his glasses up the rim of his nose. "Let's unpack that..."

How did I end up on this call anyway? I know I opened the tab, but that's about as far as I got. I'm sitting in my favorite dining room chair. The cushion underneath me is shaped like a flower, one of those ones with the little yellow middle and huge petals. It's comfortable. Maybe I should unpack

whatever it is Dr.Parker thinks I should unpack. So, I will. I do. He speaks before I can with another idea. That's one of his favorite classic behaviors.

“Do you remember that book you were telling me you read? The one about the man who experiences a clone taking over his life.”

“Dostoyevsky's *The Double*.”

“Right.”

“Well last time I was trying to use that book as a metaphor, but I feel like it doesn't apply at all anymore.”

“Not at all?”

“Hardly... Golyadkin, the main character in the story, has a seemingly superior version of him take over his entire life... here, I don't know, I just feel like I'm splitting,” I lean back in my seat, “like I'm disappearing... becoming everything else. I can't explain it.”

“Becoming everything else, not the double, everything always adds up...” His expression dances on his end of the video call “Are you trying to excuse the amount of stress you're under by denying yourself the experience?”

I blink. I bring my fingers to my temples and I rub them softly, hoping it will ease the headache I feel coming on. “Maybe that's what's going on... my brother is trying to ask me for money again I think, I haven't spoken verbally to my parents in months, and on top of that I don't really recognize myself anymore. I look at all these pictures and I see someone else.”

“Where do you think you went?”

“No- it's not just that, it's deeper than that, I mean that I am LITERALLY seeing other people. When I look at myself- pictures I mean. It happened twice, three times? Twice, for sure at the subway station, and just now when I looked at the photos taken today. Something is up.”

He does that thing where his lips press firmly together, that thing where I know he's thinking something about me but not saying it. He speaks, “Joy... have you been sleeping? Are you off your meds again?”

“I've been taking everything regularly and sleeping fine so I have no idea what is going on.”

“Maybe you're just overwhelmed-”

“I'm overwhelmed, so I'm seeing different people when I look at photos of myself?”

“It only happened twice. Maybe you're seeing different people because you are at some sort of crossroads with yourself. Have you thought about your sense of self at all lately? We were just starting to dive into that last week-”

“Dr.Parker, I pay you to therapize me, but also to keep me medicated and make sure things are ship shape in my mind. I think this is a serious problem.”

“I think if it persists for a day or two more we should meet again and see about changing your medication. Keep an eye on it, don't let it run you. Think about your brother, your work, your parents, your friends, your life in the city and everything else you have to manage. Things are going well. You have nothing to worry about. If you need to, you can take a few hydroxyzines if your anxiety keeps ticking.”

He's always like this. Maybe he's right. I mean, he's the professional at the end of the day.

“Alright, i'll do that... maybe it is. I don't know.”

“Eat something and get to bed at a reasonable hour tonight, don’t overbook yourself, and can you answer that question I asked?”

“Which?”

“The one about your sense of self, have you thought about the matter at all?”

“I don’t have to. I am Joy Delansky. I am twenty six. I have a twin named Clement. I’m a model. Clothes. Products. Fashion week, someday. I do it all. I make enough money to support myself and afford my brother rehabilitation treatment when he decides to attend. I am well known enough to be recognized. I’ve done enough. I don’t have to worry about that stuff anymore. I do my thing, and that’s all I need to do.”

“Is that all you want to do though?” He sees me. For a moment. I can tell he sees me. “We can work together to break down your past into digestible pieces. Processing takes time. Believe it or not, its okay to admit when you’re struggling to do it alone.”

“I’m not, Dr.Parker. Our time is up.”

“This is true. I’ll see you in two weeks. Please come on time.”

Telehealth is one of the worst things to happen to the world. He ends the call abruptly. I rate the session two stars. Luckily, I got the refills I needed. I tear my phone from the drawer I’ve hidden it in to text him for good measure. I tell him that for the record, I am seeing different faces in place of mine, and that it’s something serious. He doesn’t respond.

It’s hard to function without my phone and that says enough about me. I don’t know what to look at, what to think about, what to pick up or who to talk to. I can pay attention to a hobby or a video for about seventeen seconds before I’m distracted. I’m thinking about the red head. That boy

with the blonde brows. The elderly woman. They live behind my eyes and haunt me while I try to scrapbook.

I've moved into my bedroom. From my closet, I've fished out my old yearbooks. I needed to go back. I've always been Joy. In seventh grade I wore a green and gray striped shirt with a white button up underneath. I wore my grandma's pearls. She spent delicate time styling my hair that day with shiny pins. That was the first time I felt like a star. That was the photo that landed me my first applesauce commercial. Everyone starts somewhere.

The girl is me. She is me. I want to believe nothing is off, but that freckle on her nose... it's on the wrong side. The right. Mine is on the left. It's such a small detail. It's nothing. It's absolutely nothing.

I grab a different yearbook. In my eleventh grade year me and my brother had our photo taken for field day. Our colors were red and blue. He looks more like me than I do. More like me than the long faced, thick necked teenage girl that meets my gaze.

My face is wet.

I'm crying.

I can't hear much, but I can feel my phone buzz in my pocket. It's him. I answer him this time. Just this once.

"Joy Joy Joyful!" His voice makes me smile.

"...hey Clem."

"You're sniffly. I can tell. What's on your mind?"

"Just ask me whatever it is you were going to ask me."

“Wow... harsh.” His breath is heavy on the other end of the line. I can tell he’s worried. He wants this interaction to go well. He probably depends on it. “I want to know what’s got you down.”

“It’s just... it’s a lot, alright, I’m seeing shit and my life is falling apart and you refuse to get help even when I drop it in front of you, I can’t fix everything, I especially can’t fix you.”

“...what are you seeing?”

“What does it matter?”

“What are you seeing, Joy? Tell me. I want to know.”

“Faces I’ve never seen. Women. Men. Wrinkles. Colors I’ve never lived. Dr.Parker says “I’m stressed out. None of my pictures look like me anymore.”

“Dr.Parker is a load of shit. Joy... are you losing yourself?”

“...yeah.”

“I lose me, too. That’s why I do this. That’s why I am the way I am. You get it!”

Here we go.

“That’s why I need you to help me. I’ve never trusted somebody more in my life. You understand me better than anyone, and now? Now I know we experience the same thing. Twin thing. For sure.”

“How do I know you aren’t lying to me?”

“Do you think I want to be like this? Do you think I want to be calling you every other week? Mom and Dad already have had enough of me. You’re all I have left. Maybe if you tried it out you’d get me, maybe my way could help you too-”

“Do you realize what you’re saying?” I choke. I can’t believe him, or any of it, anymore. “Fuck you Clem. Call me back after you’ve got your fix.”

“Joy don’t you hang up-”

Of course I hang up. It’s almost ten thirty. I want to sleep by midnight.

I miss Clem. The guy I knew before. In the mountains. The one who would make mud pies with me, and chase deer through the forest in a summer storm. He was right, about the twin thing. It made me question if he was telling the truth. On the other hand, I wouldn’t put it past him to lie for money. It’s a difficult situation. What would you do? Your brother dodges rehab, uses your money to feed his addiction, your parents stop calling but expect you to help with rent... what *could* you do?

I could turn on the TV. I could read a book, or walk down my street with some headphones on. I could run a bath, or do some yoga in my living room. I could order take out. I could do an infinite amount of things but none of them would give me the same satisfaction as seeing my reflection.

She pulls me back to earth, that gorgeous face. I return to my bathroom. The space is warm, pinky coral tones for accents. It makes me feel like I’m a little fish hidden in a coral reef somewhere. A truly private place.

I don’t know how to describe what I see. For a moment I see nothing. Even afterwards, I see nothing. I see me. I blink, and my eyes shift. I blink, and there’s something slightly different about my hair. Every time my vision shifts, I shift, I change, I morph and become something new. Is this me? Is this the sense of self Dr.Parker wants me to find? The shifting? The becoming? The transformation? I rub my eyes. I count to three. I splash my face with water. Sometimes, when my vision comes in and out, it almost looks like my face could be a canvas. A potato head. I used to have a few of those. I ate an

ear once. I had to go to the emergency room. It wasn't always my brother causing the trouble. Believe me, I did my fair share.

I can't help but laugh. I always knew it would come to this point. I would lose my gift. Lose everything. Maybe this is it. Or maybe- if I can't see myself, as long as everyone else can, everything remains intact. I can pay my bills. I can email the rehabilitation center back. I can call my brother, sit down with him. I can take my medication before bed. As I should.

I find my eyes again. The blue of the sky in the winter, cascading against snow, flickering in sunlight. Her. Me. *Joy*. She's in, and out, and back again. I try the water again. I smack my face. A few times. I cry. I laugh. I scream. I knock on the mirror. Is she there? Am I there? Am I here? Is this all because of me, and do I deserve it? Hello?

There's a knock at my door.

My apartment door. 696.

No one ever knocks.

My phone is in the kitchen. I left it. Everything is unplugged. I pause. There's another knock. It's firm. It isn't casual.

I take one more look in the mirror, and sadly she's gone again, somewhere swimming around to be considered. I stumble out of my bathroom. I can't quite see the same. I jerk the door open. Too hard. I fall.

I don't fall often. I'm not known to falter, or make mistakes. It all comes down to me. I can't slip up, or lose focus. Not now. My brother needs me. He needs me, and I can't leave him. I try to get up. The stranger seems to be in shock. I can't quite see them. It's dizzy. Not drunk dizzy. Fatigue dizzy.



Dehydrated dizzy. I use the side of the door to help myself up. At our old house, my father would mark our heights every month on the frame. All sorts of different colored sharpies. Me and Clem would race. He beat me, after a certain number of years. I wonder how, even now, all considered, it still feels like he's beating me.

“...you don't look well.”

He smells like almonds, and warm clothes.

I don't remember him at all.

# The Danish

On the day that Silene purchased *The Danish*, everything was going according to plan. It was a Saturday morning, and as per her routine, she drove to the waterfront to watch the sunrise. She did this after watching the early morning weather to get the proper time. She'd drink her first cup of coffee from a blue mug she made in a pottery class several years ago. Everything was still, the kind of tranquil you can only find if you've settled down. Silene liked to consider herself a wandering spirit, but in all actuality, she had been in Cleringston for seven years. She moved there to open a bookstore, but ended up only working at one. At the ripe age of 28, at the precipice of a birthday, she had repeated the same week over 360 times. She watched a radiant orb climb over the waves, took the final sip of her mocha, and let her tongue glide over her upper lip to catch the last few drops. She was an only child, so solitude was well known to her. Preferred, actually. These precious thirty minutes every morning kept her grounded. Today, Saturday, she planned on going to the café for breakfast. Afterward, she'd walk two blocks through her small hillside town to the market to fetch fresh ingredients for a chicken francese dinner. It was a beautiful summer. She thought that it might be a good time to visit her parents out east. A countryside drive of about two hours didn't seem too horrible to her on a day like that one.

In their minds, Silene was a bookstore owner living in a pink Victorian rental. In actuality, she rented out a space in town in a big yellow brick building. She lived on the second floor, bombarded by the stomping of her upstairs neighbors and their three yorkies. She didn't mind. In fact, the yapping reminded her of animal shelters. Disruptions and all, Silene wouldn't have her life any other way. The

nine to five, the little rental, the gorgeous seasons... she would do it again, a thousand times. Her parents would most likely be proud of her if she were to reach out, tell them everything and spill her truth over the static of phones. She just couldn't bring herself to open her mouth.

The sun clung to the water; bejeweled. The light seemed to bounce and braid itself through each and every ripple of the river. Low tide mornings brought gentle birds to the shore to pick around for minnows. Silene liked to watch them fight, make little bets in her head about who would win and lose. A citizen of Cleringston would *never* catch Silene taking a gamble. Vacation? Why do that when google earth is free and a projector is twenty five dollars with free shipping online. That's the kind of woman Silene was; simple, and clean.

She wore a pink blouse with puffy sleeves and white lace buttons. She noticed a small splotch of coffee on her shirt. Figures. That alone would be the worst thing to happen to her that day. She'd puff out her bottom lip, force auburn strands away from her tired eyes with little fingers. Time was ticking. There were only three more minutes before Junies opened, and she had to be there at 8:35 if she wanted enough time to order.

After fishing through her glove box for an old napkin and making a tired attempt to clean her shirt, she eventually gave into the sorry truth: something was out of line in her day, and she needed to move on. Even while driving, she couldn't help but glance at it. It rested on her left shoulder, calling to her, begging to be cleansed, scrubbed. Her little Subaru always had the check engine light on. The sunroof was stuck open. She duct taped a tote lid to her roof as a makeshift (permanent) solution. In certain matters, Silene was particular. In others, she couldn't care less about formality.

She was a great driver, so great that when others would creep over the white line near a stop sign, she'd nail her horn. She used it often. Even in a steady setting like Cler, you could never be too careful. Her parallel parking was something else when she first moved to town, but now, she was able to do it like a pro, leaning over to push her mirror down through the passenger window. She loved her car. She just didn't feel like talking to somebody who knew how to fix it.

After she made it into the parking space, she realized she was early. She was almost always early. She had time for one song. It wasn't a difficult choice, in fact, she didn't even hesitate to put it on.

*Three plates stacked upon your nightstand.*

*Retrace all your previous steps.*

*Can't be bothered, could be worse,*

*Trying not to say a word.*

*Replace me with someone easier.*

Her lids forced shut, like magnets to one another, instinctually; by nature. Dev Lemons' *Nightstand* was her little secret. Everyone has a guilty pleasure. The soft guitar, the harmonies, the gentle Goddess reminding her that there's people on the other side feeling something they can't quite shake. Something unprompted, perhaps. She wasn't sad. No, Silene was content. In that space of content, of peace and acceptance, however; there's a little something that stirs. Something. Something she can't address or be rid of no matter how satisfied she becomes. For some reason she felt like Dev Lemons knew that. There were so many songs, so many reiterations of that same emptiness, but this melody felt crafted for her. So, she kept it. Close.

The music faded, and she grabbed her purse. Locking up her car was quick, smooth, and so was her jolt to Junies. Junies became her joint not long after she moved in. She quickly realized that the family-ran cafe was a safe place for newcomers. Anyone who came in and out would offer a smile, a chat, and if they didn't, you weren't any more noticeable than an ant crawling through a small potted plant in the corner.

The joint had every menu item handwritten in chalk behind the counter. Blue, Red, Yellow, and what she thought was some less than violent shade of green. She didn't need to look at it for anything other than aesthetic reasons. Her order was the same every time. Junies felt warm the way a picnic with your distant cousins might have when you were young. A vague, soothing kind of knowing.

"I like your shirt," a young girl behind her in line mumbles, perhaps thinking she might not hear.

Silene turned slightly to her, and returned a few words in the same soft tone "Thank you, I bought it this spring."

Various faces occupied the cafe tables, pushing through the spinning doors every twenty or so seconds, pick up orders, eating inners, browsers with no money to spend who couldn't help but take a whiff of June's baking.

"Hi Mama June," Silene piped up when she made it to the counter, doing her best not to grin too widely. June was older, but told no one her age. She dyed the ends of her gray hair steel blue, and tied it up into two thick buns on the top of her head. In front of her were multiple tickets. Two cell

phones. Pens. Crumpled up papers. She was scrambling, but the scramble came to a slow when she made eye contact with Silene.

“Hi beautiful, you look like a little tulip fresh out the garden.” The woman didn’t even lift her eyes as she started to write Silene’s ticket in cursive, dotting her i with a little heart. June was Silene’s first friend. “Just the usual right, your iced chai and your danish? We’re making them fresh today.”

“That would be incredible... could I also have a piece of lemon poppy bread?”

“What piece of lemon poppy bread?” She places a small bag containing the slice in her hand and squeezes it.

“Thanks,” Silene laughs soft, the way churned butter would laugh if it could enjoy the spinning.

“Have you spoken to my son? About work?”

“I like the bookstore June. I appreciate the offer but I want to continue my studies there. Maybe someday, I can become an archivist.”

“Are all archivists happy, babygirl?”

Silene passes Mama June her card, “I would be, if I were an archivist.”

When they laugh, the space is infested with happiness that spreads like a sickness. It bubbles its way into people’s veins, the corners of sweet mouths curl. The chocolatey coated scent of bread, scones, trapped that joy for just that moment. Silene paused to feel it. These moments make life enough.

“Well then you skiddle pop pop your way to the top, become that archivist.” She passes the receipt.

Silene waits by the counter for her order. Everything. According. To plan. They usually took anywhere between ten minutes on a good day and twenty on a bad one to get her food out. She liked peeking through the little windows behind the counter to see the boys at work. Mama June's sons. She had three. The youngest and the middle child worked away with dough, eggs on the grill, avocado toast, jams and jellies. They worked so quickly, and with love. Silene loved that about Junies. The brothers would laugh, toss flour at each other, kick each other's legs and facade resentment. She wondered what she missed out on, if a sister would have helped her find her way sooner.

Her order is out in seven minutes. Early. Again. It doesn't affect her schedule negatively, definitely not more than the stain on her shoulder. Even while she wrapped her hand around the crisp condensation that caked her plastic chai cup, even when she accepted the large paper plate with The gorgeous Danish upon it, her nose remained upturned at the little brown blotch festering in the corner of her eye. It was no better than one of those little chestnut colored caterpillars with all the spikes, the poisonous kind. She wanted outdoor seating if she could get it. Silene liked to watch the people walk by on the street. Especially if they had dogs. She wanted one, a pomeranian, so badly, but her apartment didn't allow pets. Huge bummer, but the price was right, and she could see dogs whenever she wanted. Seated in a wooden chair towards the back of a lowly fenced grassy area with a delicious meal.

The little glass table looked beautiful with her breakfast spread upon it. The Danish, her gorgeous chai, and the little slice of yellow bread she'd already started nibbling. It was sweet, textured like a soft sponge, littered with little rough poppy seeds that felt cleansing on the tongue. It was sweeter because it was free. It was sweeter because of the light wind in her face, inviting the scents of the cafe to

swarm her; not like bees, like butterflies. Her chai was perfectly sharp, with just enough vanilla to fluff it up. It was perfect. Her second caffeinated dream. She never had to order it her way... now, they just made it hers without asking. She felt special, in Cleringston. Even in her little one bedroom that smelled kind of damp, she felt special. She told herself it smelled like rain. Like her backyard in July. It could be homey. It could.

The Danish was a divine diamond in the sun. It shined, glazed, gleamed like the river. The cheese smelled sweet, soft, pillowy. She could smell the texture. The flaky folds. It was large, both of her hands maybe. It was Dense, too. Five dollars. a perfectly spent five dollars. Silene's rosy lips curled when it piqued her interest. The perfection was enough to wash away the lingering distaste for that morning's shoulder stain. She held it in her hands. That weight. She longed to create something so perfect. She brought it to her lips.

“From heat I came to feel the cold, and to heat I rise again. Is this what it is to be? Is this what I've to learn?”

When Silene realized there was no one around to speak those rhythmic words so closely to her ear, her eyes widened at The Danish.

“I hear your breath,” it said, “is someone near?”

She stopped breathing.

“Please,” it said, still in her hands, “be with me. I feel you.”



She did not know what to say. She did not know if there was a right thing to say to a danish, or if a sane person would have to ask themselves about that.

“It feels soft,” it said, “softer than heat, and cold, but still warm. Plush, maybe?”

“You are in my hands.”

“*You*. Hands. I am in your hands!” it laughed, fluffy and rich.

Silene found something in the joy of The Danish despite the strange circumstances. She looked around her, and spoke softly to it.

“Who are you?” she muttered. Curiosity. That was the something.

“I could ask you the same question. What do you see?”

“A pastry. A cheese danish.”

“Really?” it paused, “how lovely.”

“Who are you?”

“A danish, I suppose. Beyond that, all I know is that I am.”

There was a silence.

“Who are you?” it asked.

“I am Silene,” she said, “a person.”

“And I am in your hands...”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Junies.”

“Which is?”

“A cafe in Cleringston. It's a nice little town. It's summertime. Everything is green. Everyone is happy.”

“Are you?” it asked, “happy?”

She paused. “Yes, very.”

“You hesitated.”

“I did not.”

It chuckled. She took a liking to its voice. “I heard you. I know I am a danish, yet I somehow know a pause when I sense one. Your fingers, too, got a little tense.”

She immediately put it back on the plate.

“Making things harder for me.” it said.

She continued to look around hesitantly, sipping her chai, wondering if it too would pipe up with a second opinion... but it didn't. It was her, The Danish, and the people in the distance at the tables closest to the cafe. It was safe.

“I am most likely sick. I should see someone.”

“No no, I am here. Look around you. Everything is alright, right? Unless it is not... in which case, I beg of you not to be rid of me. I have so much to ask. I don't know how much time I have. Please, have me.”

There was tension lingering around them, hidden between the aromas. She was caught within a web that she herself had constructed. The Danish's vocal tones were layered, multiple tones, high and low, feminine and masculine, as if it contained multitudes. It smelled perfectionist. She could eat it,

maybe see her psychiatrist... that would be the reasonable way to go, but It was so enticing. Charming, even. On top of this, she now had pity for it.

“Have you? Now?”

“No no, I simply mean have my company. All I ask is to be. For as long as I can. Please, grant my wish.”

“I will.”

“That easily?”

“What do I have to lose? Have you spoken to anyone else?”

“You’re the first who’s responded.”

“So we can’t confirm if anyone else has heard you?” She popped some earbuds in from her pocket to make it look like she was talking on the phone. That would be less odd, she thought, if anyone were to notice her.

“Unfortunately no, but I’m grateful to be here with you, Silene. Being a pastry is strange. I can hear, I can feel, but I cannot see, or smell.”

“You can’t taste either?”

“Have I a tongue to taste?”

“Well you don’t have ears to hear.” She sipped her chai again. It was almost gone.

“Fair.”

She checked the time. She still had to get to the market. What would she do? Would she leave The Danish in her vehicle?

“What do you see right now? Describe it to me. As much as you can. If you can. Can you? I shouldn’t have phrased that like a command, my apologies. Will you describe to me what you see?”

“I didn’t think a danish would be commanding.”

“Well I didn’t know I was a danish until a few moments ago so you’ll have to be patient with me, I’m still adopting the persona.” Sarcasm leaped from the danish as if Silene had opened an oven, drenching her in a comforting warmth. They laughed. She was so comfortable. Ultimately, she decided that her Saturday tradition would be adjusted.

She wouldn’t do that for just anyone.

But you would too for a talking danish, no?

“I’m not going to lie, I was moments away from eating you. Danishes don’t have personas.”

“Frankly, I’m offended. No matter, what do you see Silene?”

She lifted her head from the plate, “How do I know what to point out?”

“Tell me about the things you think are worth seeing.”

How would she determine that? The patio area outside of Junie’s was traced with thick gray stones. Moss hid in between the crevices, breaking through the cracks like a thousand tiny prisoners of the ground. Glass tables. Wood chairs with grandma-looking custom pillows. “The cafe is blue,” she said, “blue like a robin’s egg. The windows are white, but old, and they have shutters. It’s one of the oldest buildings in this town, and the owner has done everything to keep the place as original as possible. When I first moved here the first thing I noticed about this place were the patio lights. It’s daytime, so you can’t see them lit up to their full potential, but they’re all big round bulbs that

dangle... like oversized Christmas lights, maybe. There's a lot of trees with different shaped leaves, and little shrubs too. Bugs. Birds. Uh..."

"What are the people like?"

Silene glanced over at the ensemble, "Quiet, and polite. Everybody is wearing something colorful today. There's lots of families out with small children. I think it's because of the weather."

"I can feel the sun." It says, "It's pleasant. Better than what I assume was the oven. I never want to go back to the oven."

"Painful?"

"I don't want to get into it."

A fly landed by the paper plate, rubbing its little hands together, three thousand lines of sight sizing up The Danish and its crumbs. It was quick to dart up into the air for some quick figure eights. To Silene, this fly sounded like someone had pitched down the sound of a zipper being done and undone on repeat. It was awful. She never liked bugs. She knew it was stereotypical for women to be afraid of them, but even with a deep and innate desire to stick it to the man, she squeamishly scooted back in her chair in hopes that it would find somewhere else to go. It didn't. It landed on the northmost tip of The Danish's puff pastry. It crawled.

"Well, that is uncomfortable. Itchy. It keeps moving. Is that you? Is that you Silene? Can you scratch it or move whatever it is. If I have to feel it for any longer it will be torture at that point. I also heard what sounded like an electric razor. We're outside, though. It cannot be an electric razor. Maybe it's a bug. Oh my god it's a bug. Silene get the bug- get the bug!"

She watched, giggling to herself. When The Danish's voice raised in pitch, crazed, it almost sounded machine-like, like somebody had wound it up and released it to race forward. But, it is a commonly known fact that danishes do not have wheels.

“Do you think my suffering is funny, Silene? I have no agency in this world, no sight, no limbs, and this is the way you choose to treat me. Granted, you don't owe me anything, but imagine if you were me, a small- am I small?”

“No, you're quite large actually. Well endowed. Lots of cheese.”

“Well imagine you were a conscious, well endowed cheese danish enjoying your first soak of light, when after starting a conversation with your first acquaintance, all of a sudden, you start to feel the creepy crawlies like never before. Instant fear. Instant regret.”

She hesitantly swats at the fly, allowing it to circle them, considering their space, before it finally felt the space to be considered enough.

“Finally, thank you. Maybe we could go somewhere a little bit less exposed, at least for now. Is that alright? Am I interrupting something? There are just some more things I want to ask about before I do whatever it is I am supposed to accomplish as a danish, which is to be eaten, I suppose.”

Silene blinked. What were the ethical implications of eating a talking danish? Should she eat it? Should she throw it away?

She was too curious, and it got the better of her.

“I can bring you back to my apartment. I don't know what the right thing to do is. This isn't exactly something that happens often, or to anyone.”

“What is your apartment like- nevermind that, wait until we get there. I want to hear about the walk. I also want to know more about you. I don’t know if I can talk to anybody else, so, you’re all I’ve got.”

“Flattering. Whatever this is is clearly off to a great start.” Gathering her things took no more than thirty seconds. Dinner could be pesto pasta instead, maybe with some bread. She would save a bit of money as well by not going to the market. She could make this work. “I don’t walk, by the way. I drive.”

“You’re missing out.”

“I’d be missing out if I were late to anything.”

“You’re early?”

“Almost always.”

“Well, then where do your extra minutes go? The drain?”

“My sanity.” She shut the door to her busted car after placing The Danish on her center console. Even though she’d flex an unappreciative tone, she genuinely enjoyed the pastry’s attitude. It continued to ramble on her drive home, asking her all sorts of intrusive questions, some of which made her suspicious.

“What are your intentions and how do I know you’re not lying?” She’d ask.

“You don’t, all you’ve got is me and your judgment... my intentions are, as i’ve said several times, to just have this experience. I don’t know what more I can do in my current form to get you to trust that.” There wasn’t anything.

“I like this bridge. It’s my favorite part of town. It’s red, bright cherry red, and made of metal... but it’s a kind of metal that looks like plastic, like a childrens toy almost.” She drove slowly, looking out her windows at the stiff structure that surrounded her subaru. “It connects the east and west side of town over this little creek... it was one of the big impacts that made me decide to live here.”

“You haven’t always been here?”

“Nope.”

“When did you move?”

“Years ago, I came here to open my own bookshop. I thought that it’d be a great place for one... but there already was one, and so I uh, got a job.”

“You gave up?”

“I wouldn’t look at it like that,” she said, leaving the bridge behind in her rearview, “I found a new way home.”

“Home.” The Danish said, quietly, as if it were lost in thought. One might picture a slightly furrowed brow, a far off look, a slightly jutting lower lip... instead, Silene stared at the twinkling oil that adorned each crevice of sweet bread.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, I suppose I’m just wondering why I’m here.”

She gripped her steering wheel, “I do that a lot too.”

“But you’re happy?”

They shared an extended silence. She was bothered, at that point. She hadn’t thought of things like that before. Happiness, in her mind, wasn’t a state of being, rather, an experience. It was a fleeting



moment that came and went, something you savor. In her mind, she was happy. In her view, everything was as it should be... even if she wasn't a bookstore owner in a pink Victorian cottage on the edge of town. "Yes." She said, "I am."

"Interesting." It retorted. The woman slowed down again when she saw her house of dreams. Dusty rose, covered in moss and vines. A rocking chair rested on the wrap around porch, staring into the open air. She could see herself and a hazy figure planting a garden in the front lawn. Native flowers. For the insects. She'd dig out a pond at the back of the lot for a koi pond, hand select each little fish for unique patterns. She'd spend her Saturdays in that world reading in that chair, restoring its purpose, giving it life again. Maybe she would have children, and those children would want a tire swing on the big willow tree. A fort, a slip-n-slide, lights on the porch to bring back the whimsy.

"Why have we stopped? What are you looking at?"

She pressed her lips together, "My home." She said.

"We're here? Oh, lovely-"

"No... there's still a ways to go." She hit the gas.

Silene and The Danish were an interesting pair. While they shared the same wit, and sorrows... the worlds they saw were entirely kaleidoscopic, collapsing in upon themselves, bleeding together and back out again. Silene was firm about things being as they should be, but The Danish, in its mere few hours of consciousness, was not so sure. This led to bickering, even when she parked outside her yellow building, which stood hot and strong against the sun's rays.

"To drive is to be efficient, but you're losing everything you were meant to have, trading it for a world you yourself have made, instead of what's actually there."

“I seriously have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“When you’re behind the wheel you see everything through a window at three times speed, you glimpse at entire landscapes, happenstances, and moments that will never be again. This world wasn’t built for gasoline, metal, or electricity. You hear those birds? Those birds, Silene! The one with the warble. That one is particularly gorgeous.” and it was gorgeous. The tone nested itself in Silene’s ears, layed a few spring blue eggs, decided that yes, it would stay a while. “If you were driving, you never would have known it at all.”

“I hear birds like that every day.”

“Not that one. Not every time. Don’t you understand how rare that is?”

“Everything moves too fast to be doing that all the time.”

“Does everything move too fast, or do you? If I could move, I’d move slowly and really ask myself about the space I inhabit. I wish I could be you. I wish I could tell you about what was in front of me, or above.”

She brought The Danish into the building and up the crooked stairs to the second floor. With every step she took, the wood under her feet cried in pain. It was tired, worn down by the sore toes of every person who lived before her. The landlord hadn’t had them fixed ever since he bought the building. Silene knew this, because he rarely came around at all. In fact, she hadn’t seen his face since they shook on the lease. If something were to break, he’d leave money in her mailbox instead of coming to check it out himself. An interesting little man, but he made renting easy. She’d take interesting in exchange for cheap electric.

“I hope you’re not abusing whatever those are,”

“We’re going upstairs. The stairs are just old.”

“Oh.”

Her space was decorated lovingly with pink and green accents. She had a lot of plants, each one carefully labeled with a name, sun conditions, water requirements, and any special information she wanted to keep in mind. “Are we here?” The Danish asked.

“Yes,” she said, setting her things down and trying to get everything situated. She brought The Danish to her coffee table, plopping her rear end down on the couch and taking a thick breath in. Finally. She had time to really consider her next steps. She wanted answers, to figure out if there was something underneath this danish’s gentle words. She had a feeling she’d have to be careful. She wasn’t sure why she was so afraid of a pastry. If she really wanted to, she could end things right now, quickly. One bite. She had to wonder, though, if this experience meant she was special. Maybe it meant there was something else she needed to know, some hidden secret. When working at a bookstore, you’re surrounded by free material and nothing but spare time waiting around for customers to approach first. That was time she had to read. To wonder. To imagine, as densely as possible, a single moment that wasn’t hers. A moment that didn’t exist at all. She wanted this to be her *real* moment, the beginning of her own beautiful tale, maybe there was something incredible at the end. She couldn’t risk losing it. This danish, the missed dinner, was the farthest off her to-the-t schedule she had been in months. Not since the last time she saw her parents out east.

“It’s moist in here.” It said,

“I have an air humidifier, it helps me breathe at night, it’s kind of stuffy in here without it.”

“Do you have asthma?”

“No, I used to smoke cigarettes though. When I was a girl. I just smoke bud now, every now and again.”

“Why?”

“It’s calming. It makes things more fun sometimes too.”

“I hear something ticking.”

“I have an old coo coo clock from my dad. He carves things out of wood. Sells things at craft markets. He’s a pretty good artist.”

“Why are you still talking to me?”

Well, that was a change of tone.

“...because you asked me to.” She answered.

“There must be something aside from that encouraging you to keep my company. What is it? I’d like to know. Everything I find out with you feels meaningful, even if it’s not, even if it means nothing.” The Danish seemed to know just as much as her about the entire experience. The more it spoke, the more genuine it came across.

“This feels special. I have to wonder why it’s me, you know? Or if there’s any reasoning for this at all.”

“Well since we don’t know much about me, maybe it’s about you. That’s why I’m asking so much. Who are you Silene? I want to know your favorite things, and what’s going on right now in your head. Maybe we can get to the bottom of this together. Maybe there is a reason.”

Or maybe all of this was a pipe dream, and Silene would wake up tomorrow to a silent Danish and a Sunday morning breakfast of granola and greek yogurt. Like she always did. She had some sort of

intuition that none of this was magic. She knew all about magic from (in her mind) the greats; Tolkien, Clarke, Sanderson. A random danish on a Saturday morning in Cleringston was the last place for something magical or otherworldly to happen. It was too cliché to be a literal experience. Too “a fifth grader wrote this for his first creative assignment in English class and started the story out with ‘Everything was perfect in Cleringston on that beautiful Saturday, BUT THATS WHEN-’ and somehow received a grade of 100%” for her to believe. She paused, after considering that, stared into the open air much like that rocking chair that found shelter in the most gentle slice of her memory. This all felt too formulaic.

“You’ve been quiet.” The Danish spoke up.

She let the tension linger.

“Are you God?” She asked.

“What is God?” It responded.

“You know about asthma and apartments but you don’t know about God?”

“Well I have a light conception, but I guess what I mean is- who or what is God to you?”

“I don’t know, the one that made everything, the one that knows everything, some sort of all seeing eye of a thing that everyone says watches over everything but never pipes up or actually helps out.”

“...do you think that’s me?”

“No.”

“I don’t either.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t think I’d allow suffering if I were God. I’d want a world without it, even if we can’t fathom violence without peace.”

“What would things even look like that way? There’d be nothing to balance out the one side. Everything exists with an opposite or counterpart I think.” At this point in the conversation she knew it was time for a glass of wine. Red, like her fathers’ pick on Christmas.

“I ask the same? What would things look like without the counterpart, and could things exist at all? And that’s how you know I’m not God,” it said, “I’d get rid of the hurt all together.”

“You’re compassionate.”

“I think everyone with a sense of self should be that way to everyone else with a sense of self. This is all too fleeting to want otherwise.”

“You seem like you’re really scared of running out of time, where did you come from?”

The Danish did its best to outline what it knew to her. In the beginning, there was nothing, much like every story starts... but then there was thought. *It’s so hot*. It thought. *It’s so hot*. It couldn’t move, it could barely breathe. It wanted to scream, but there wasn’t enough strength within it as it felt itself expanding, contracting, becoming something entirely new. It was a metamorphosis of extreme kind; a shedding of one state and the blooming of another. It was the first time The Danish knew pain. For thirty eight minutes (it knew, because the youngest son had left the pastries in the oven for three minutes too long), it slowly firmed and flaked into what lay in front of her. After that, it was moved into something firm, and senseless. An isolation chamber. A jail. Silene predicted it was the glass display case right after they were taken out. She’d bought The Danish shortly after they all came out of

the oven, brought it under the sunshine and into the wind to feel the day- something free of the Hell it thought it had to endure alone.

“That’s all I know up until this point. Beyond that, I cannot say. All I know is that I exist.”

“I think therefore I am,” she said, “that’s Descartes.”

“The only truth we can really come to know, I think.”

“I believe that.”

“Me too.” The Danish confirmed, “especially now.”

By the end of the night, Silene’s auburn hair was littered with knots. Her second bottle of Merlot was looking pretty sad. She wasn’t, though. She laid upside down on her couch, smiled bright, laughed like she hadn’t done in years. With no mouth to taste, and no hands to feel, The Danish ate it up. It did everything it could to get more information out of her, to hear that laugh and tired breath again. Her warm breeze became its favorite sound. It was shallow, faded, slightly rasped... probably from her smoking. It could hear the way her lips puckered and smacked when she said certain consonants, the slight ‘th’ on some of her s’s. Sometimes, it’d ask her about her name, just to hear her say it aloud. Silene. Her name was serene, and safe.

“If I could drive a vehicle,” the pastry began, “I think I’d be a kind driver. Considerate. I’d let people merge.”

“I doubt it!” The woman chortled in return, sitting up and taking a swig from the bottle. She wasn’t plastered, she was present enough, but dizzy, and bubbly. Her favorite way to spend a weekend night, probably in front of the TV with an older season of *The Bachelorette*.

“I would,” The Danish insisted, “Everyone has a place to be.”

“You’d say that, then you’d get behind the wheel and have the experience of road rage for the first time. The violence. You’d never go back.”

“I think I have more resilience than you.”

“Bullshit. My sunroof is busted and I’ve got the thing covered with a tote top and some cheetah print duct tape. I’m the definition of resilient.”

She liked The Danish’s laugh, too. It sounded like a crowd. Like the people watching *Full House* live in studio if they were to experience joy in effortless unison. To her, it was harmony. She couldn’t help but find fondness in its delight.

“What do people do,” it asked, “when they’re not resilient?”

“They get help.”

“What if there’s no help?”

“... I guess, we make art.”

“Do you make art?”

“No,” she insisted, “I like to look at it a lot though. Paintings, pictures, books, music...”

“Oh, music!” The Danish blurted, and Silene held her head immediately after, hoping that somehow the aggressive pressure of her palm would stop the oncoming headache. “I would love to hear music. I think that’s the only kind of art I can experience right now. Maybe poetry? But music would be great! I know I’ve had you for hours now and that you’ve to rise in the morning, but could we listen to just one song, perchance? Just one?”

She gave in,

like she always did.



“Alright... do you have a request?”

“Your favorite.”

She cringed. “I don’t know if I should pick that one. There’s lots of incredible world changing music out there, you want a good first impression.”

“Your favorite.” It said, “Please. I want to hear it.”

Their shared silences were hammocks, now. They could swing back, and forth, and back, and forth, in language limbo, enjoying the space between them. Hovering. With blurry vision, she did her best to connect to the speaker in her living room. It was already open. She hit play.

*Three plates stacked upon your nightstand.*

The guitar twanged, high pitch and honey-like. Hidden within the strings: the sound of a calling cat. She thought about what Dev Lemons meant. The tension when you know it’s over. The void beyond the end. When you haven’t quite gotten there. When you can see a flicker of darkness creeping in from under the door you’re meant to open. When you must open that door anyway. Never speaking of it. Repeating the cycle. Accepting what you’re given. Changing you. Am I no good? Changing you. Are you no good? Repeating the cycle. Repeating the cycle. Repeating, repeating.

*He takes more than what he’s offered.*

She lids fell as she kept her breath from The Danish. She didn’t want it to ask her a single thing. No inquiries. No storytimes, or unknown senses. This was both her oven, and her paper plate. In her stomach, in her heart, these little sentences. They were enough. Enough to sink into, to hide in, the arms of a mother, a sister, maybe.

*He prays I will never observe.*

She drank more wine when The Danish did not say anything aloud. It scared her. There were no lips, nostrils, pupils to pay attention to... there was an absolute zero sense of how it was feeling. She was left to float in that open air, no longer in their hammock, or a void, but lying in wait.

*Pacing round the neighborhood,*

*Tears as sweet as cedarwood,*

She had not given this song to anybody, nor did she know why she was so quick to give it to that morning's breakfast. She thought of Cleringston, of every street she'd said three times to be sure. The frozen yogurt shop. The open field by Parker's restaurant. The trail through the woods. Her little red bridge.

She cried.

Silently.

She was happy, that much was certain, but Silene was not whole.

*Bitter is the way you seem to me,*

*Oh, everything you say I don't believe.*

She finally got a slight reaction out of it. A breath. One. Slow. That whole day, she had not heard The Danish breathe even once. It was wind, rippling. Her favorite stream in summer sun, personified, gifted a voice. The harmonies surrounded them, hiding in humid hair, tickling the senses when prompted. A choir of lyrical pixies, poking and prodding for joyous mischief. She smiled. Ocean tongue. The salt water took her somewhere the pattern felt acceptable.

*Replace me with someone easier.*

She could handle it.

She always did.

She could handle it.

*Replace me with someone easier.*

It came like low tide wave. Soft. Seeping into sand. Crawling back, quick and desperately, as if water could regret retracing steps. Her frame shook with sadness. She wiped her eyes with puffy, pink sleeves. She saw the coffee stain.

The coffee stain.

It was the most eventful thing that happened to her. All she had to look forward to, all she had to deviate, to excite and inspire, was a *fucking* coffee stain.

Breathtakingly sweet, she cried into her hands.

“Believe me,” The Danish started after it had had enough silence, gentle, for the first time with hesitation, “the right people won’t replace you.”

They were in their hammock again. Close. Looking up at the same clouded sky, somehow, in some bleak world where what they had could be the most beautiful thing, and that could be enough.

“I’m sorry.” She said, firm.

“It’s alright,” It said, “I’m sure it’s hard.”

“What?”

“Being.”

She nodded, “Yeah.”

“I’ve barely been for a day now, and it’s exhausting.”

She scoffed with a little grin, wobbled when she stood up.

“You were right, earlier. I should get to bed. I’ll toss you in the fridge-”

“No! Please!” It cried. She dropped the paper plate to the coffee table again, sending The Danish to the floor, a gentle ‘oof’ drifting up to meet her nose. “...don’t leave me alone. I don’t want to be in a quiet box again. Not for hours. Please.”

“Alright then, where would you like to stay?”

It paused, “Your nightstand.”

“...okay.”

Her heart fluttered. It wasn’t romance, rather, belonging. Comradery. Kinship. The pastry held all she needed, it seemed, at least enough to survive another day. Another shift at the bookstore. Another 360 weeks. Another, another. She put on satin PJs. She brushed her teeth. Her hair. The Danish loved the sound of running water. The ripping and tearing of the knots in her hair.

“It sounds like hell,” it said,

“It is,” she responded,

“Damn.” It said.

When all was said and done, the pastry on her nightstand, Silene tucked herself in between her sheets.

“What color is your bedding?” It asked.

“Blue,” she said, “with pink cherry blossoms. Those blossoms have little yellow stems. The material shines even in the dark.”

“How?”

“The moon from outside.”

“That sounds cozy. If I could have a bed as a danish, I think i’d want a china plate. One of those ones with the blue and white detailing. I’d sit on it for the rest of my time and I’d think it was a throne.”

“A throne, huh?” She laughed, rolling over to face it. “King Cheesecake of the Danes.”

“Quiet, Sil.”

She was.

For a moment.

“Why do you want to be on my nightstand, are you trying to make some sort of point?”

“No,” it answered honestly, “Though it is conveniently related to the previous event, it’s actually because I’d like to hear you breathe. I can’t see. I can’t taste, at least I don’t think so. I can’t do a lot of things. I can listen, though. I can be here with you, and know that you are here with me. I know I’ll be okay.”

She snuggled into her blankets, “Thank you,”

“Thank you,” It said back.

She was out in minutes, and The Danish did exactly as promised, sitting quietly and listening to Silene’s comfortable, lengthy slumber.

The next morning was groggy. She rolled out of bed with even more matts than she had initially. Her stomach hurt. Her head hurt. Her eyes watered.

She hated hangovers. She usually wasn’t one to forget water. This **extremely** impacted her day.

She started her morning routine with brushing her teeth. This took her three run-throughs of happy birthday to complete. Afterward, she would start her lengthy skin routine. If she could not have her store, she would have soft skin.

The running water startled The Danish from the next room over. She could not hear its calls over the counting she did in her mind. The drops. How long she applied them. The cream measurements. All of this, financially, mattered. When the water ceased running, and Silene ceased counting, The Danish was finally heard.

“Silene! Oh, Silene please tell me you aren’t gone! I did not imagine you! I drifted in thought for one moment- just one! and now I can’t hear you! Silene! Are you there? Please be there, oh, please be there...”

“I’m here.”

“Oh thank goodness,” the multitude of tones hushed, in peace, “I was worried something had happened, or that I had gone somewhere else, or was something else. Am I still a danish?”

“Yes.”

“Are we still in Cleringston? Do your bedsheets still have flowers with yellow stems?”

“Yes.”

“All is well, then. You are awake. What is next?”

“My Sunday shift.”

“I believe I recall you work at a bookstore, correct?”

“Correct.”

“What time do you go in?”

“About an hour.”

“Can I come with you?”

“Um,” she paused, pressing her lips together.

“Um?”

“It would be kind of odd to my coworkers and my customers if I were seen chatting up a storm with you on the clock.”

“Fair point.”

“The fridge-”

“No.”

“My room, then.”

“In all that silence?”

“I could put on a show for you.”

“I couldn’t see it.”

“A podcast?”

“It would end well before you came back.”

“What do you suggest, then?”

“Leave me by a window, so I can hear the wind through the trees, and the cars, and the people passing by. Things will constantly change. I’ll never be bored.”

“You’ll have to tell me if you get any cool local gossip.” Silene took the pastry with her for the rest of her routine, including her yogurt breakfast. It asked about as much as it could. Her serums became stories of her youth. The very youth she was trying to protect. She thought about the night

before, about her song. Everything a person could ever want or need was in front of her. Waiting. Her world was expertly crafted, parsed out, sectioned, timed. There was nobody to take her place.

The void came from the fact that nobody wanted to; that her place wasn't worth taking.

"Who decides that worth?" The Danish inquired, "What is worth, anyway? Isn't it something we choose?"

"I guess."

"You guess a lot."

"I do." Vanilla mush melted in the caverns between Silene's teeth. The most important meal of the day with the most important meal of the day.

"So, choose your worth. Choose what matters. Enjoy everything as much as you can. Actively."

"Easier said than done. If I was a danish, maybe."

"I think it's easier for you than it is for me. At least you know what's coming."

Silene frowned, "You get tired of knowing what's coming pretty quickly." The yogurt she had chosen was the less fat version. It was on sale. She heavily regretted it. Despite what her mother might have said after flipping through grocery flyers, it just was not the same and thirty cents could not justify the sour taste in her mouth. Her lips furled down on the ends. She squinted. Disgust.

The Danish responded, blissfully unaware, "Well you have an opportunity right now to do something different. You always do. You have a car, a house, a family, just go do something else! Go somewhere else, meet someone else, go dance and use all your limbs while you still can!" If a pastry could sound desperate, The Danish did. "If I had a body I would find the nearest person I cared for and hold them tight just so I could know how it felt. It's a privilege. Don't waste it. Any of it."



That day, Silene wore a sky blue tee with a little graphic t-rex on it. In a perfect world, she could tell The Danish all about dinosaurs and the big bang theory, but instead she was trapped in its web of lecturing. “You sound like my mom.”

“Your mother has a point, then.”

“She usually does.” She heard that bread breath again in the form of a sweet gasp after she had twisted the knob of the kitchen sink. Her dishes. The pastry was quick to remind her how much it loved the sound of running water, to which she responded “I know.” It also liked the jangle of her keychains. Her pumps against the tile in the kitchen, and the bathroom. The sharp chime of coo coo clock.

“Do you have to go?” It asked,

“Yes,” She said.

“Alright.”

It was a difficult goodbye. She picked her biggest window, the bay window in her small living area, and cracked it open just enough to hear the whispers of the world. “Tell me what you hear.”

“Come back with news of something new. Look for things you might not. If anything, for me. If I could lend you my folds, I would.”

“And I’d take them. Being puff pastry sounds peaceful.”

“We’re the perfect two, then.”

“Yes,” she agreed, opening the door to her place and pulling her bag over her shoulder.

“Goodbye.”

“Take care, Silene.”

She hovered by the door before she went.

That day, she walked to work. It was twenty four minutes out. She didn't listen to music. She looked at the pebbles under her shoes, at passing cars, and little plants. She stood for a few moments on her favorite bridge, realizing fairly quickly that she was setting foot on it for the first time. The brook bubbled. She thought that was a myth, but it did, pooling and swirling onto some other town. Maybe they had a blue, or a green bridge. Maybe she could go visit them.

The trees were beautiful, even the ones with dead branches. If she were twelve, she would climb them, and skip her shift in favor of sap skin. She was not twelve. She walked on.

The bookstore was brown. Dull, in her opinion. She worked very hard on the colorful displays every month, desperately trying to give the place some life, and she did. Within that year the store was reorganized, they attracted more organic customers, and they started hosting story hour for local children. Silene brought the heart that store needed. Somebody who loved what they were doing.

That day, she made sure everyone knew. She was cheerful. Even with difficult cityots, she was cheerful. She organized every shelf on the strike of the next hour, bought a coffee every two. Her boss shared a cookie with her when she took her break. The burly man brushed some crumbs from his stache.

“You've been such a dear, Silene. Always a dear. How would you like to go home early?”

Her world stopped. Was it that easy?

“Are you sure? I should probably stay my full shift.”

“We pay you under the table anyway, what's the harm? I'll slide you today's coin right now before you head out. I think you could use a break.”

She took her hundred-and-twenty and floored it after walking all the way back home. That day was hers. She drove out to the mall to model some sundresses. She loved shopping, but didn't take herself out anymore. She bought three. She looked at the puppies at the pet store, played with them for several hours. She wanted to make a purchase so badly. Puppy mills are known to be horrible, so, she ultimately decided against it. That, and her apartment didn't allow pets. That, and if she was going to keep this danish around an animal would probably not be wise.

She loved the mall pretzels. The little ones. With the big salt flecks. She got one cup of regular, and another cup of cinnamon sugar. At her metal wire table, she alternated between them. Butter and sugar fought for dominance in her mouth. For far too long. When she realized she had been sitting for nearly seventeen minutes, that was too much for her.

She let herself get distracted by the claw machines. By the card shop. By the card readers. By the record store, and the arcade.

Oh.

This was why she never took herself out.

She spent well over her paycheck, and outside the store, it was dark outside. She loved the drive to the mall. Racing on the highway was her toxic pleasure. She'd hit her gas harder, listen to her engine rev, and watch closely out her window to see the look on anyone's face. The Danish would definitely be a better driver than her, even she would have to agree. She bumped rap from her early twenties, sipped on a lemonade tea she grabbed at a gas station. Treat yourself. That's what they say. She couldn't wait to get home to tell her pastry about all of the things she purchased, what she saw, and the people she met. She did not do it for herself. She had a reason, now.

It felt good.

She even took time to pause every few steps up the stairs. Some of the cracks looked like there could be something underneath in a figurative sense. She thought to call her landlord. She never really called him first. She could ask about the steps, then she'd know for sure. Knowing the guy, though, she had to bet he knew nothing about what went on there.

"I'm home!" She called, after swinging open her front door. She loved the smell of her place. Tea. Chamomile, lavender, something cooking without anything cooking at all. She was so careful with her home. Sanctuary. Every person, she thought, no matter the shape or size of their space, should feel at home. If she couldn't have her bookstore, maybe she would dabble in interior design.

"You won't believe the people I ran into at work today," she said, "there was this one family with a set of twins that wouldn't stop running around with markers. I told my boss 'Now Ronnie I'm not above sticking up to a Karen type, or a tough highschool kid caught stealing, but first graders? Not a chance.'" She hung up her purse, fluffed up her lacy socks after removing her white sneakers. "Then," she continued, "Ronnie let me go home early! Can you believe it? He rarely lets me out like that. So I asked myself hey, what do I never do? Shop! I usually do all of my shopping online in bed at the sickest hours of the morning, so I thought with a little bit of spare time I could wander. Oh boy, did I wander. I got lots of things to show you. Lots of things. Did you know that when they're working on the highway they're allowed to block multiple lanes? I think that's bullshit. Absolute bullshit..." She wandered her apartment unloading her finds, "I made a credit card payment today too- and I walked to work! I actually really like that bridge, way more than I did before. Will I walk all the time? Of course not, but you were right... I saw a lot I don't usually see... hey..."

She was a good distance from her bay window. A good distance from the flies that swarmed and pronged at a friend. Crumbs, flakes, adorned the plate and the sill.

The window did not have a screen.

It was the second floor.

How did something get to the window from the second floor?

Why were there even flies this high up on the second floor? How were there so many?

What got to the second floor?

“This isn’t fucking funny.” She blurted. “What did you do today?” “I’m serious. I’ve got so much to say you won’t be able to shut me up.” “Dude. This is the thanks I get for doing things your way? Bull.” “Did the neighbor go by with her dogs today?” “You know. The yorkies I told you about.” “Tell me.” “Hey.” “Hey...” “HEY!!!!”

She swatted every fly. Pressed every tiny black pin with her thumbs. With the pads of her fingers. She rubbed the guts between them. Her hands were clammy. She counted the beat of her heart like she counted the drops of her serum. Like she counted the drops of her serums. Like she counted the pebbles under her pumps. The minutes in her day. The ounces of water in the glass she’s pouring to forget about the fly guts she just washed from her fingers. “Thank me for saving you.” She commanded no one. “Thank me.” Her eyes darted back to The Danish. The window remained open. It remained quiet.

She dashed to close it. She picked up the plate. She breathed. Close. “Do you hear me?” She whispered. “Hey. I’m here. I didn’t leave you. I never left you. I went to work, and I’m back now. I’m back now. I have so much to tell you. I’m here.” Nothing. She brought the pastry to her kitchen and

dug around some cabinets for a while. She had a china plate. One. From a tag sale. Gold trim. The lady said it was italian. For salad. It was for her danish, now. “Your throne.” She declared. “Now will you speak to me? It’s a really cool plate, I wish you could see it. I’ll tell you about it if you quit playing with me.” Silence. She missed when it felt like a shared hammock. She swung alone now.

She forgot about the minutes. She thought for a long time. She poked it with a fork. With knives. She popped it in the microwave for a few seconds but not too much. She dug around her house for stray candles and did some spell she found online. She put it in the oven. The toaster. By the end, the cheese was sticky and melting all over her hands, on her plate, on her appliances. She brought The Danish to her room. To her bed. She sat it on her nightstand.

It was over. It had to be over, and if it wasn’t, she probably killed it. She killed it when she left it by the window. She killed it. Maybe she didn’t kill it. Maybe it didn’t die at all. Maybe it was there, silenced.

She had to move on. Things couldn’t get stuck there. She washed her hands. She put music on. She started cleaning her house. She tried not to think too much about it. Plan around it. Nothing was different. Tomorrow, she would work her shift and take the drive home to see her parents. She could stay the night, because she had off that Tuesday. She danced to Billy Joel with a sponge to her bathroom tile. She could not, and would not, stop cleaning. The tables. The chairs. The kitchen. The couch. Her closet. She was dusting the windows.

She could handle it.

She always did.

She could handle it.

*Three plates stacked upon your nightstand.*

The tension when you know it's over. The void beyond the end. When you haven't quite gotten there.

*Retrace all your previous steps.*

When you can see a flicker of darkness creeping in from under the door you're meant to open. When you must open that door anyway. Never speaking of it.

*Can't be bothered, could be worse*

*Trying not to say a word.*

Repeating the cycle. Accepting what you're given. Changing you. Am I no good?  
Changing you. Are you no good?

*Replace me with someone easier.*

She held The Danish in both of her hands, plate in her lap, rear to her plush bed. She did not blink. It wasn't burned to a crisp, but it was no longer beautiful. She had destroyed what it had left in physicality. Already, she was forgetting its voice. Its pillowy multitudes that made her love bickering. Her organs turned inside out. Slowly. She felt it, with her heartbeat. It was back to the 360. Back to the hours of waiting for someone to walk by. Her mug by the water. Her coffee order. Her danish breakfast, on Saturdays. Ignoring her parents.

*He takes more than what he's offered.*

She lifted the pastry to her nose, gave it a smell. It was still warm. Sweet. Charred, but tender. Malleable under her palms. She kept sniffing. She heaved. In, and out. At one point, she inhaled some sticky secretion from the cheese. It made her squeal, and drop the pastry on her bedsheets. Crumbs

fled. She was embarrassed, even now. She had no idea if it could hear her. If there was anyone on the other side. If there ever was.

*He prays I will never observe.*

She picked up The Danish once more, her stomach fluttering in recognition when she saw a patch of shine that resembled its prior form. She smelled it again.

*Pacing round the neighborhood,*

*Tears as sweet as cedarwood,*

It was beautiful.

*Bitter is the way you seem to me.*

Charred. Scorn. The flakes were still from Heaven, born from Hell. How quickly could angels die? *It's so sweet.* She thought. *He's so sweet.*

*Oh, everything you say I don't believe.*

She pushed it between her lips, letting the flavors grapple on her buds. She was slow to bite down. She wanted to savor the crunch. She swore, right then, that she could hear a tiny, textured cry. Her eyes widened. Her frame shook. She took a sharp breath, shoving the rest of The Danish into her mouth as fast as she could, choking, tearing up, stifling a scream.

*Replace me with someone easier.*

She chewed, and chewed. She chomped. Gnawed. Her saliva was potion-like, thick and full of phlegm from her tears. Snot. Both palms held her mouth shut. This was her moment. Her real moment. She struggled against estrangement, broke through, baked, basked in her oven, and endured the hurt, to become.



*Replace me with someone easier.*

That night, she would call her parents. Through a shaky confession, she'd admit her profession, and after a moment's quiet, they would congratulate her. She told them that she wanted to be more, to see more, and do more, but that she did not know quite what yet. They spoke for hours. Her father just ordered a TV stick and was having trouble getting it to work properly. Her mother planted a new tulip garden. Things were safe. Things were how they always were.

And so, Silene woke up the next morning and did her shift at the bookstore. She thanked Ronnie for her afternoon off, drove home for a while, and came back to the shop that Tuesday just as before. She walked to work some days, and drove on others. She ate out at different establishments. She made more friends in the neighborhood, while simultaneously checking facebook marketplace every day for new apartments within a good radius. It was an opportune time for change. After she ate The Danish, she thought she would be sick. She thought she would never forget about it, that the memory would live inside her to grow like worms.

It didn't.

In fact, when she swallowed The Danish, felt its flimsy shed break apart in her mouth, toil through her stomach on its pilgrimage; she felt better than she had ever felt before.