

Estranged

She unstraddled me gracefully. I listened to the bed groan against the shifting weight and then watched her take long strides to her clothes, neatly folded on a chair. Her pale complexion glowed beneath the halogen bulbs. Strands of black hair stuck to her sweaty cheeks. The muscles in her legs loosened and contracted while she put her skirt back on. When I rolled off the bed, the floor was cold against my feet. Opening the refrigerator door, I realized the light was broken. Taking out the egg carton, I asked, “How you like your eggs?”

“What?”

“Eggs. I like them over easy.”

“Oh, no need,” she said confused. “I just want to go.”

“Sit. You look hungry,” I said, lighting the fire beneath the frying pan. She did sit. Guess she was hungry. She buttoned her blouse to her neck. Her arms and legs were crossed tight, goose bumps forming on her thighs. She didn’t seem to want to look back at me, her gaze preoccupied by the floor. I walked over to the wall and adjusted the thermostat. When I returned to the stove, the smell the olive oil filled the air. I cracked the egg and let its contents fall onto the hot oil. It sizzled white. Shrapnel of hot grease stung my stomach. I flipped it. After placing the plate in front of her, I gave her some microwaved coffee and then made an egg for myself.

Surprisingly, she had not started without me. She gave me a weak smile when I sat down and began to eat. I poked the center of my egg and watched the yoke bleed out, gathered it on the tip of my fork and licked it. She ate her food daintily, chewing softly with her mouth closed. She sat straight, left hand perched on the table, no elbows; residual etiquette of a past that would not predict her present.

“What is this?”

“Breakfast,” I said flatly.

“It’s 11PM,” she said. I shrugged and drank some coffee. It was cold and bitter.

“Is your coffee cold?”

“I don’t know what it is your keeping me around for.”

“You chose to stay.”

“You told me to.”

“I did.”

“Why though?” she asked. I just looked at her. I began to notice the faint lesions that showed beneath the caked on makeup. She made me weary. I collected our plates and placed them in the sink, running water over the dried yoke. After grabbing a beer from the fridge I made my way to the couch where the television droned. Without looking at her, I said, “Goodnight.” I felt her presence remain in the chair, sitting, contemplating. I heard the ruffle of her clothing, the scraping of chair on linoleum, muffled footsteps on carpet and finally the door.

Her presence lingered with me, mostly in her smell that clung to my body. I inhaled deeply and tried to recall the sound of her chewing and the way her sad eyes felt when they looked at me. I called her Mary. I didn’t know her real name. We had a silent understanding that names were irrelevant. I think she called me Paul. I sunk into the cushions and began to feel the dark cloak of sleep. I wondered who Paul was, right before consciousness closed its door on me.

It was snowing when I stepped onto the sidewalk. The chilled air worked its way through the gaps in my clothing, brushing its cold hand across my body. My hair was slick and greasy. I hadn’t slept long. The snow fall was unrelenting, blanketing everything in its path. The ground

under my feet was slick as I walked beneath the street lamps. Soft flakes hit my exposed neck and trickled down as water. I saw him from a distance, illuminated beneath the radius of a street lamp, yet shrouded by the veil of snow.

He was an old wino, sitting against a brick wall, bundled in a tattered jacket with newspaper stuffed inside. His nose was a deep red and the only distinguishable feature on his face amid the tangle of grey hair that consumed his entire head. It was cold, but he didn't shiver, or really move at all for that matter. I thought he was dead at first. I stood in front of him casting a dark shadow. He looked up at me blankly, with a twinkle of fear so I sat next to him beneath the street lamp. We were two strangers watching the snow fall. I tried picking out one flake and following its path until it hit the ground. I got close once. Feeling the lump in my jacket, I pulled from it a pint of gin. It sloshed audibly, only half remaining. That all too familiar sound broke my wino friend's trance and he turned to me. "Marco," I said, picking the name from thin air, "it's cold out here." I took a long swig of the gin and shuddered.

"Hah, stick with me son and you'll know cold," he said gruffly, taking the bottle I offered him. He tilted it at a deep angle and his Adam's apple rose twice. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and handed it back to me. People walked past us with sideways glances. I must have looked the part, greasy and unshaven, sitting next to Marco. He waited impatiently as I held the bottle, watching a passersby fade away behind the veil of snow. I took a shot and passed it back. "Tell me something Marco."

"What?" said Marco, before putting the bottle to his lips.

"What keeps you going?"

"Good question," he said, chuckling.

“I expect a good answer.”

“You’re a depressing fucker.”

“Well that’s saying something.”

“Answer’s easy. Stubbornness,” said Marco, polishing off the bottle. He placed the empty bottle in his pocket, leaned his head against the brick and closed his eyes. He had a dumb smirk on his face and hummed a tune I couldn’t quite catch. I leaned my head back too leaving my eyes open and catching snowflakes in them. I would feel them hit my eye and watched them smudge my vision. The light warmth in my head was comforting. I concentrated on it to distract myself from the rest of my body which was feeling a creeping cold against my damp clothing. Stubbornness, I thought, was fitting.

“How’d you get here?” I asked.

“How’d you?”

“I was walking along and I sat down.”

“Yea, well so did I,” said Marco smartly.

“You chose this?”

“Chose this spot.”

“Was it cause of the street lamp?”

“Nah.”

“Why then?”

“That storefront there was my daddy’s,” said Marco, pointing across the street at a pharmacy, decorations in the windows in preparation for the holidays. He gazed at it fondly, memories buzzing behind his soft eyes. He was humming that tune again.

“Was it always a pharmacy?”

“Nah, daddy was a butcher,” said Marco, smiling.

“Oh yea?”

“Damn straight, best meat in town. He had principles about meat. He had principles about everything.”

“What are your principles?”

“Yea, he would show nothing but love and respect for those dead critters. He’d honor them in his sausages, and cured meats. He was an artist with a knife and cleaver. No part of the animal was ever wasted.”

“What happened to the deli?”

“Every time I see meat, I can’t help but think of my poor old daddy!” said Marco, with a deep sigh. He just stared ahead, his mind somewhere far off, beyond that old storefront or its memory. It made me want to tell him about my father. He leaned back again, head against the brick wall, eyes closed, but no tune this time. I had made him weary. I wondered if he would sleep here all night, under the street light. We were both blanketed with a thin layer of snow and I imagined him, gathering more and more through the night to be found the next morning, frozen, a real life snow man. I got up and brushed myself off, looking down at him fondly. “Goodbye Marco,” I said solemnly. There was no answer. He was fast asleep. I walked on ahead.

With a deep crunch under my feet, I was alone. A familiar feeling. I would leave fresh boot prints and in the morning they will have been covered by new snow. Existence in flux. People leave there residue everywhere they go but it usually goes unnoticed. However, if anyone

should enter your life, they place a stain on it and their memory follows you. So I kept thinking of Mary and way she ate. I kept thinking of Marco and the way he hummed that tune. I had met them, shared words, time and flesh, but these were simple transactions. Sometimes that is enough to stave off the loneliness. It is less burdensome than friendship, less painful than love.

I was trying to remember that tune, when I approached the welcoming glow of an all night diner. I crossed the threshold and was met by gratifying warm air which eased my shuddering body almost instantly. I sat at the counter and ordered a coffee from a tired old waitress who smelled of cigarettes. I drank my coffee heartily, feeling its contents course down my body, warming my core. She watched me warily. I looked back, challenging her glare.

“You gonna watch me all night?” she asked sassily tossing her washcloth on the counter and shifting her weight to one leg.

“Who else am I gonna watch?”

“You don’t have to watch anyone.”

“I prefer to.”

“Maybe they don’t want to be watched.”

“Maybe.”

“Definitely,” she said.

“How do I earn your wisdom?”

“Ain’t no rule book for that.”

“Too convenient I guess,” I said.

Playful banter, a simple transaction and she warmed up a bit. She smiled and poured me another coffee. The environment of the diner felt sterile. The fluorescent lights reflected off the

white linoleum, metal trim, and polished windows. It was hard to see out the windows, beyond my reflection. I noticed her sitting a few seats away. She turned her head away when I looked but I recognized her immediately. Mary's eyelids hung low and her posture was hunched. There was a bruise beneath her left eye, which was not there before. She must have felt my stare because she turned and gave me a bitter look. "Didn't you listen to what Nancy said?" she asked softly.

"Nancy?" I asked. She pointed at the waitress.

"She said people don't like to be stared at."

"She did," I replied.

"Well, why don't you listen?"

"Not sure."

"You're wet," she said.

"You're hurt."

"Well, comes with the territory," she said almost mournfully.

"You should put some ice on it."

"Doesn't matter."

"I guess not," I said, seating myself closer to her. I bought her another coffee and ordered the soup of the day for us both. I wondered if she slurped her soup or if she ate it as quietly as she chewed her food. We didn't talk while we ate. For some time, there was just the sound of my slurping and her quiet swallowing. We finished with the clatter of our spoons against porcelain, scooping up the remnants of soup while Nancy watched us intently.

"Thank you," said Mary.

"You're welcome."

“I never did thank you for the egg.”

“No need.”

“Well, I’ll thank you anyway.”

“If you insist.”

“I do,” she said.

“May I ask who Paul is?” I asked out of impulse.

“Oh huh, you noticed that did you?”

“Hah, yea, you let it slip once or twice.”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me who Mary is.”

“You’ll be disappointed.”

“Try me.”

“Well, I guess I needed to call you something and Mary is what came to mind.”

“You’re right, I am disappointed,” she said, laughing at me.

“Well, your turn, who’s Paul?”

“You know who Paul is.”

“Yea, I guess I do,” I said looking down at the counter, “but who are you?”

“What do you want to know?” she said, giving me a faint smile.

“Your name.”