

SHE lives in an all-brick house where the road curves. It's covered behind a low wall of flowers and shrubs. Professional, yet sloppy. Once I saw an empty beer bottle cracked on the road near her house. Not that she ever drank.

The house next to hers is a white one with a red door and a tire swing out front. A house cake, that's what I call those horizontally-oriented houses. Not like your house, with it's awkward vertical stance and its slanted foundation -- a townhouse that got too old for the cities so it grew fat and moved to the suburbs. Anyways; when I was a girl, there use to be stories of that house, the white one with the red door. Haunted; they called it. I was past the age of unrefined naivety; yet the story was alluring and I persisted in believing it. Besides; I never saw any car parked in the driveway. And the paint was always chipping just the right way to spook the creeps out of a child, and the grass, a little too perfectly long every time. Then there was that damn tire swing, always there, mysteriously swinging when nobody else was.

Of course, it's not haunted, I know that now. Trucks go into the driveway. Big, sturdy ones that are used for construction. The grass is mowed -- or at least parts are-- and one day, someone even dragged out a picnic table, dusty and splintery, onto the slanted driveway. It just sat there for weeks, the picnic table; idle, out on the driveway, as if waiting for an unannounced barbeque or to be hauled off the junkyard. A listless captive of household furniture. Weeds grew in between it's planks; dogs peed on its legs; teenagers carved their names into it.

But once, I had seen her with it. She had been sitting at the picnic table, doing the neighborly thing to do. Sipping coffee from a free mug she had won at the county fair while her other hand grazed the table, splinters sticking up and all. She looked like she was waiting for someone; but perhaps she wasn't, and was just sitting out there for the pure pleasure of it.

I asked her what she was doing.

Nothing, she replied. Just waiting. Life's like that sometimes.

Like what?

A waiting game.

Her eyes were blue and hollowed out like a carved figurine, looking elsewhere. Caught in a thoughtful daze. She was actually quite ruggedly handsome in this sense. Masculine features accentuated by a blunt femininity, a contradiction in itself. Her hair was long and blonde; but more nuanced than the typical variety: tousled, with streaks of different yellows, as if it were the sun's rays. As for her face, she had a pleasant structure, with high cheekbones and a pointed chin. The cheeks were a little flushed, as if out of embarrassment, and the eyebrows were audacious and thick, as if to ask the question everyone was thinking but would never ask. Still; there was a composure to her face, of relaxed nonchalance -- of something smooth and greasy like thick litho ink or an improvised melody, strumming to its instinctual beat, no metronome in sight.

People liked her.

Not necessarily loved her; no; she didn't stick out as particularly anything other than an amiable fellow. Necessary; though, not for the win or for absolute sustenance. Just for the flow of things; for being a Cod in a sea plentiful of them. Because the good fish get overfished, and the crappy ones die out.

On the evening in question, I was out walking with Shoeshine. He was an old, lazy dog, with a bulging belly that loomed far below his tiny torso. I don't walk Shoeshine much these

days, especially at such an hour; but that night, it had felt right, the air crisp and the wind a soft wandering type. The sorts you might feel when riding a roller coaster: lulling, to and fro; hitting the face in brief whooshes. A virulent pendulum. In the silent moments, when it subsides, you hear all the rest that was left behind: a dry leaf, crunchy and flakey; tree branches agitating a slow and methodical rustle; wondering laughter wafting through the air, unwarranted, unwanted.

But let me tell you something about that night. It felt wrong; wrong in all the ways it should have felt right. The weather was warm and feigned summer; except, that was a lie because I was wearing a fleece and jeans and had a scratchy throat from a low grade viral infection. And the sky was still lit - though it was past its due time. It was painted a strange brownish pink--the same shade you might see a five-year old paint with after mixing a bunch of incongruous colors together--yet; the color was dark, dark enough that it could blend in the realm of 'being night' and for that reason, be considered something ordinary.

From somewhere behind, a radio was playing. It was an old, dusty one that someone had left on the side of road. Forgotten. White paint was splattered on the top and there were white fingerprints sloppily pressed against the buttons.

*"She never stops. She's a go-getter"*

That's what they had always said about her. Though I had never personally witnessed her gritty hard work, her wealth of perseverance, but I had heard about it. She was one of those who worked hard, a mechanical work ethic, that absent-mindedly, yet purposely, went through the actions, body following commandment in one fluid action. She worked at a post office, which was tedious in those days, because the customers were mean, and would hurl insults at you while you served them. It was also mindlessly boring, stamping those envelopes and peeling stamps off

those metal plates. She had to do the latter very often, a matter of fact. Nobody ever realizes how annoying such a task is, how the stamp curls as the water saturates it, but still clings to the metal surface, even after you've picked at it with your nails. Tiny bits of it. Small enough for you to want to give up and turn away. Then there's the water: always hot, sloshing through. Wasted; because it barely even touches the metal before it goes down the drain.

There's a big hill near where I live with two distinct features: the grass and the shape. The grass is soft, each strand defiantly sticking up as if it's its own entity -- it's own self, an individual; but still, as a collective whole, it looks homogeneous, continuous and ceaseless, a plush carpet of greenery. As for the hills' shape, it's actually a series of hills, each one an awkward shape with a sharp climax that quickly subsides to an otherwise flat slope. At the center of the hill, halfway down, there's a flag. Tall and strong, like the helm of a ship.

We were sitting at the top of the hill on a bench. Shoeshine was tired, as he always is, and the night, though eerie, still warranted a brief moment of indulgence. There are certain pleasures in life. Little dainty things that you wrap up in a memory; then throw away. To enjoy eating an apple and doing just that. Cowering over; because it's slightly chilly, but still nice. To hear the birds sing freely--especially the call of the unnamed rainforest bird, who is ubiquitous because he's always on children's sound machines, but fantastical because he doesn't actually exist.

From somewhere below, I saw her. Or at least a figure: blonde hair trailing and purple flowers in hand. Same purple flowers from a different memory. Crushed ones, originating from a common stem. On a flattened stone. The centers are blunted spikes that are painted fuchsia; but there are also a few dandelion-looking bodies mixed in there. The stem is long, seven inches or

so, and has leaves dotting both sides, as if caught in combat, an asymmetrical fight that neither wins. Attached was a tiny gift tag that read “You’ve waited long enough” with a deformed heart drawing next to it.

I had found that the morning after seeing her sit at the picnic table. I knew what its true intentions were, it purporting as an ambiguous love note. I picked it up and threw it away. It would’ve been better for both of us if neither had seen it.

And so Shoeshine and I sat at that bench, a drunk evening set before us. Feeling exhilarated in an ominous way, like what we were witnessing was somehow bad. Or was to be that way: the start of a horror movie when that sinking feeling settles in and the horror really starts -- the shaky camera, the stupid girl; faltering, all faltering. But the evening! The sky was so splendid -- a feat in visual aestheticism, with its harvest moon, fat and egotistical, out prematurely. The sky, segregated into its constituent colors; except the colors you see are make-believe and don’t really exist: pale lavenders and eggshell greens. Below; a lone figure. Walking down that rural road at an intermediate hour. Late, but not late enough. Walking down it like so many times before. Thumping to its sick syncopation. Like a bad indie movie. Too cold for the sweater off, too hot for the sweater on. An auspicious night. That’s when they met, our two lovers.