

## Ann, Without

Ann without an *e* glares across the café at Anne with an *e*. Ann without an *e* has always wished her name had *e*. Anne with an *e* has an *e*. Anne with an *e* has it all.

Ann, without an *e* to echo the extra-ness of having an *e* with the same fanfare of townes and shoppes that are always olde and sound like fancy places to drink frappes and talk about jewels and extravagant vacations, stares hard at the chip in the lip of her brown mug. Anne with an *e* probably doesn't have a chip in her mug like this one that keeps funneling drops of coffee to land on Ann without an *e*'s lap before a good swallow has a chance to roll across her tongue. The coffee's bitter warmth is lost on the barren wasteland of her third-best pants with the purple thread running down the outside seam that she sewed in from the knee to the ankle, in an effort to get Thomas to look at her again, to get him to notice the results of all those new Zumba classes at the Y that she's been going to since he started working longer and longer hours and sometimes had one excuse or another to not come home at all.

The image of herself seated at the old Singer, bent over the pulled-apart denim and tough purple thread, working like her entire Home-Ec grade depended on the straightness of her lines and the closeness of her loops to hold the parts together, seems a little desperate now.

Well, she failed that project anyway. It was never about the pants. The seams came undone, but not of the pants, which she now wears with the same determined flash of color as any warpaint in history smeared from finger to cheek, but of the marriage they had stood on either side of and passively stared at for more years than either of them wanted to admit. They would have to acknowledging that they'd both let it deteriorate like a car left parked and unmoved until its tires begin to slacken, though no one notices until the frame suddenly reclines to one side more than the other and the terminal stain is discovered seeping into the pavement below.

Thomas now sits across from Anne with an *e*, his back to his wife without an *e* several tables away. Anne With looks up and makes brief eye contact with Ann Without. No sign of recognition or discomfort crosses her pretty face, so Thomas probably hasn't mentioned that he's married. That he's been married for fourteen years. Anne with an *e* doesn't know she's looking at her namesake who is one letter short of having everything.

Anne With lets her eyes drop back to the conversation she's having with Ann Without's husband, though her gaze nervously flits back up a couple of times to see if Ann Without is still looking at her.

She is.

Ann Without watches them order. Anne With crinkles the corners of her eyes at the waitress and Thomas shifts against the back of his chair in a way that allows him to slump a little as his groin pushes toward Anne With under the little round table as the waitress walks away smiling. Their legs touch and Anne's hand traces circles on his knee. It's a casual, familiar move.

What does she see in him? Ann Without can hardly fault her, though, because she herself was drawn to his borderline helplessness, his almost humanness, that made him appealing in the way that a sullen dog at the pound sits in the corner, unafraid but certainly not effusive, and somehow gets adopted by someone bent on rescuing a creature that might not actually feel itself in need of rescuing in the first place. From the moment Ann Without met Thomas, she saw him as a scribbled sort of person who didn't really know what he wanted ahead of time but definitely knew what he didn't want after the fact. The kind of man who passively bobs along the surface like a jellyfish without making any real decisions for himself, but who is also quick to point out when things aren't to his liking.

When she planned their honeymoon after giving up on getting his input, she was giddy to tell him about the cabin in the mountains that she'd reserved. A few days of being alone, just the two of them, sounded like a fine way to start their marriage.

"It sounds cold," was all he had to say.

She rebooked a cottage at the beach.

"It's always cloudy."

She scheduled four nights at a casino resort where they could eat buffet dinners and watch recognized singers wrap up their dwindling careers by performing for small audiences as cocktails and smoke made the rounds of the room. She chose not to tell him where they were going until they were on the road and he realized he didn't know the plan and it was easier for him to just go along with what Ann without an *e* had planned for them both.

Little did she know, this was just the preamble to a long lack of planning together, a day to day of Ann speaking for both of them and looking for his satisfaction in the results of her efforts. She made plans, he complained about the details, and they ended up doing things and usually having a decent time. It was okay, she told herself, it wasn't like they fought or worried about outcomes. By dropping her unrealistic vision of great, she found she could live with good enough.

And now he's ditching her without so much as the courtesy of a conversation. She saw the text on his phone this morning that confirmed what she'd already begun to assume. *Hi Love, Rosie's for lunch, 12:30?* But she didn't know the other woman had her name, only with that *e* that changes everything. And Anne not only has an *e*, but Ann's husband now, too.

Ann Without is startled back to herself by the appearance of the waitress's coffee pot under her nose to refill the chipped mug. She considers asking for a new mug that maybe doesn't

have a spot in it that causes her pants to bear the discoloration of coffee, but she doesn't want to be a bother. She can just turn the mug around and drink from the other side.

The way she jumps in surprise makes her chair squeak against the floor and several people look up, including Anne, whose *e* practically hovers over her head like a halo. Even Thomas half turns her direction, enough that she is reminded how much face he has on so little territory of his head, leaving a remarkable amount of head without face. It's a little odd, distracting even, but she'd not really paid attention to the extent of it before. It was part and parcel of the whole Thomas. Now his small face feels like settling for so much less than great that she wonders how she ever convinced herself they were good together at all. Maybe she deserves someone whose face is stretched into more normal proportions and whose eyes would meet hers as they spoke to one another.

Ann Without notes with cheerless, but nonetheless gratifying, satisfaction that he's not really looking at Anne With as they chat, either.

She wonders what Thomas might have noticed about herself that he just put up with. What did he settle for as their marriage crawled through the first decade and into the second? Probably the flashy threads she likes to sew into her pants. Definitely the way her body put weight on right around its center before it thought about adding some anywhere else. It was the very reason Thomas didn't want to have kids. Most men would probably worry about their lifestyle changing when kids come on scene, but Thomas was worried that her body would go through what is essentially a war with itself to produce an heir, giving up its tight borders for the softness of motherhood. The absence of life blooming from her is suddenly very evident. She'd always thought of herself as someone who would have a family, but she had allowed her desires to be flattened into the slow rolling wheels of Thomas's superficial concerns. Who was he to be superficial, anyway? Why did she ever agree to that? Her own weakness, the willingness to give up every bit of self to preserve the couple is beginning to glare through as darkly as the things Ann overlooked about Thomas.

So her midsection got a little thicker. Did Thomas read that as permission to take up with someone else? And damn, her legs were looking good from all that Zumba and her middle was slowly shrinking back to what it was a few years ago, but he hadn't even been home enough to notice.

Ann Without turns her gaze back across the café to inspect the other Anne, who is picking at a pile of fries drizzled with cheese sauce that arrived a moment ago, causing their conversation to stop while Thomas shoves a burger in his face. Ann Without adds Thomas's atrocious table manners to the list of things she's overlooked.

Anne with an *e* looks nice, but more a hair shirt than fur coat kind of woman, the kind just like Ann Without who would sacrifice herself to keep Thomas. Thomas really has a type. Anne looks like someone with simple goals who would search for her dream home among a sea

of identical floorplans and paint jobs in a development called Déjà View Estates and never see the irony. A girl who was holding out for a rock star in her twenties but, now pushing thirty, ends up settling for a part-time master of the bongos. She looks innocent enough that she might march unknowingly right up to death's door and ask to borrow a cup of sugar. She's an inexperienced gardener who plants what she thinks will be a towering sunflower but instead a vining hybrid squash grows from the soil and produces warty fruit that tastes....

Ann Without is yanked from her thoughts by the realization that Anne With has stood up suddenly, letting her polite napkin fall from her lap and onto the floor, an action she seems not to notice as she turns and hurries across the diner to the back hall with blank silhouettes of a triangular skirted woman and a blocky man above the doorway. The neon sign above has burned out its "rest", leaving "rooms" glowing red against the pasty wall.

Ann Without is relieved that her husband's back is to her, so he won't see her grab her purse and follow Anne With into the bathroom.

As the heavy door sighs closed on its long hinge, Ann Without sees that there are only two stalls and one is already closed. Water drips into the single sink, tapping a spot that has darkened from years of this same drip slowly weakening the clean porcelain surface and leaving it stained. She steps through the open stall door and tries to figure out a reasonable position to assume in the confined space as she works out why she followed Anne in here in the first place. She sets paper on the seat and sits with her pants still up and her purse on her lap.

In the next stall, a trickling sound gives way to silence. But only for a few seconds.

"No...no no nonononono...."

Anne With is whispering frantically. The toilet paper dispenser spins around and around. In the ensuing silence, Ann Without thinks she hears the labored breathing of someone holding back sobs.

Thomas would hate to hear this. Not because he empathizes with someone who is in pain and suffers alongside them with a supportive—if obligatory—arm around the shoulders, but because he dreads the lasso that someone else's pain in his vicinity drops around him, dragging him like a helpless calf to the branding iron into helping another human sort out their emotions. She almost giggles at the image of Thomas with his arms pinned to his sides by the tightening rope of Anne's upset here in the bathroom.

Ann Without waits silently as Anne With pulls her sobs under control and commences with sniffing, enough that Ann Without can tell the other Anne's nose is dripping at a higher speed than her body can manage on its standard breathing schedule. Ann Without wonders why Anne With doesn't just wad up a tad of that ream of toilet paper she's just unleashed and use it as tissue for her nose.

What feels like a very long time ticks by, marked by the persistent drips landing in the sink every few seconds and the periodic sniffs from Anne With. Ann Without shifts her legs and weight to make it sound like something legitimate is happening in her stall. She pulls at the toilet paper theatrically, then folds it carefully back over and over itself to rest on top of the roll, knowing no one will ever use this because it's already been touched. She thinks about ripping off a few squares and suggestively pretending to blow her nose into it. But why would Ann want to help this woman who is having lunch with *her* husband and tracing love circles onto his leg under the table?

Rummaging commences in Anne With's stall. It pauses, then continues at a more frantic pace.

"Do you have a tampon?"

The way she keeps getting lost in her own head makes Ann Without like a nervous fawn alone in the woods today, because she jumps again at the question and the hand that appears beneath the partition.

Aha! Anne with an *e* doesn't have everything after all. Ann Without considers the small, lightly callused and very utilitarian hand open and asking under the metal divider. She thinks about the battered-wrapper tampon lying somewhere at the bottom of her own purse. The kind every woman has unless she is past the time of fruitful delights or is in fruit at the moment and doesn't need one for a long time.

"Eh, no, sorry."

The words quietly escape her mouth, lingering on the *noooooo*, before she has a chance to ratify the final bill of sale this statement represents. She's shut down the possibility of conversation before she even decided whether she wanted to talk to Anne.

The hand pulls back to its side and disappears. The unfurling of yards of toilet paper begins again. Ann Without is certain Anne With has pulled sufficient paper out to float away on her own tissue raft.

After Anne With has passed so many minutes of stuffing and rustling in the next stall that Ann Without's legs have gone a shade of numb just shy of cold dead stone, there is a semi-triumphant completion to a zip in Anne With's stall that sounds strained against what it means to contain, and then a pause before the feet turn around to face the toilet.

Ann Without feels her ears tense in preparation for the assault of sound she expects from the imminent flush and its echoes off the hard surfaces that surround the capsules that contain the two Ann(e)s together, yet apart. Instead, a cavernous silence beats its nothingness against her eardrums and the drip from the sink sounds louder than before. Its rhythmic tick...tick...tick marks seconds that threaten to turn into minutes and Anne With hasn't moved. Neither, accordingly, has Ann Without.

The sole of her shoe squeaks quietly against the polished concrete floor as Ann Without leans forward to peer under the divider. She sees the deep plum flats that Anne With chose to meet her lover in and Ann Without can't disagree with this choice. They're very cute shoes. Just as Ann has to brace a hand against the metal door to stop herself from falling onto the floor, from the stall next to her the slowest flush she has ever heard from a public toilet begins to swirl and finishes with an echoing roar.

The latch slides open and the plum flats walk haltingly out of the stall. As the sound of water filling the bowl subsides, Ann Without hears faint beeps being dialed. The bathroom's rigid surfaces echo even the sound of the phone ringing on the other end until a click and a cartoonishly distant voice picks up.

"Momma, I'm not pregnant anymore," Anne With whispers into the phone.

A wail tremolos through the phone but is quickly drowned out by Anne With keening through clenched teeth until she gets her tears under control. The voice on the other end makes noises that lilt upward at the end in a question and Anne With answers in a shaky whisper.

"I know," she shudders into the phone, "we only figured it out last week." She draws a shaky breath. "He was going to leave her because of it. But now...." Her words trail off into wet sounds somewhere between moaning and weeping.

Somewhere far beyond what Ann Without considers her world, a great tilting jolts her sideways and out of earshot of the conversation outside her stall door. The cold of the porcelain she sits on that has crept into her deadened legs flashes into her core and freezes Ann in place. The planet's spin, the way life courses around each being's movement, is suddenly very evident to her stopped body. The stagnation of her own life, the pause of her body's patterns and desires so that she could wrap her existence around Thomas, becomes a looming wall that she never saw until this moment when she has left that reality to enter an unrecognized space in the café restroom where she sits fully clothed on a toilet she doesn't need with her husband's lover on the other side of the thin metal partition.

She knew. Anne with an *e* knew about her.

The Anne outside the stall door continues making noises and eventually ends her conversation. The Ann inside the stall feels her dizziness pass and hugs the leather purse on her lap to her chest as an anchor to keep herself tied to the cold surfaces of this reality.

Ann Without listens to the faucet spray water into the sink and overtake the sounds of Anne With sniffing. Good. Let her wash away what is on her hands. The paper towel dispenser grates and after a few minutes of dabbing sounds, the door hisses open and groans back closed.

This time, in the new silence, the muffled sobs come from Ann. Ann without a husband or a child or even any dignity left.

The shrapnel of her previous existence settles onto the unforgiving white tiles around her. The purple threads down the outside of her third-favorite jeans, the ones she altered to get Thomas to look at her again, burn into her skin. The lazy naivete they represent weighs against her legs. It was never about what she did to get noticed—he was never going to see her fitness, the thread in her jeans, or the style of her hair. He might not even know to this day whether her name has the flourish of an *e* on the end of it or not.

Ann Without rummages through her purse for the nail clippers that roll around the bottom somewhere with the unoffered tampon. The folded metal tool lands in her hand with a satisfying chill, and this satisfaction grows as she uses it to snip open and tear at the end of the purple threads on the hem of her pants. As she pulls at the loops higher and higher, the jeans bell open wide from her ankle to her knee. The threads stop at her knees, and so does she. This movement has brought the blood rushing back into her legs and she rises to her feet with the ends of her pants swaying loosely around them.

The chill she felt from the porcelain has drifted into her chest and formed a knot there. She wads the purple threads into a similar tangle and digs through her purse for the tampon. Then she wrestles off the ring Thomas bought, the smallest diamonds available at the jeweler that day she still remembers with a warm glow that is quickly fading in a new clarity that allows Ann Without to see that their excitement was really only hers and Thomas had just been along for the ride. The stones had long ago stopped glinting in even the brightest light. She pushes the ring against the tampon, but it won't fit around the wrapper and applicator. Once she removes those, the gold band slides effortlessly over the cotton bundle. It looks much better there, on the plain white wadding with its little braided mouse tail. She feels an unexpected relief in recognizing that fighting to stay married to Thomas is no more effective than harvesting snow. It's just making her cold with no yield.

Purple ball with tampon and ring wadded into her fist and her third-favorite jeans now flatteringly tight around her thighs and swinging widely around her ankles, Ann Without strides from the bathroom and back out into the brightly lit restaurant. She's already halfway across the room of tables when Anne With, seated back next to Thomas, looks up and her eyes grow wide as the pieces fall into place in her mind, as though the growing acknowledgement is too much for her cranium to contain. Thomas turns in response and leaps out of his chair when he sees his wife.

“Ann(e)!” Both with an *e* and without.

Two Ann(e)s look back at him. It's the most animated Ann has ever seen her husband and the look on his face is one she'll remember for a long time to come: a sudden swarm of details and lies and realizations like so many biting flies he can't wave away. A shiver of delight at his surprise and discomfort thrills her spine and motivates her forward to their table where the congealing remains of their lunch lie in puddles of their own seepage. She doesn't bother looking

at the other Anne's face because she knows the pain already etched into the space between her carefully cultivated brows.

Keeping her eyes locked onto Thomas's to glean more satisfaction from his shock, Ann unfurls her hand to reveal the messy nest of purple threads with the dull shine of her ring on its white carriage in the center.

“You might need this.”

The pile rolls from her palm to land with a muffled metallic clunk next to Thomas's plate, the end of the tampon string dipped into a spot of ketchup. Perfect.

She spins and marches toward the light pouring through the glass front door, dropping a five next to her half full chipped mug on her way past, and revels in the silence at the table where Anne with an *e* and Thomas stare after her. Ann without an *e* thought Anne with an *e* had everything. She was wrong about so many things, but of one idea she is sure, and this thought propels her out into the sunshine. Ann is better without.