

Plans

I'm getting married in two weeks. My fiancée Joan is sitting next to me bent over the coffee table with frustration on her face. We are going over the seating chart and she is mad at me because I prefer to watch the muted TV. When I don't watch the TV, I like to look at the way her pale skin glows beneath the fluorescent lights. I have always loved her skin, colorless and soft. In the winter I turn down the thermostat and watch the goose bumps gather on her chest.

"I can't see how you can be so nonchalant about this," she complains.

"The seating was set a week ago. I don't feel obliged to change it."

"You can't possibly think it's a good idea to leave Lola and Jim at the same table."

"They'll work it out."

"Simon, your brother just left Lola for another woman and you expect them to sit together?" she asks, not sure whether or not I'm serious.

"You've got a point," I tell her and move some names around.

"Who are Stacy and Graham?"

"Well coincidentally, Stacy left Graham for Jim, so they'll probably be going together anyway. Put Graham and Lola at the same table and we got the recipe for a great revenge fuck."

"This wedding is going to be a disaster," she says in horror.

"There was no avoiding that."

"Your family is fucked."

“How many of your dad’s ex-wives are invited?” I ask snidely.

“You’re an asshole.”

“Ah but I am you’re asshole,” I tell her, holding her close, “and I’m bleached too.”

When Joan goes to sleep I watch porn. I’m getting pickier these days. Nothing seems to be hardcore enough. It’s always a moan instead of a whimper, a yell instead of a cry. Often the scenarios are trite and the acting is unconvincing. But what can I expect from fantasy?

I once had a girlfriend who fantasized about rape. I would abuse her and she’d writhe in pleasure asking for more. But it was all in the bedroom. One night I said some evil things to her outside the bedroom and she cried. I liked when she cried, but I pretended not to.

I remember she came up to me one morning and said, “This week, any time you want, just ravish me.” I remember wondering why a word like ravish sounded so pretty.

I had taken the day off from work and waited in her apartment until she got home. I hid behind the door when I heard the key turn and dragged her to the bedroom, carrying her tense body, kicking and screaming. I had to muffle her mouth with my hand and took my time. I pushed her face down on the bed and hiked up her skirt, tearing away the stockings and panties while my other hand was pressed on her back. She was begging me to stop but pushing into her felt too easy.

Joan does not have the same sexual proclivities as my ex. I cannot love that kind of woman. I don’t like it when Joan cries and I can’t stand the thought of laying a hand on her. But when I look at other women, I hate them. I used to worry that people could see it in my eyes. I

imagined they were recessed and hollow, but no one looks at me any different. I can't hide this from Joan for the rest of my life though. Maybe I just need to get it out of my system.

I am getting married in a week. Rebecca is a barista at a café I've been frequenting. She has bright friendly eyes and a coy smile. Her teeth are crooked but not distractingly so. She is soft spoken but quick witted. Yesterday I found out she lives alone. It came up in casual conversation. She had messed up my order and apologized profusely. She told me she was exhausted, that it was hard to afford rent by herself. I agreed with her and left.

She is four seats ahead of me on the bus. I see my reflection in the window. I've shaven my beard. I keep rubbing my face. Rebecca wears a disheveled pony tail. I have plans for that pony tail. Her profile is pretty and sad. Her sighs leave marks on the window.

I have been following her all day. After the café she works at a little book store. She sat behind the register happy to recommend her favorite works while I peered from behind a bookcase across the room. When she was stacking some used paperbacks high on a ladder I got close enough to touch her. I felt like an apparition. It is a powerful feeling to see everything but not be seen.

I was across the street at a restaurant's patio section, sipping on a cappuccino and eating a cheesecake, when she locked up the place. The street sounds were dull and I could hear the jangling of her keys from where I sat. The night air was refreshing against my bare face. Then the bus came and the air made me choke.

Five of us get off when she does. I am just another face. I keep my distance behind her on the street. The street lamps cast a yellow hue on the night as our shoes click in syncopation against the sidewalk. My gut curls in anticipation. I am all nerves and greed as I try to figure out my next move.

Something hits me hard against the side of my head. My vision blurs and my soft body slams against the concrete. There are a million hands digging in my pockets and hard toes slam against my ribs. Hard footfalls dull in the distance but my ears still hum. Soft clicks approach me and I swing my legs in their direction grunting like a dying animal.

“Shh, calm down,” she says, “I’m here to help.”

Her voice sounds nice. She helps me up and my surroundings begin to regain shape and the humming quiets. She takes out her phone but I place my hand on it.

“No,” I tell her, “I just need some ice for my head.”

“Are you sure? You don’t look so good.”

“Yea, I’m sure,” I tell her, actually looking at her for the first time. Rebecca scrutinizes me and begins to recognize me as well. Her eyes seem to lighten. She helps me up and guides me.

“My apartment is just the next block over,” she tells me.

“Okay.”

“I think I recognize you from somewhere,” she says with slight hesitation. “Don’t you go to the Alcove Café?”

“Yea,” I tell her, “You’re Rebecca right? Barista?”

“Yes,” she says delighted that I remember her name.

Her apartment is small. She seats me in her kitchen which is only separated from her living area by a skinny rectangle of linoleum. She makes her way to the freezer.

“I hope you can excuse the mess,” she tells me filling a bag with ice.

“Cleaner than my place,” I say, taking the bag from her. “I, uhhh, appreciate you doing this for me.”

“Oh it’s nothing,” she says, “though I still think you should go to the hospital.”

“I don’t like doctors much.”

“I see,” she says. The ice against my head is beginning to drip water down the side of my face. The kettle lightly whistles. She stares at the steam pushing through the kettle’s hole and I stare at her body. The whistling stops and I avert my eyes. A mug is placed before me with a string dangling from it. Steam rises as the water cascades from the kettle’s spout.

“What brings you to this end of the city?” she asks, “You don’t live here do you?”

“Um, no,” I say slowly, “I was trying to visit an old friend.”

“Oh that’s nice,” she says, “I just thought it was such a strange coincidence.”

“Yea,” I smile, “small world.”

“You’re jacket’s too nice,” she tells me out of the blue.

“Huh?”

“I was just thinking that it’s probably why they targeted you.”

“Ha, probably,” I say, “That’s what I get for trying to look nice for a college pal.”

I raise the cup to my mouth and burn my lips. Rebecca grabs the bag of ice off my head and opens it. She places two full cubes into my tea and gently places the bag back on my head. I want to grab her by that pony tail. I think she noticed me looking at her body earlier. I wonder if she noticed the erection through my jeans. I look about the room. All the blinds are shut.

“This is all there is,” she says.

“What?”

“There’s no bedroom,” she tells me, “that couch pulls out into a bed.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep, it’s pretty annoying really, constantly folding and unfolding it,” she says, “I usually don’t bother.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I know why. She just looks at me, her eyes calm and beautiful. It’s the way Joan looks at me sometimes. I stand up and walk towards the door.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“I, uhh, have to go,” I tell her standing awkwardly in the middle of the room.

“Are you sure you’re well enough?”

“Yea,” I say and add, “My fiancé will be worried if I don’t get back soon.”

“Oh,” she sighs, her face sinking into shame.

I practically run down the stairs. The dry autumn air is harsh against my throat as I pant. My head is killing me.

I'm getting married in two days. The music vibrates deep in my marrow. Sunk deep in a chair, arms firmly at my side, Tammy rubs herself up and down my body, ignoring my erection. I pick up my drink and suck through the thin straw. The bottom of the glass is bitter. My brother Jim whispers something in Tammy's ear and hands her a small wad of cash. He smiles at me, yelling something over the music I don't bother listening to. She leads me by the hand through the club to a back room. It is insulated from the sounds of the club and smells like taint.

"What will it be?" she asks.

"Take a seat," I tell her, patting the spot beside me. Her motions have an exaggerated sensuality, even sitting.

"That guy gave me a lot of money."

"That's his business."

"So you're getting married huh?"

"Yes I am," I tell her removing a small baggie from my blazer pocket. I pour a small pile of powder on her pale thigh and inhale deeply. I offer her the baggie and she scoops a bit on her long pinky nail and brings it to her nose.

"Do you fuck people in here?" I ask her.

"I'm no whore," she says defensively, "that money covers a private dance and that's it!"

“Shut up,” I tell her, “I wasn’t asking.”

She looks up nervously at the ceiling. A camera stares back at us, its red light blinking.

“Dance on the fucking pole,” I tell her.

“Thought you’d never ask,” she says, obliging. She gets on the raised platform in the middle of the room, grips the pole and swings herself around. Her skin squeaks against the smudged metal of the pole.

“Tell me something,” I say, “that camera is for show isn’t it?”

“Real as can be.”

“Let’s say hypothetically that camera was bullshit.”

“It ain’t,” she says insistently.

“You fucking hear what I said?” I ask, “I said hypothetically.”

“So?”

“So, there is what, one bouncer outside the door?”

“Yea, Ralph.”

“These walls look real thick,” I say. She doesn’t say anything. “You think he’d hear your screams?”

She stops dancing. She is breathing hard. “Even in that hallway, the music is pretty loud,” I tell her. She goes for the door quick, yanks it open and runs out, yelling, “Get him the fuck out!”

Ralph comes in grabbing me by the collar. “The fuck you do?” he asks, spitting in my eyes.

“Didn’t do shit Ralphie!” I laugh, “Ask your camera man.”

5AM. Joan is beautiful as she answers the door. Her tired eyes widen looking at me. “What happened?” she cries. I lean against the door and smile stupidly at her. She leads me quietly to the bathroom and puts a hand towel under some cold water. Her touch is gentle.

“What the fuck are you doing getting into fights?” she says, scolding me softly, “You’re going to have a shiner in our wedding photos.”

“I should’ve just stayed home with you.”

“What happened?”

“Ah, Jim got too handsy with one of the girls,” I say, “I thought the bouncer was excessive.”

“Real fucking smart,” she says, shaking her head, “Your brother’s always getting you in trouble.”

I take her hand and kiss it, pressing its softness against my wounds. She sits on my lap and I lay my head on her shoulder, grazing my fingertips against her bare calves. She smells so clean. I probably smell like shit, but she still buries her beautiful face in my greasy hair, pressing her full lips on my scalp.

“What are you doing with a fuck up like me?” I ask her.

“Marrying you.”

“Want to know something?” I ask playing with her engagement ring, “You’re the only woman I have ever really loved.”

“That so?”

“Yes,” I tell her, “Even so, I can’t say I won’t screw things up bad.”

“You’ve done alright so far,” she says stroking my hair.

“I’m not sure I can help myself.”

“Shut up,” she says getting up and leaving, wiping away tears. I look at myself in the mirror. I feel okay. My face with its few lumps and cuts looks right. My eyes are bloodshot and hollow. I wish I hadn’t said that to her. I hate it when she cries. I shouldn’t let her go to sleep upset. The bright bathroom spreads light throughout the black hallway. I push open her bedroom door and flick the light on.

“Joan,” I say softly.

“Turn the light off,” she says sharply pulling the blanket over her head.

“Joan,” I plead, “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s fine,” she says, muffled beneath the blanket.

“But it’s not,” I say waiting for an answer. There is none. “Talk to me damn it,” I say throwing the blanket from the bed revealing my angry fiancé.

“Fuck off.”

“Just listen please,” I plead, kneeling beside the bed and clutching her hand. She looks at me reluctantly. “I’m an idiot. I’m just scared. I’m scared because I love you and it’s still new.”

“I’m scared too,” she says.

“You’re all I want,” I tell her, kissing her. Her kiss is soft and restrained.

“Okay, I believe you,” she says, “let’s talk in the morning, I’m tired.”

She gives me a short kiss. I push my lips hard against hers. I don’t want her pushing me away again. I lay myself on top of her, clutching beneath her night gown and kissing her neck.

“Don’t you see?” I tell her, “I realize it now. You’re all I will ever need.”

“Okay Simon,” she struggles, “I know, but please, I don’t want to do this right now.”

“Don’t you see?” I say, undoing my pants, “Can’t you see that I want you?”

“Please!” she cries as I pry her legs apart.

“I just want to make you understand,” I whisper, pushing into her. She suddenly goes still and doesn’t make a sound. She lies flat beneath my pulsing body, dry as a bone.