

## Remains

She thought he left.

But here he is.

Sitting at the kitchen table.

Working on a puzzle.

As if nothing had happened.

She shuffles into the kitchen, spine bent, arms dormant by her sides, slippers soles scraping harshly against cracked linoleum. He glances at her as she carefully settles into the empty chair across from him.

She ignores him, eyes down, folding her body in tightly until resistance satisfies.

Having locked herself in the guest bedroom the last three days, it feels strange to shift outside the confines of four azure walls to a space that bleeds into additional territories. The kitchen feels far too real – harshly assaulting her senses with staccato rhythms and bright cheer – yet she stays seated.

Without a word, bloated fingers pick their way through hundreds of pieces scattered across green Formica. Grabbing all the black pieces she can find, tiny stars dotting the cardboard, she gathers a small pile of darkness before her. Even as a little girl she loved fitting together puzzle skies. Not only was it the hardest section most people avoided, but she always felt all-powerful creating the heavens above since everyone lives beneath the same sky.

“You know, the church fair is tonight,” he begins. “We could go.”

She’s not ready. Everything has to be done in its own time – a different time that never before existed.

With a bitter smile, she thinks she would have loved attending the church fair if this night was four weeks ago, three weeks ago, even last week. But, time interfered. Today is only today, tonight only tonight. And tonight is a night for puzzles, not what's fair.

She says nothing, amber eyes hunting a rogue fragment of nightfall.

“Hey, I ordered Chinese – should be here soon if you want some.”

She flinches at the thought of food, the thought of his appetite.

*As if nothing had happened.*

Frustrated by another rejected union, the gap too large, she ignores the hunger pains stabbing her stomach. She needs this pain. It's her penance and she wants to ride it.

A fleeting feeling of triumph flares within her as she makes her first connection. *I don't need food anymore*, she thinks.

It just reminds her of things best forgotten.

Like all of the pointless sacrifices she made, trying so hard, so very hard, to do everything right. Banishing lifelong companions – daily lattes, stress smokes, Chunky Monkey binges – that had accompanied her for years, longer than many of her friendships. Longer than their relationship.

*All for nothing.*

His food arrives, interrupting her thoughts. The *ding-dong* sounds fuzzy to her ears, as if the doorbell feels a bit off-color. Long legs quickly exit the kitchen, strong arms returning moments later with steaming sacks of warm aromas. The familiar, comforting smells don't seem to register – the disconnect she feels apparently short-circuiting communication between nose and brain.

She listens to him munch stir-fried knife-shaved noodles while sorting through the mess in front of her. She has a feeling he wants to dump her. He's not the kind of man who can handle something like this. She's waiting for him to break up with her so he can forget her and their time together. If he breaks up with her, she realizes, maybe she can too.

“Am I beautiful?”

As each second passes, dusk creeps in, fluorescent kitchen lights shining brighter as their backdrop fades. Fingers paused in their quest, she wonders if he'll make her repeat it. Silence envelops the kitchen. The question only needs to be asked once.

*Once is all it takes.*

“Yes,” he awkwardly begins, “of course.”

She knows he's lying, but doesn't care.

All she wants is to feel beautiful. To stop feeling so big and so fat and so ugly. Knees drawn into her swollen belly she fights the urge to slice the excess with a pair of shears.

Instead she thinks of the dream, the disjointed narrative already fading into fragments: a midget in yellow, multi-colored snow, a lit sparkler thrown in her face, the lifespan of a tree in fast motion.

She hasn't yet figured out the meaning, but it aggravates her, like a scratch she can't reach or a shrouded memory on the cusp of reveal. It must be important – it's entered her subconscious half a dozen times these past few days, haunting her slumber.

As the blurry images recycle, she remembers how he once suggested she start a dream diary since she had so many and usually remembered most of them. But she just laughed at the idea, saying nobody was interested in other people's dreams, just their own.

Her small, pale hands expertly orchestrate images into existence as her thoughts revolve. It feels good to be doing something again. It feels good to have an active goal. Her singular goal lately has been to not throw up.

A goal yet to be realized.

Vomiting helps though. Helps to dull the intensity searing behind closed eyes, the images imprinted there, the sterility threading her senses, the renegade accusations attacking her mind countless times a day and no one else to blame.

Icy hands hovering over the cityscape, she shivers violently. Over the past few days she has willingly forgotten so she could still feel beautiful, even for a brief moment. Now, in the smelly kitchen apartment with its dirty floors, she feels ugly – uglier than she’s ever felt before. Her only desire has been for someone to tell her how beautiful she looks, how much she glows. But she knows she doesn’t glow.

*Not anymore.*

The pair continues to labor in silence for hours. The last lamppost finished, he starts constructing the happy couple, hand in hand, hip to hip. Her bejeweled sky spreads further across the table’s expanse, black, vast, smooth to the touch.

When only one piece remains in each of their hands, he softly snaps his into place, but she hesitates, twiddling the object in her hand, unwilling to complete the romantic scene.

“I almost don’t want to,” she says, looking at the image, suddenly scared by its imminent conclusion.

He studies her for a minute, regarding her as if seeing her for the first time slouched across from him. “I don’t think there’s anything sadder,” he says, “then a puzzle missing its final piece.”

She agrees.

But she doesn't want to.

Almost five minutes pass before she hesitantly drops the fragment into the only empty space and, with her forefinger, pushes it down, the tiny click of finality loud in the silence.

They both stare – the lovers, fingers entwined, strolling down a Parisian cobblestone lane, the soft glow of the streetlights illuminating their path, the starry sky winking above them. They seem untouchable in the city of love.

*Or is it the city of lights*, she absentmindedly wonders as her eyes greedily devour love.

“I've never wanted to go to Paris,” he says, unexpectedly.

She examines the picture. “I think Paris is some made-up place people talk of when they want to escape. This,” she says, motioning, “is not real.”

He nods. “Completely fake. And completely cliché.”

“It looks nice though.”

“It looks nice because it's not real.”

“I wonder who these people are,” she says, gently tracing their outline. Their soft-focus faces hide specifics, yet she spots the look of happiness stretched in their ruby smiles and glittering eyes. “And I wonder how they fell in love.”

“They met at a fountain in the middle of a forest. They were both there to make a wish.”

She pauses a beat, surprised by his quick response, then plays along.

“She wished she could find the antique watch she lost. It was her great-great-grandmother's watch.”

“And he wished he knew how to sew. He had holes in all his clothes and no way to fix them.”

“And as she threw her coin, her wish, into the water, she heard not one, but two splashes.”

“And he heard not one, but two splashes,” he says quickly, tripping over words.

“And she walked around to the other side of the fountain and saw him standing there, scratching his head.”

“And they found each other.”

“And they got so much more than they’d wished for,” she finishes, her voice whispering to a halt.

Their cloudy eyes lock a moment, then both burst out laughing – true tears-in-eyes, cramps-in-belly, can’t-get-a-breath laughter that takes a long time to wind down. As the piercing hysteria eventually transitions into silence, she refocuses on the tabletop, unsettled by the loss of control felt while playing host to an unexpected burst of delirium.

“I wonder,” she says, eyes fixed on the white dress, “if she’s pregnant. I wonder if she knows she’s pregnant and is waiting for the perfect time to tell him. I wonder if, maybe five minutes after they walk down this street, she tells him.”

“Are you going...” He pauses. “Are you going to be okay?”

She glares at the optical illusion. “I wonder how he’ll take it. If he’ll be happy, truly happy, or if he’ll just end up hating himself for ever having met her at that stupid fountain in the first place.”

“It’ll be okay,” he says softly.

She turns away from him and faces the opposite wall. She doesn’t want his sympathy, because it’s sympathy without understanding. He can’t comprehend what she’s gone through, what she feels. She doesn’t think anyone can.

“You know what I wonder most of all?” she asks the wall. “I wonder if they lived happily ever after?”

“Happily ever after what?” he replies, addressing her frail back.

Silence speaks, her response interrupted only when he gathers soggy cartons, quietly stowing leftovers in the leaky fridge.

“I don’t know,” she whispers, caressing the glossy portrait, forefinger skating the polished path.

“I don’t know,” she repeats, removing the woman’s smile before shuffling out.

The next morning she enters the kitchen to find the jigsaw canvas replaced by its box, the disassembled pieces shoved haphazardly into its container of ruins.

*Our creation.*

Examining the slick cover, she can’t help but think that, in the daylight, the lovers look foolish.