

The Eating of Apples

There was a man hanging out of the window. Although the sidewalk was lousy with pedestrians, no one gave him more than a passing glance, save for a couple of austere dressed executives who observed the scene as if it were a mildly entertaining street performance. A woman in a felt hat was on the phone with the police.

Evelyn drifted over in spite of herself, bleached hair whipping in the rising wind like tentacles. She checked the charge on her ThoughtBlock, the battery indicator a comforting black line, the only thing between her and the howling intrusion of other people's thoughts.

This far down she couldn't see the jumper's face, only the pristine white of his sneakers. The woman in the hat put the phone down, turning to Evelyn.

"They want Insight," she said.

"Okay..." Evelyn trailed off. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Would you mind?" the woman asked, giving Evelyn an encouraging smile.

Evelyn touched her ThoughtBlock, unconsciously protective. She didn't want to know why the man in the window was trying to die, refused to hold his pain in her mind. "I'm really not the appropriate person."

The woman's cajoling manner dropped at once. "Well someone has to!"

"Why don't you, then?" Evelyn interjected her tone with as much attitude as she could. It was the obvious choice, after all. Why translate the jumper's psychological quagmire through a third party when the person actually speaking to the police could hear him just as well?

The woman's face pinched, and it was with extremely poor grace she used her thumbprint to unlock and unhinge the tiny face of her ThoughtBlock. She pressed the single button inside, turning it off, eyes darting immediately to a man a few feet ahead, broad back

covered in a thick brocade coat. Whatever he was thinking must have been vile, because the woman swallowed like her mouth was filled with blood as she looked away.

“I can’t tell which thoughts are his,” she said into her phone, turning her eyes aloft as if sight alone was enough to focus one’s Insight. There was a pause before she snapped, “There’s like, twenty people walking past, and hundreds in the buildings around me. It’s not so easy.”

Evelyn was dying to hear what the dispatcher was saying, but nothing was worth disabling her only protection against the viral degeneracy of the human mind.

The woman on the phone shrieked seconds before her scream spread to the two lookie-loos with their noses to the sky. The sound was sudden, quicker than should be possible. Limbs and skin spread out like an empty suit, letting the viscera and pulp, the churning stuff of life, spill out in a red slurry. Evelyn saw, by accident, the jumper’s head had fragmented like a shattered jar of marinara.

The woman in the hat was still yelling, incomprehensible, perhaps only to Evelyn who could hear nothing but the sound of the body obliterating itself on the pavement. She shook hair into her eyes and stumbled away, thinking with laser focus on the miniscule details around her: the oak leaves tossed in the strafing wind, the gum flattened into black discs on the sidewalk, the graffiti on a blue BMW.

The faces around her portrayed no distress. Such incidents were unpleasant, but these things happened. They were why there was a euth clinic in the first place, so people could handle Insights in a safe and controlled manner that didn’t inconvenience hapless bystanders. Evelyn shook off the sticky-sick feeling attempting to hook into her belly and joined the stream of commuters. There was no time to dwell, she had to go home and prep for Patterson.

Her apartment hunkered in Camden, part of a drab building which remained relentlessly industrial despite her attempts at cheer. A twist of plastic tinsel clung to the rain lashed window like a rock climber, precarious over the dollar store Santas below. The light switch did nothing but click.

Groaning, she called the super, getting his voicemail message twice in a row. She twisted her ThoughtBlock around and around the bony protuberance of her wrist. Any other night, and it wouldn't be worth it, but tonight she was going to see Patterson.

She wiped the ThoughtBlock's face with the corner of her cardigan, and opened it with her thumb. The button inside was a tiny nub encased in silicone. It amazed her that such a little thing was the arbiter of Insight, the difference between Knowing and not. At this hour only a few people were home, so there wouldn't be many minds to sift through. Her fingertip brushed the off switch's slippery surface, but she couldn't do it. She snapped the face closed.

Before the Universal Flu Vaccine had accidentally incited Sudden Onset Telepathy in millions of people, Evelyn had thought it would be so cool to read minds. It was always what she said when someone asked her to pick a superpower. She had imagined never studying for another test, always knowing if the cute barista was actually flirting, but the reality was a constant barrage of unfiltered opinion and unbearable truths. It had been excruciating.

Evelyn lived every day knowing her sister stopped inviting her for dinner because her brother-in-law didn't like her, that she wasn't her mother's *or* father's favorite daughter. Her brain had been the repository for the filth of thousand's of minds, everyone's sad and angry and sickening thoughts slicking the floor of her head until her own mind filled like a cesspit. Maybe some people revelled in their new Insight, maybe some could brush it off, but not Evelyn. She'd thought she'd go mad with it, or have to live in the mountains far away from the city she loved

before the ThoughtBlock had been released to the public. She wore it constantly, for hours longer than recommended, sometimes not even removing it to sleep. Whatever migraines she suffered were a cheap recompense for her blessed, mental silence.

Evelyn's head was pounding now, not least because of the stress of the afternoon. She swallowed down a brace of Advil and set off to locate her missing super. He wasn't in his office, nor outside by the dumpster rolling a fluff of Top. She found him in the basement, one knee on a ratty bath towel as he swore before the fuse box. He spoke before she could announce herself.

"My towel ain't ratty, it's well used."

With someone else she might have felt awkward, but he had surely heard the thoughts zipping across her mind repudiating that any offense had been meant. Besides, those who chose to listen had no cause to be angry at what they heard.

"Damn straight," he said. "And to answer your other question, a rat chewed through our wiring."

Evelyn inched forward to peer over his shoulder. The fuses were antique, squat glass rounds with threaded lightbulb bottoms. None were blown, but caught in the bald, copper innards of a shredded wire, a rodent skeleton pointed forward like a mummified arrow.

"I think the electricity smells like iron or blood to 'em," he said. "The buzzing tickles their teeth and they'll chew until they hit the current, never knowing what's about to fry 'em."

She opened her mouth, but having heard the question be born in her mind, he answered before she could give it breath.

"Probably three or four hours. I have some backstock material but it'll still take me that long to replace it."

"I hate it when you do that," Evelyn said, but she was smiling.

“Yeah, yeah. You and your little doodad are just jealous you’ve met your mental match.”

He winked as if she couldn’t tell he was only teasing.

“How can you stand not to have a ThoughtBlock?” For once she blurted exactly what she was thinking. “Doesn’t it make you crazy, hearing horrible things all day?”

He heaved himself to his feet. “Those horrible things have always been around. I guess I figure it doesn’t do any good pretending something’s gone just because you can’t see it.”

Upstairs Evelyn completed her usual pre-Patterson rounds: dishes, sheets, sweep, mop. Flame to wick so the apartment smelled like cinnamon. Dinner with Patterson always flustered her. He smiled at her like he was selling watches in GQ, but she was never sure what was happening behind his eyes. She’d get ridiculous if she let herself, frenetic and clumsy with nerves. Instead she clung to a monk-like null, setting the table and dropping frozen fillets into water to soften with as few thoughts as she could manage.

At four she lolled in the bath, shaving herself dolphin sleek and pumicing the puckered half moons of her heels. The ritual always made her feel like a bride before her wedding night. It was a silly thought, Patterson and her hadn’t even discussed exclusivity, but she couldn’t help feeling he was right at the threshold of becoming her actual boyfriend. She told herself she’d be embarrassed for him to know how much she liked him, but truthfully she hoped he’d sought insight so she’d never have to say anything. He always wore his ThoughtBlock, but most people pretended it was on, especially when they were actually eavesdropping. She thought about what a good girlfriend she would be when he was over, just in case he was listening.

Water down the drain, lotion, then robe. Her room was draped in dusk, a small square of light intruding from the window as she dried her hair. Later, she would slink into a dress that

tried without admitting to it, but not until dinner was done and the threat of grease splatter had abated. The lightswitch once again failed to produce illumination, so she set every candle she owned at the table's center until it glowed, candles of all shapes and sizes burning like a skyline on fire.

Patterson turned up later than expected so the fish was a little overdone, weeping albumin. Still, he cleaned his plate so Evelyn surmised her salmon de citron couldn't have been that bad. He looked like a king in the candlelight, regal and reposed with shadows dancing in the dip of his throat, and surely that was worth a late arrival and his phone joining them at the dinner table. Evelyn was seized with curiosity, sorely tempted as she so rarely was, to listen to his thoughts every time he answered a text message.

They spoke about his day and the new project for his division and the weekend he'd spent with his brothers in the city. He didn't ask her questions, but Evelyn made sure to pepper her own likes and dislikes, her day, her work, throughout their discussion like sea salt over a good meal. She was certain he was interested because he always listened quietly, he must just be bad at thinking up lines of inquiry. As usual, their conversation turned philosophical over dessert.

"Nobody can avoid Insight forever," he said, teeth piercing the fondant skin of a chocolate petite.

"Maybe one day we can again," she said, shepherding a fat, three-wick beeswax into the kitchen to pour the coffee. "A neurologist on 60 Seconds of Science thought we could reverse SOT if they severed certain connections in the brain."

He laughed. "Who's going to test that? Animals don't have Insight. It's not like they can mince a bunch of mice brains until they get it right."

“But there’s still a chance,” she insisted, setting his usual cup with half and half and a single spoon of turbinado sugar in front of him. “And I read about a blogger who couldn’t hear her boyfriend while they were spelunking in Crete.”

“Wooooow,” sarcasm stretched the word like toffee. “A peer-reviewed blogger?” He poured a hot draught of dark roast into his twitching mouth.

“Just because someone’s – sometimes regular people notice things,” Evelyn said, taking her seat.

“Sure. But if somebody cracks Insight, it’s not going to be some airhead professional tourist.”

“Maybe not,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Why does avoiding Insight matter so much to you?” he asked.

“I just miss the old days. I miss not knowing every fucking thing my Mother ever thought about me, or hearing people’s sad sackery all day.” She laced their fingers together. “You know how hard it is for me. I couldn’t stand to be around any of my old friends, and now I have to have a headache all the time.”

Patterson nodded, letting her hand go to reach for his coffee. “You kind of choose to have a headache, but I get what you mean. I just hate to see you waste so much time obsessing over something you can’t change. They’ve been trying to find out what the vaccine did to turn us all into Professor X, and they’re no closer now than they were when it first happened six months ago.”

“So you wouldn’t want to go back if you could?” She asked, playing coy over the rim of her coffee cup.

“Hell no. Insight is an incredible tool. I’d be an idiot not to leverage it, especially in my business.”

Evelyn smiled, leaning across the table. “So you’d be willing to spy to get what you want?” she asked, pretending to admonish him.

“Sometimes,” he said. “When I need the advantage.”

“Do you ever listen in on me?”

He snorted. “It’s not really necessary to spy on a sure thing.”

“‘Sure thing’ meaning what?” It sounded so rude, but being sure could be a good thing. You had to be sure of someone to love them.

“Just that, you know, we kind of have a pattern going by now. I come over, we have dinner, we hang out.”

“Do you ever see the pattern changing? Like, seeing each other more often?”

“Maybe. I really like what we have now,” he said, taking her hand again. “I like seeing you every Thursday, but I’m really busy the rest of the week.” His eyes glimmered, beautiful, black shale in the candlelight.

“It doesn’t have to be a big thing. I could bring lunch to your work.”

“Are you gonna offer to do my laundry to see where I live? Nice try, Sherlock Holmes, but you’re not that subtle.” He nudged her with the point of his elbow, but Evelyn wasn’t laughing.

She stood, stung, and retreated into the darkness of the kitchen, sans candle and her previously buoyant mood. She washed her hands to make it seem like she was actually doing something and not just hiding. Already she regretted her outburst. Patterson was a good guy. He was just taking his time. There was no harm in being sure of someone before you committed to

them. And besides, a few months wasn't such a horribly long time in the grand scheme of things. She dried her hands, still in darkness.

The pattern continued as it usually did, though this time they washed the dishes by candlelight before moving to the living room. It was Patterson's turn to pick, so the evening's entertainment was his car show. It wasn't Evelyn's favorite, but it gave them something to talk about and it was so rewarding for her to see Patterson light up during the program. She could imagine them like this, together, a couple in a new, bigger apartment. Evelyn could almost sense the invisible border between casual date and girlfriend that was drawing nearer with every hour they spent together.

"Is this the dream car you were telling me about? The Hemi?"

He knocked his hand gently against her head, knuckles sliding to caress her cheek on the way down. "It's so adorable how you try to keep up with Top Gear. Hemi's are trash. The car I was telling you about is a LaFerrari Aperta. You have to be invited to even buy it. So epic."

His eyes returned to her laptop and shortly after, her's did too. Eventually, she couldn't take it anymore and pressed kisses into the bristly shelf of his jaw, until he pulled her to the bedroom, springs creaking as they wrestled with their clothes. The condom looked like a greasy icing bag in the lone candle's feeble light.

She sat astride, hair a curtain cordoning her face, as the bed squealed and his breath bellowed up, smelling of fish.

His hands were warm and welcome, skimming up her arms. They groped her chest, thrilling, and meandered around to discover the dip of her back. She was enjoying herself as usual, eyes closed, but couldn't stop thinking about the pattern even as she raced to complete it, moving with increasing ardor until the mattress springs complained.

For once she looked down, seeking connection instead of oblivion.

His face was all wrong. He didn't look bored, or displeased. There wasn't a word that described the thoughts flashing like fish scales in the depths of his eyes, but she could see them, formless things, only hinted at.

Even as she moved, she unlocked the key to knowledge at her wrist. It seemed a thousand, thousand voices crashed down on her in a crushing wave. Many minds--ruminating, shouting, grieving, thinking, dreaming--pressed against her as closely as the body below. She let them flow through her and away, becoming one with the only mind that mattered in this moment: the mind that held her in its regard as she hurtled toward the apex of thunder and light.

Patterson didn't like her tits. He thought they were saggy and her nipples were too long.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She climbed off, shaky legged, and disappeared into the bathroom, flipping the switch by habit only to be blinded by a sudden stab of illumination. He was in his underwear, still hard, when she returned armored in her robe.

"You turned off your ThoughtBlock." He didn't have to ask.

"You don't even think I'm pretty." Her throat could barely disgorge the words. "What have you been doing here all this time?"

It came to her in fits and flashes. Their meeting, her eagerness, his indifference. Last week, before their meetup he'd told his brother he was on his way to pick up some Fast Ass. It was like Fast Food, only cheaper.

"That was just a joke," he said. "Just guy stuff. I didn't mean it how it sounded."

Their minds were two mirrors.

She said, "Get the fuck out of my apartment."

She wandered to the window to air out the goathouse stink of her and Patterson. Like everything else, the window was old. She pried it open by inches, turning a small crank while paint flaked onto her hand. There was no screen, so she rarely dared to leave it agape for fear of flies, but now she needed the blast of icy-fresh air more than a sanitary apartment.

It wasn't so much that Patterson would never be her boyfriend, it wasn't even the months she wasted making dinners and watching awful television, it was her own cowardice and foolishness that ate at her; her own pathetic, puppy dog desperation that made it hard to breathe under the pricking light of the stars.

"Fast Ass," she said to no one, dry eyed and wishing she could just cry and get it out.

The street looked abyssal, dark and far away even though she wasn't that high up. She stared down at nothing until a wedge of light split the velvet black directly below: her super stepping out for a smoke. He threw a sagging bag into the dumpster one handed, then moved into the light to roll a cigarette, sliding the glue strip over his tongue like a harmonica to seal it.

Seeing him reminded her of the electrocuted rodent in the basement, blindly nibbling fizzy-good feelings until he burned away to bones. Reminded her of the jumper, destroyed by truth as surely as others were saved by it.

The man below seemed to sense her, jerking up to meet her eyes. A surge of recognition expanded within her with the force of a breaching star, suffusing her, face to foot, with the giddy flush of certainty. He smiled, understanding.

She unclasped the shackle from her wrist.

It dropped into his waiting hand.

