

## The Company of Strangers

She hates the smell of Calvin Klein and loves the taste of whiskey with ginger ale. She tells her friends they can go on without her, that she will pass on the bar with cheap beer along Greek Row and head straight for Main Street and the half-priced liquor that calms her. The friends don't argue, they raise their hands and cheer at others on the bar patio leaving one person for six. She adjusts her shoulder bag; small, brown leather with the word paradigm sewn in along the curve of the clasp. She glances at her phone and sends a quick text to Alan who may already be at the bar. More texts are sent to people who are just names on a screen and she slides the phone back in her pocket and wraps her hands around the single shoulder strap.

The time is seven, nearing eight, and the sun is holding tight to the rolling hills of the Palouse with deep orange edging to the spectrum of red. There is a breeze from the south that skirts brown leaves across the asphalt, scratching and dragging in circular momentum like tiny tornadoes across a scaled down Kansas. In the north, away from the coasts of California and minimal chill of winter, there are no dunes of

sand but hills that stretch in all directions, blankets ruffled and changed between colors of green, brown, and blinding white that sheets over rooftops and fences.

Houses tower above her as she makes her way down the row, the breeze pushing against her rust yellow cardigan and whipping at her brown hair. Three of the houses have third floor balconies and there are groups of men on each. Some are shirtless despite the breeze and take time lighting tiki torches around the balcony perimeter. She slows her pace in front of these houses listening for a whistle or shout between the sound of scattering leaves and the humming of bass behind walls. By the time she reaches the bottom of the hill, houses out of sight and only a faint murmur of conversation carrying downwind, her phone is out and she is sending a message to Alan, who has yet to respond to her last text.

Cars are far and few between as she waits for the crosswalk to flash green and grant passage. In these minutes of waiting she thinks about the studio project she has been working on, the texture of wood as she carves into it, the way the lines change as she shifts from long, forced strokes to short, jagged tares, and the smooth sensation of the roller as it covers the wood with ink.

The light turns green and she crosses, keeping her eyes to the east and the unlit road leading to the bars. In the distance

lights shift yellows to reds and a scattering of people exit a restaurant and walk along the unlit streets toward new destinations. She checks her phone and sees a response from Alan. Slowing her pace she digests the words I'll stop by before responding with a single great.

If he doesn't show she knows she can try her luck with a stranger. Sitting on a barstool, she would order a drink and wait for an approach and a number. It wouldn't take her long, at least when she envisions it in her mind: the approach of a stranger emerging from the crowd of unnamed faces, imprinting himself in her line of sight. The man in her mind has a vague existence, a build and expression created from the assimilation of the men she's taken home, the men she's eyed, and the men she's seen scrolling through her Tumblr feed. She slides the phone back in her pocket confident in the night's progression.

On the opposite side of the street a man in blue Patagonia waves her way.

"Abigail!" He makes a motion to cross the street, but pauses, taking a second before stepping back onto the cement. She watches this, not fully turning in his direction, but partially shifting her body toward him. The road between them is darkening, lit only by the remaining light from the hills. Three nights ago they maneuvered to her apartment together, intoxicated and fumbling with the keys attached to her

university lanyard. In the morning he left his number scrawled on her whiteboard and avoided writing anything else. She saved it in her phone as 4/13.

"How are you?" She says while throwing a wave in return. Abigail tries to remember his name but jumps between Patagonia and April 13th. When they encountered each other she had been three drinks deep and on her way through a fourth. There had been no Patagonia, instead he approached her with a shirt that was pressed tight against his chest. There were words spelling out the name of some triathlon and she eyed it before eyeing his face; patches of blond scruff ending below the cheekbone. At that point she made up her mind to take him home. Somewhere in there his name was placed aside and somewhere in the drunk, dark fumblings it was lost.

"Good!" He replies and appears to hesitate over more words and Abigail wonders if he's realized how awkward this is for both of them.

"Good," Abigail says, quieter, and Patagonia raises a single hand and nods, speaking a sentence that fails to cross the road. She proceeds downtown with one hand resting on the leg of her jean, tracing the outline of her phone with gentle fingers.

Alan is absent from the front bar so she walks upstairs to the lounges. She holds her cardigan in her hand and takes note of the crowd, men near her age sitting at tables with their friends, men older but not too old, and boys just past the cusp of twenty-one. She memorizes the ones that stand out, the ones who turn her way as she passes. The lounges are half full with people still waiting for others and some faces she recognizes from classes of present and past. A girl in the lounge to her right, the lounge with tattered blue velvet upholstery, glances up, makes eye contact then rushes her gaze down to the green drink in her hands. Her name is Madison and she frees a hand to wipe the growing condensation on her pantleg: black fabric, tight, fitted. Her blond hair is pinned back in a bun with several strands hanging out and draping against the curve of her neck. Like Madison, Abigail averts her gaze, focusing now on her surroundings and looking for a specific face against the seating.

There is no Alan and so she makes her way back to the bar downstairs and takes a seat. The bartender is busy with another order so she runs her hands through the hair near her temples and undoes the ponytail letting it fall along her shoulders. She feels as though there are looks coming her way but she does not turn, instead she leans against the counter with eyes vexed on

the bottles of liquor. She will look later, casually, as though she had no idea.

The wood in front of her is lacquered and scuffed from the sliding of glass and everyday hustle of bar life. She runs her hands over it and dreams of carving into it with her tools, longing for the smell of wood, the scratch of splinters and the staining of ink. Three projects ago she had made a print with a similar wood; carving in small details of a woman's décolletage, the bones of her sternum pushing against tight skin and the outline of breasts, small, loose but confined by wood. It had taken her three days before she rolled the ink across the raised and lowered surface and made her first test print. She worked on the print between classes and work study, before lunches and during phone conversations with family across states. The main lines of her figure came out as desired but there were lines around the sternum that curved in directions that looked like claws, not lines from bones pressed against skin. She spent several hours after, carving away her mistakes until the print was satisfactory and she could close her eyes and rest. She fell asleep on wood shavings, arms limp across the fresh paint, the ink clinging to the soft hairs along them.

The bartender breaks her thoughts and she traces her pointer finger along the wood in a pattern while giving her order.

"Jameson and ginger ale, double."

He begins to pour the drink and she turns her head to examine her surroundings once more; expecting to catch someone looking her way but finding only friends wrapped in conversation and heads illuminated by phone screens. The bartender pushes a double Jameson and ginger ale in front of her and Abigail turns her attention back to the bar with a smile and a thank you. She presses her lips to the thin green straw but doesn't drink, instead she thinks about the chase: the moment of pleasure that comes from obtaining the desire and the slow realization of normalcy that comes after bringing the valued down to indifference. With her teeth she plays with the tip of the straw, edging the pursuit to a close.

"Long Island Ice Tea, Bill style."

Abigail shifts her eyes to the right and sees Madison leaning over the counter to the bartender. She lets the straw go and leans away from her drink and the bar. Madison takes note of this by glancing to her left but still continues to lean and address the bartender. "I'll close out. Thank you." She signs her check and takes a seat. "Gail," Madison says while grasping a straw between her fingers.

"It's called a Bill Zinger."

"I remembered that after I ordered."

Madison takes a sip. They sit in a period of silence and Abigail wraps her lips around the straw again, this time, without pause, she drinks. She thinks about printmaking studio and the way Madison approached her on the first day, sitting next to her and inquiring about her art. For the first few days they continued this communication; working away from acquaintanceship and toward some form of artistic alliance. Then the projects began and Abigail saw glimpses of Madison's vision and in turn saw glimpses of Madison as a whole. It made her feel sick.

Abigail looks around the bar once more more and notices the glances of a man with a teal Neff beanie. "Did you ever rework that Last Supper print?" She asks Madison while maintaining eye contact with Neff.

"No." And after a moment in which Madison takes down more of her drink, she adds, "I got a passing grade on it. No need to revise." Abigail finds herself taking an extended drink of her whiskey with eyes locked on Neff and voice speaking to Madison.

"Are you thinking about taking the advanced class?" She waits for an answer but hears nothing. The whiskey finished, she removes her eyes from Neff and looks at Madison. "Are you thinking about taking the advanced class?" The repetition adds a tone that is harder, more pressed with truth.



Madison's hands let go of the drink and she says with eyes aimed at the rows of liquor bottles, "I nodded for christsake. Why wouldn't I?"

Abigail restrains her words behind lips, tongue pressing against the backs of her front teeth, sliding across the uneven positioning. In her response Abigail can see the final portfolio of work Madison submitted, the carvings and prints compiled over weeks of studio and the typed artist statement that mentioned a search for divinity and consumption of media. What Abigail sees most in the response is the dismissal of practice, of craft and the abortion of talent left to wither for a passing grade.

Abigail thinks about what she knows, thinks about how Madison knows nothing, how Madison took up space during critiques with work that showed no improvement, no craft. She thinks about the Raymond Carver interview she read while sitting cross-legged on the kitchen counter waiting for her pad thai to finish. She thinks about the way he admits that you want your friends to do well and produce the best they can. About the way he admits that there will always be this sense of dread that maybe they won't make it in life and that there is nothing you can really do about it. She thinks about the way the pad thai tasted and the way she realized you can't surround yourself with failures.

"You know," Madison says with an elbow on the bar, "it's cheaper to order a whisky ginger." She has her index finger placed on the tip of the straw, pressing up and down and clattering the ice against the glass.

"Why does it have to be cheap?"

"It doesn't."

Abigail receives a second drink and laughs; she can't help it. She notices a silence spill over the conversation and she can't think of another word to waste. She takes her drink and leaves the bar for the lounges. She pulls her phone out of her pocket and sees no replies from Alan. Madison does not move, she remains at the bar, silent and surrounded by strangers. Abigail checks for teal movement in her peripherals, for the start of a chase, for the start of her night, but catches nothing and finds an empty seat against tattered blue velvet.

Her third drink is at its final sip when a man approaches. He's wearing shorts despite the mid spring chill and the skin around his calves is firm. She moves her eyes and takes him in, the shirt, the watch, the dark stubble that appears to have recently grown in. He sits down smiling and places a hand on her knee, talks about how beautiful she is.

She's smiling and saying some words back to him. Her drink is gone and he's already rising up to buy another. She grabs his

arm and feels the tight skin. He insists. She's playful and says she can get it herself and they argue for a moment, smiling, and she gives in. He leaves. She grabs her phone and messages Alan, asshole. The man in shorts is back with two Jagerbombs. They are smiling together and counting in unison. *Three and two and one.*

Cold. She can't feel the fabric of her cardigan. She's sitting, leaned against a wall, breathing. Her hands fumble at her waist and she feels the familiar texture of leather. *Paradigm*. Her hair is hanging against her face and it feels damp. The floor beneath her is cement. The texture behind her is brick. Voices distant with music pulsing. She is not alone; warmth wraps an arm around her and helps her up. She rolls her head onto a shoulder and takes staggered steps. There is a smell, a smell she hates and she rolls her head in the opposite direction. Off balance, she tumbles, hits the cement. A voice. She can only focus on the rough, cold of the cement and the smell of scuffed rubber and tracked dirt. There is warmth around her waist again but she swats it off wanting to press closer to the cold. It stings. She can feel. Two voices now and she looks toward it, the sound, and sees the street, sees two sets of legs, sees lights and sees the stars. She's never seen them so beautiful before, the way they blur into the sky like mini etchings across black wood. It is everything. Warmth draws near

then pulls back. There are three stars catching her eye, they stream together like a long carving of light. Her left hand mimics the motion it would take to make that carving. A set of legs move in front of the light and she claws at them, her nails ripping at exposed skin. She screams as her hand is slammed into the cement, pressed down by the weight of one person, the uneven pattern of a shoe imprinting itself on the back of her hand. The shoes twists, grinding her hand, tearing skin. The cement stings. The air stings. She screams. The stars are in a frenzy above and the shoe releases. She brings it close to her body, tight against her chest. A set of legs, one bleeding, is on the ground now, another with black boots and fabric standing by. Water blurs the stars even more. Warmth pulls her up, struggles. She wants the cold. Her hand burns. She can't focus on sight. She closes her eyes. There is a voice, softer, and the air smells sweet. Hair, foreign, is brushing against her temple. The back of her eyelids are imprinted with the light of fading stars and she struggles to keep them lit. Her free hand grazes a leg, not hers, different jeans, tighter. Movement is stopped. She is leaned against a wall, different texture, and hears the rustling of a bag being searched. There is the sound of keys and a click of metal. A door opens. Her door. A door. Any door. She leans into a mass and inhales. The breeze is gone. She can't feel it

on her skin. The air is still. She opens her eyes and makes out nothing. She wants her phone. She wants.