

The Sweet And The Strange

THE SWEET AND THE STRANGE

Stoned, strolling down Central Park West wearing sunglasses, smiling under the breeze-swayed trees. No rush. A city sanctum in this park, away from honks and herds. It feels open, like the palm of a green hand. Step in. Enter. Forget the downtown bustle—down there, a different kind of wilderness. A weird wildness.

These trees—shadows, then gaps of sun. Bright blue smile above. Dogs everywhere. Kneeling down next to one, human eyes in this dog, curious and imploring. A busker massages a rickety violin near an entrance.

LCD Soundsystem's "Home" trickles through my headphones, and my slap-happy feet tap towards the southern edge of the park. The song reminds one of times they've had, hints at times they'll face. I walk west.

I find a knick-knack shop on Amsterdam Ave. Dusty rows of goods, musk, mold, and wood. An old rug hangs faded on a wall. Dull typewriters stand like pot-bellied sentries, dried ribbons their tired flags. Pale signs and posters announce the past. Monogrammed seals of obsolete initials.

"E'rybody bought this crap in the 80's... *sold* in the 90's," the gruff owner boasts to a young couple holding hands. They shift their stance. "All kinds of things..."

I flip through several records, finding the Grateful Dead's "Europe '72" tour, smiling at a distant summer singing "Tennessee Jed" with all our eyes closed. Jaime's older brother had bequeathed that CD, though weeks before he'd been killed in a car crash. "The Dead will enliven your life," he'd said.

I wrap the plastic bag around my finger, bounding west to Riverside Park. A slight wind picks up, flowers smelling sweet and distant, then getting stronger. I breathe deep. A bench overlooks the Hudson, and now sitting, with the wind wafting more flowers I close my eyes to

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enhance my ears and nose. Honeysuckle, roses, maybe petunias. Some unknown scents too whose owner I'd someday love to meet.

Plants and flowers—beauty borne from dirt. Despising darkness, they rise proud, perfect, imperfect, towards the light of the sun. Even when they can no longer hold up their own weight, folding over, they still become ladders for other vines to climb.

My eyes move past towards the water, heavy and transfixed, and with some effort I bring them back into focus. Choppy waves sway in the dark water below, full of black teeth and tips that curl towards the sun. Flowing streams, the same all over the world—only the life around them is different. In meditation they say to visualize all your negative memories and emotions packed into crates. Then release those crates downriver, watch them brought around the bend, go out of sight.

Speaking of sight, my thoughts fall to my father, those last few days he knew it was over. Weird seeing him like that: eyes clouded like blue blurs, drained of force and pride, the shriveled skin around his neck. Bone-shaky fingers. The empty boxes on the Times crosswords I'd brought him. Seeing me stare at those empty letter-boxes, he chuckled something about my planting some letters so his words could grow. It was the first time he'd ever asked for help, on anything.

Growing up, he'd insist we use first names when discussing "business" matters, like college tuition, or help on a rental deposit. So when he brought up his will, voice hollow and weak, I started saying "Caleb—" but he raised a frail arm to stop me. He'd be donating his estate to the Pancreatic Cancer Foundation. "There must be better ways," he said, looking down at the catheter. "They need to find better ways." But his tone was uncertain, like he hoped I might object.

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His uneasy smiling fading, he dragged his burdened eyes towards the lighted window. For just a moment, they glowed like fireflies. I finally said, “Dad. It’s ok, you know? It’s a good thing you’re doing.” His eyes turned back to me, slow and dreamy, reassuring my wrist with weak fingers. My eyes welled. I felt a weight on my chest seeing him like that, and all these words I had prepared about how much I loved him couldn’t be lifted from my heavy bosom. A few days later I got the call.

Within six months I’d flown back to London, quitting my job, and joining the dream I’d long set for myself. I’d cut the safety net, feeling the thrill and fear of freedom. Taking only my notebook, I set off to Eastern Europe—going anywhere I’d not been before, gathering stories and watching people in order to truly write a novel. Now I’m home again, but feeling like a foreigner. I wanted to keep traveling, keep moving, but then I’d thrown this ball that I now had to catch.

That ball looms in the sky now, blocking everything else. It grows like the dark shadow of a swooping dragon that I’d soon need to face. A shadow full of my limitations, blocking the sunshine of any potential. And with my savings dwindling, it’s time to sit down and work. Pure madness, trading jobs for dreams.

But then I love it—like lighting off fireworks, and writing out the booms.

The party’s in the West Village, and I say “I’m here to see the Mayor of Tarrytown” through a slit in the side door.

“Chase, yes!” Jamie rushes over, bear-hugging me until I tap my right hand against his side. “Welcome back man! Hair’s getting long. I like it.”

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“It’s getting a bit unruly,” I laugh. “First time I’ve really gone for it though.” I hand him the record. “Happy birthday, brother.”

Jamie tilts his head over an outstretched arm, closing one eye with a smile. He brushes a smooth hand across the cover, as if dusting a windowpane. Glancing up, he wipes his greyhonest eyes, and we both step in for another hug.

“Heard you and Brooke just bought a place,” I cough.

“Yeah—yeah we did,” he drawls, turning the album over. “Got lucky with a spot in Greenpoint. Little outdoor space, too.”

“You’re like a real adult,” I smile. “Nothing better than some greenery too. You guys should grow some veggies out there.” I picture my old patio in Notting Hill. Everything dripping in plants; everything left behind.

“Could actually use some help on that front,” he says, raising his eyebrows. “Gotta get you over for beers soon. Or dinner.” He swigs his drink. “Brooke’ll hook it up. She’s better than me now, anyway. At most things,” he adds, “But definitely cooking.”

“Home-cooked meal sounds pretty good,” I admit, envisioning its wholesomeness. “Not had one in months.”

“So whereabouts you living now? You never answered my text.”

“Just renting a room on the Upper West Side. Really nice lady owns the place.” I blush, adding, “Quiet, but I need that.”

“Back for good then?”

“A while at least.” I scratch my neck. “Feels weird to sit still though. To be in one place.”

“Well we missed you, man. Didn’t know if you were ever coming back,” he shakes my shoulder, then turns and hands me a beer. We clink.

There’s a pause, and I know the question coming—

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“How’s the writing going?”

“It’s going,” I say. “I guess. I take another drink, wiping foam off my beard. “Still so much to learn.”

In truth, I’ve been back a month, and have only succeeded in squandering cash. Can’t sit still. Nights out, buying drinks and dinners, which is akin to stealing away full days and weeks from the timeline I’d painstakingly saved up for during those London years. Years of cubicles, fluorescent lights and low interest in the job I was doing. Here in New York, hungover, I stare at the screen—finding anything else to do—scrolling through Instagram or watching Phoenix play on a bus for the tenth time on La Blogothèque. Frustrated, I’d go out again for a “quick” walk that turned into hours of wandering. Anything to get away from the possible truth. Was like if I didn’t start, the writing couldn’t be bad. But if it’s never bad, how will it ever get good?

We duck outside for a joint. People are pouring into the streets, as the day dips into the night. A wind stirs, trees flicker all around us like leafy jazz-hands. It’s getting cooler. I slip off my Nikes, stretching bare feet against the naked sidewalk.

“Haven’t been to Manhattan in ages, Jamie says, taking a hit. “Brooke loves it though.” He rubs a cigarette butt with the bottom of his shoe. “You seeing anyone these days?”

I shrug. “Need to sort out my own shit before I can be there for anyone else’s.”

Jamie doesn’t say anything, just sort of nods gently. “Well listen,” he breaks in, “Brooke wants to set you up.” He pauses. “I told her it was trouble though,” he laughs, glancing at me. “But seriously, let me know. Cool girl, really smart. Plus Brooke already told her you hate commitment.”

I take a hit, and exhale deeply all the things I wouldn’t be able to give to her right now.

“Honestly though, man,” he adds, clasping my shoulder, “She’d be good for you.”

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I rub my foot against a mossy strip in the sidewalk. “Chasing pleasure *is* costly,” I admit. “In so many ways. But still,” I raise my eyes, “I need those amusements. I ne—”

“You *need* a muse.”

I focus on the fiery point between my fingers. It burns, but I hold still. Maybe it is time to get serious again. How long has it been since Hennie?

We’d crossed paths at an English bookstore in Paris, where she’d been studying at the École des Beaux-Arts. I’d been looking for good translations of Balzac and Baudelaire, as she reached for *Wuthering Heights*.

“There’s a real love story in there,” I’d said to her. “But sure seems sad at first.”

She turned child-blue wide eyes toward me, curiously naive considering her beauty. It was late afternoon, and a dusty shaft of waning sun through an old window glowed on her blonde hair. The sides of her mouth were curled upwards, but the middle was muted, as if someone had whispered a salacious joke into her ear, but it wasn’t right to laugh. Her eyes and mouth were incongruous—the former, orbs of innocence, the latter suggesting salacious sagacity.

We wandered together all day and night through Parisian streets. We walked blindly, talking, touching arms for emphasis. She wanted to be a Gallerist featuring unknown, local artists. She was training in Paris to work in New York—showing that city its undiscovered beauty.

We shared fears; “failing” topped both of our lists. Scared more of not trying. We covered half the city that day, and everyday after we covered even more. Her mind was entrepreneurial in every sense. She’d call me out on my bullshit, laughing when I’d do the same to her. We kissed on the first day, made love in the second week. I finally understood that euphemism. She

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confessed I'd been the first guy to go down on her even, and ever since then I'd felt this overwhelming need to protect her—from a dark world; and later, from myself.

For two years we met on weekends, rendezvousing throughout Europe, or in our respective cities. Every weekend felt new and intense. Hennie was the first person I'd shown my writing to, expecting to be laughed at, or worse—politely told it was great. Instead, she came back with a marked-up draft full of insightful, red-inked comments suggesting a serious business.

Her coursework completed, Hennie brought up moving to London. Her sweet, sunrise eyes offered me a chance to be better than I was. To have a true partner. But then having the sweet, I wanted the strange. I could feel myself straying, wondering what unmet girls were like in the height of their ecstasy. So I cut things off, cursing my sunset-soul.

Tired from tears, we'd stood embracing at the Gare du Nord. I said she was better off without me—that she'd be fine once back in New York. It wasn't grand, but I meant it. We kept slow dancing in small circles, eyes closed, her feet on mine. "You're so stupid," she whispered, as I kept squeezing tighter. A foreign, female voice overhead announced my train's imminent departure.

"It's funny," I tell Jamie, flicking the joint. "Sometimes I wonder if this romance thing isn't just a big game of musical chairs. Like if you don't settle soon, you'll get caught without a seat—and nowhere to sit—when the beat stops."

We head back inside. The bar is darker now, more muffled. It's filling up, but the din's dimmed down with the light.

"Well I hope you find that sweetheart tonight," he says, with some pity.

"Yeah," I shrug, ordering beers. "That girl that makes you dance."

Jamie cocks his head, giving me a side-smile. "But then allows you to stop."

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I grab more beers later on as two girls, sitting at the bar, lean into each other giggling. One's a pretty, light-skinned black girl with twisting braids and large breasts. The other is Latina, with a hard beauty—sharp cheekbones, pointy almost, like they'd been pinched at the top. Dark brown hair, pulled back tight.

"We were just saying you've a nice face," the Latina laughs. "I'm Kat." She raises her hand like a waitress holding a platter. "This is Shayna."

"What's in the notebook?" Shayna nods to my left. "Doodles?"

I give them the quick version. There's a pause, then Kat claims she has a project to discuss.

"Get anything good done today?" Shayna asks.

"Not really," I admit, looking down. "Couldn't get past the first sentence."

"Go on," she smiles. "How's it start?"

I look around the bar, considering how good it might feel to finally open these pages to someone. I'm sure they'll be unable to read my handwriting—a scrawling, cursive hybrid—but before I even decide, Shayna gently unburdens my clasped hand, turning to the last page:

We're all just loose souls, tip-tapping toward rabbit holes, while dancing on the dusk.

She looks up, then reads it again. "Couldn't take that anywhere?" she finally says.

"Seems like it could go in a million different directions."

"Probably right," I laugh. "But by its nature, I'm not sure it can ever end."

"Well," she says, rubbing her finger along the rim of her martini glass, "He could finally fall into one."

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I fall transfixed by the pink liquid in her glass—how impossible it would be for a shrunken person to climb out of a glass like that.

“Been here a while?” I finally ask.

“Just got here,” she shrugs. “But Kat’s been at it all day. She’s dragging me to an afterparty in Noho now. You should come.”

“Yes! Come!” Kat cheers, sliding off her stool for the bathroom.

“I would, but all my friends are here.”

“Can’t have that then,” Shayna smiles. “A drink, another day. Here,” she says, scribbling in my notebook. “Take this.”

Kat comes up behind me, breasts resting against the back of my arm. She asks if Shayna gave me her number.

“Well, I guess you got the prettier one,” Kat lies. “You smoke? Wait, where’re my cigarettes?”

“In your bag,” Shayna scoffs.

“So, you smoke?”

“Pot—cigarettes just when I drink.”

“Well you’re having one now.” Kat nips two Newports, pulling my arm towards the door.

A pout pours over Shayna’s face. I hesitate, not wanting to hurt this fellow creature’s feelings. Smiling over my shoulder, I give the helpless look of a parent humoring a child—though I’m unsure what the roles actually are.

Kat pats the seat next to her on a bench outside. “Sit.”

I move closer, but stay standing. She lights both cigarettes, handing me one.

“So what’s this ‘project’ you mentioned?” I fill my mouth with menthol, letting it tingle, then inhale sharply.

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She looks puzzled. “Oh, right!” She fidgets, then examines her cigarette to ensure it’s lit. “A screenplay. I need help writing a pilot.” She relights the cigarette. “For instance, you like strip clubs?”

“Well, yeah,” I laugh. “At least—I don’t *not* like them.”

“Passive, are we?” she smiles. “So yeah, I help organize, like, ultra-private strip shows. Parties, really. Loads of finance types. Guys with too much money. Like if you have stupid money, we sort you out.”

“It’s amazing how—”

“But it’s an art,” she continues. “Pulling cash from the client, stringing them along.” She takes a long drag from her cigarette. “Just gotta make sure they’re satisfied.”

I cut her a knowing glance.

“The girls don’t have to do everything,” she laughs. “Only what they want.”

I pull thoughtfully at my Newport. “Not sure you have a whole series there,” I say, exhaling.

“Depends on the writing,” she shrugs. “I’ve got contacts. Friends who’re producers.” She pauses. “So wait, what were you doing in... London, right?”

I think about making something up, but retract. “Worked at a bank,” I admit. “Hated it though.”

“Like T.S. Eliot,” she winks. “You know, you could actually do well with it,” she muses, crossing her legs. “These parties. You’d be a great asset to clients.” Seeing the look on my face, she smiles. “You wouldn’t have to *do* anything. Some just wanna talk—discuss stock picks, or whatever.”

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I chuckle, looking up into the black-orange sky. Starless. “Maybe I’ll just show up wearing a Sex Police hat. Get the rubber nose and glasses disguise. Fake mustache. Bust up tables—confiscate drugs.”

“Seriously,” she pokes my thigh. “Could do a lot for yourself money-wise. Especially since you’re not working.”

“What about women?” I say, playing along. “They don’t want this?”

She slowly shakes her head.

The bizarre edge on her statements and manner gives me the troubling, yet sensual sense that this girl could lead me anywhere. A place I didn’t know I needed to go. Those dark, daring eyes you could only guess at, or watch over like a charming thief on a house tour.

“That street behind you,” she nods, “Actually, this whole triangle,” she sweeps her arm over the area, “Is a place where you can get anything you want. Nothing’s illegal in this part of the city. Well, nothing’s *impossible*, let’s say.” Wistful, she adds, “It’s almost too good to be true.”

“Or too true to be good,” I grin, flicking my cigarette into a small puddle. It hisses.

Shayna comes outside, a tight look on her face.

“Ready to go?” Kat smiles at her. “Wait, where’s my phone?” She paws through her purse.

Shayna lets her search a while, before finally reaching into her own pocket. “She asked me to hold this for her an hour ago.” She rolls her eyes. “Said she couldn’t be trusted.”

Kat and I look at each other, our unsettled business. I kick myself for not grabbing her number earlier. Of course, something tells me those ten digits are dangerous. That I’m better without them. But then, that luring look in her eyes pulls me outside of myself.

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Faint footsteps—drawers open and close. I knock louder. Two bolts turn, and the door wedges. “Oh, it’s you,” she says, re-closing to unlatch the chain.

“Expecting someone else?”

“No, just—it’s Bushwick,” she shrugs.

I step into a long hallway, dimly lit like a moon river. Ambient music floats through a dark doorway at the end of it. The lock latches behind me. My bones feel heavy suddenly, though my insides lighter, like on that first slow climb up a roller coaster.

Scented candle flames of lavender dance along the walls of the living room, glowing orange, the room like a Jack-O-Lantern. Kat passes behind me, gently stroking her nails across my back. I shudder. She strikes a match; a fleeting, tangy smell of sulfur.

“I remembered what you said,” she smiles, lighting a joint.

She passes it from outstretched fingers. I take a hit, holding it in, growing light-headed with watery knees as I exhale. I sit down. A weight comes over me. The music gets louder or lower, seeming to only come through one ear.

“What is this?” I hear myself ask.

“Just a little twist on the traditional.”

I take another small hit, before handing it back. She places the joint in the ashtray, letting it burn.

“Surprised you took so long to call,” she says, pulling my hair playfully. “Been almost a month.”

“Guess I felt bad about Shayna.”

“You felt bad about choosing me?”

“No,” I pause. “Feel good about the choice—just bad about having to make it.”

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“Makes sense. She’s a great girl. My best friend.”

“Why’d you give me your number then?”

“Because I’m not *her* best friend.”

My eyes begin adjusting to the dancing darkness. Open boxes sit against most of the walls. No TV on the stand—just piles of paperbacks. Walking over, I smile when I find *The Master and Margarita*. I pull it out, seeing it doggy-eared midway through.

“You didn’t finish this?”

She squints to see. “I never finish a book.”

A long silence, which she breaks with, “Did I ever tell you, I used to be a stripper?”

“You sorta alluded to it.” I look at the books again, then turn. “A good stripper?”

She jumps up from the couch, twirling in front of me. Her red robe unfastens, flaring out like a dress. Black tank-top and panties underneath.

“I was a great stripper,” she laughs. “Gave ’em what they wanted, without losing what I wanted to keep.”

I pull out another book. “That’s... a delicate dance.”

She leads me back towards the couch, stopping suddenly, pushing her hips back into mine. Feeling goofy and stoned, I slip my hand under her shirt, gently cupping her breast. Her nipples harden between my fingers. I kiss her neck, and inside her ear. She leans her head to open the area up, then pulls away and sits down. I follow, but she holds my hips in front of her, unzipping me slowly, peering up all fang-toothed like she’s suddenly got me dead-to-rights.

Reaching her hand into my jeans, she strokes the swelling outline of my briefs. Smiling, she curls her fingers inside the elastic waistline, licking just above it. She slides them down to my ankles, but doesn’t let me kick them off. Her tongue teases around it. My breathing shallows as her upper lip curls like a ski jump, and I’m flying out the gate.

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Before I know it, I'm on the couch with my knees up around my shoulders as she goads my gooch. I'm putty. Every part of me aches to be touched. She keeps changing pace, delaying my climax, while my feet dance in the air like pom-poms.

I'm almost there, when suddenly she stops, pulling me out of her mouth.

"That's a good boy," she says in a business-like tone, closing her robe.

"What?" I croak, my legs falling limp. "You're not gonna finish?"

"You can finish yourself," she shrugs. "But I'd suggest you wait. Could make tomorrow night more interesting."

My insides drop like a snapped elevator. "Tomorrow?"

She leans back, crossing her legs. "7th & Waverly," she says. "Midnight."

I'm seated at the bar, finishing my seventh Champagne—its last bubbly drops warm and sweet. Dense, grey cigar smoke engulfs me like quicksand. Neon lights pulse to the beat of music. Dapper guests gab while huddled in dark nooks around the cavernous space. Subway tiles covering the floor and walls reverberate the strange, hollow music. Private lairs flank the main hall, pink lights spilling from their silent doorways.

I'd blown off Jamie and Brooke once again, telling myself that I'm here to find a story—that it's not just circumstance. Mrs. Farrington had come knocking this morning; three light taps on my open door. Her speckled hand hid a dust-broom behind her leg. She asked about my health, how my writing was going, such nice weather, etcetera. Then she went quiet, bending down to smooth out a wrinkled piece of carpet.

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On Fridays, I wake up sometime before noon—a tray always outside my door. Two hard-boiled eggs, a grapefruit, yogurt, some cereal. Milk in the fridge. Once, there was even a note with a little doodle of me overpowering a typewriter, smiling, threatening to pull out its ribbon.

Her face averted, she finally asked if I could maybe pay my next two months' rent in advance, since I'd still not provided proof of income, and was behind already. My stomach started throbbing. I understood. She was on her own as much as I was. I gulped, quietly, then told her of course it was fine—that I'd have it in a few days. My neck burned in shame as I said it. She lingered—her sullen eyes apologizing for the request—so I mentioned how great her new plants looked in the kitchen. That they'd grow good there. She smiled with quivering lips, saying, "The key is not to overwater," before closing the door.

It's almost pleasant sitting here now, on my eighth glass of Champagne, though Kat keeps calling me to mingle. I scratch my neck. Sure, this party might pay—but what's the cost?

Cocktail waitresses in black lingerie bring out finger foods that no one touches. Men wear dark suits or tuxedos; crisp cuffs and black ties. The women are striking, mostly. But even the ones that aren't have this quiet confidence about them: the chin-up dignity of an entrepreneur—selling their bodies, but owning their souls. Eyes forward, they strut like models on a catwalk, chatting to different men, moving on as they please. These girls barely drink. The men can't drink enough, sniffing coke out of small silver spoons.

Large bouncers stand solemnly by every doorway, hands clasped in front of them, wide shoulders held back. Two flank each side of the bar. Indifference borders on disdain for the clientele. Tenderness towards the girls.

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Of the guests, a big man in a navy suit sports a gold pinky ring on his left hand. Black hair, combed back with gel, his hairline in retreat. Churchill cigar. Puffing smoke into his mouth, he nods at a smaller man speaking next to him while his eyes scan the room.

His acquaintance wears a black dinner jacket; bow-untied, slung around his neck. Bushy brows and hair wild, wizardly. Holds his cigar differently, between thumb and forefinger, like a mobster saying, “Capisce?”

Two girls approach them. One has long blonde hair, perfectly straight. Her back is towards me. Her angel-white dress glows unblemished under the blacklight. It’s like she walks with a spotlight. Something about the way she stands thumps my heartbeat up into my neck suddenly. Not sure why. It keeps pulsing, my stomach feeling heavy again.

The blonde whispers something to Churchill. The other girl laughs—white teeth, gleamed clean—though she missed what was said. The wizard waves his tobacco wand, expressing something. More drinks appear. He tells a joke about an optimist who falls off a ten-story building—how passing the window of each floor, people kept hearing him say, “So far so good!”

They waltz over to a back room. My mouth grows dry. I order a tequila shot, but the bartender shakes his head, giving a slight nod towards Kat. A waitress refills my flute, and I follow the group, avoiding Kat’s eye.

Pink light shines along the near wall. Three doorways have black curtains drawn, their satin secrets safe. Stopped against the wall, my neck grows hotter though my body shivers. I can’t remember what I’m doing here, but I wish Kat would tell me to leave—that *anybody* would just tell me to leave.

I loiter, sweating over whatever’s behind that curtain. My stomach drops further, like I’m in freefall, but maybe I need to hit bottom. Maybe that’s the only way I can stand back up.

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A tall brunette saunters past me, sliding a curtain. The shrill of metal hooks tingle down my spine. A white pile glows on the floor of the small chamber, now unconcealed. Farther in, that blonde girl is bent over naked with the big man's head bobbing behind her. His nose is buried. Loose wisps of black hair stick up as his head starts jerking from side to side, fingers sinking into her butt cheeks. Pinky ring. She throws her head back in pleasure, eyes closed, biting her lip. One hand pulls her hair as she pushes at the wall with the other. She's smiling.

I drop my glass, seeing her face. I slide down the wall. The room spins pink and black and bad. Everything blurs—music blaring hollow as if I'm in a tin frying pan. I keep gasping "Hennie" but my mouth is dry and nothing comes out. Standing, I stumble. The tall brunette closes the curtain, signaling to someone.

A bouncer rushes in, yanking my arm as I creep towards the curtain. I pull away, lashing blindly a punch to his face. My hand hits bone. I scream out in pain. I look towards the closed curtain as a fist slams into my ear. Everything rings. Another punch to my stomach—room spins more. I puke, my eyes pulsing like heartbeats. Everything is red and watery. I keep screaming, "Hennie! Hennie!"

Kat swoops in with two more bouncers. They drag me by the collar while I wail wild punches, wanting one last look—just to be certain. To take her away. A hard knock to my head and I drop to the ground, curling up against the kicks, shouts, shame, almost enjoying the pain now, as if it's all I needed to worry about. As if it can't get worse.

Like lighting off a firework, and riding out the boom.