

When he first came to New York, nothing could bring him down. The city was so enticing, with shimmering scales of lights climbing the skyscrapers. Staring out the window, it was easy to lose yourself among the buildings, the cars inching along the road, and the night sky filling the gaps between. The skyline was a mysterious source of beauty. It had always appeared that way to Jerry, even in movies and photographs on postcards.

The people living and working inside these towering buildings were stacked on top of each other because they all had a common vision in mind. They wanted to pursue their dreams, no matter the level of sacrifice required. They worked long, banal hours at mediocre jobs with flashy titles. They were willing to do whatever they could to afford a few cubes of space for rent. The city was a living animal, spread out wide across a grid, sectioned into an assortment of stereotypical lifestyles. The biggest struggles were getting to New York, and then possessing the drive to stay. The initial journey was just as difficult a challenge as making a comfortable life here.

Jerry was tired of thinking about New York, but he couldn't help it. It was all anyone ever talked about. Every conversation revolved around locations and names. It was a never-ending game of who-knew-who and who-fucked-her and why-the fuck-would she-do-that and "oh yeah's" and "I used to do it but I quit, but maybe just one more time."

He had seen a half eaten box of holiday cookies in the trash the other day, lying on top of a perfectly good guitar. It was the same kind of waste you always saw sitting in trashcans outside of wealthy people's apartments.

Some people strike gold in the city. They make enough money at their jobs to live in gorgeous neighborhoods, only to throw away their fucking cookies and musical

instruments. He felt sick walking around garbage like that, clearly too refined to be picked up by any sort of bum or delinquent.

A gingerbread man playing guitar. That's what Jerry was now. He was all dolled up, with delectable icing spread on top of his soul. And with his gingerbread hands, he couldn't pluck the strings. He couldn't even strum without getting cookie crumbs stuck in the heart of the instrument.

He picked up the box of cookies with one hand and the guitar with the other. Shaking his head, he began walking, having no set destination in mind.

Shawn sat on the curb in front of the door to Once Upon a Time. Jerry was closing up for the night. He had locked all the drawers and counted the money in the bank deposit envelope. He leaned against the counter, his hands tightly curled into two indestructible fists. He tried to think of whether he needed to do anything else. He gazed out the window at Shawn, who was sipping his beer out of a brown paper bag. Jerry decided he didn't need to take out the trash. Although he couldn't recall the last time he had, the store smelled clean enough.

The door slammed behind him with a jingling of the bells. He turned around to lock the door as Shawn stood up, drinking his beer all the while. The two friends stood with their backs to each other, allowing the silence to settle and the sounds of the night to fill the void.

As Jerry slid his keys back into his pocket, they both began to walk down the street, knowing where they would go without having to say it.

"Slow day?" asked Shawn.

"It was all right. No new business, but a couple people came in," said Jerry.

“Did you fix that bugger yet?”

“No,” Jerry chuckled. “But I’ll get it. Eventually. Never let a timepiece defeat me before.”

Jerry heard the last of the beer’s contents empty into Shawn’s mouth. He left it tilted upwards a moment longer, savoring any remaining drops, before tossing it across the street. It knocked against a sewer grate and then remained still, having landed only five feet from a trash can.

“Why did you throw it?” asked Jerry.

“Wanted to see if I could disprove gravity. Just for a second,” said Shawn.

Jerry shook his head at the absurd answer. “And are you satisfied with the results of your experiment?”

“Not at all. Satisfaction is a crutch. I refuse to allow my state of being to stoop so low.”

They had made it to the bar. The windows were foggy and the lighting was dim. It was impossible to discern any of the faces inside. Its anonymity was something they both appreciated.

“I’m gonna smoke a cigarette real quick. You go on,” Jerry said.

For the first time that night, Shawn looked him in the eyes. “All right, I’ll get you a beer. But if you start chain smoking out here, I’m going to drink it for you.”

Jerry smiled. “Understood.”

Shawn left and Jerry lit a cigarette. As he inhaled, he closed his eyes. He had no idea what he and Shawn would talk about. He hadn’t watched any new sports games since the last time they had hung out. It already felt like the end of the night, not the beginning.

Mirabelle opened the bathroom door and stepped outside. She sparkled from her head to her high heels, like the splashes that hit you when you're leaning over an edge admiring a waterfall. Jerry could feel the sensation of her beauty. She was wearing a tightly wrapped hot pink dress that hugged her chest and showed off her lean physical build. She was thin but she wasn't a skeleton. She was healthy. You could tell by the rosy peach color in her tanned skin. Mirabelle was perfect.

It baffled Jerry that she was dressed up to go dance around a pole for the remainder of the night. She said it made her feel pretty, all the guys cheering their crude comments and throwing her dollar bills. Jerry knew he only thought of her stripping as degrading because he wanted her to be only for his eyes. He didn't have anything against the adult entertainment industry or the strip club biz. But he loved Mirabelle. She was his best friend.

And although thousands of strange men and the occasional woman touched her in a given week, even if they were just grazing her leg as she strutted past them onstage, he had never touched her like that. He only looked, stared, and said nothing, besides that he liked her outfit tonight. Jerry was the worst pervert out of all of them. He was ashamed of how much he cared for her. There were many reasons, but at the forefront he feared she would never reciprocate his attraction to her, if the day ever came where he grew insane enough to admit it.

Mirabelle was devoting her full concentration to applying her lip liner in the mirror behind the cash register. Jerry had left her in charge for a little bit while he went on a walk around the block a few times. Needed to clear his head, he had said.

She knew she looked stunning, in her black sleeveless top, her skirt stretched just low enough for the police not to pull her aside on her way to the club. She always tried her hardest not to look like a hooker. She was a dancer, a performer, and a star in the eyes of many, including her own.

Mirabelle connected the final meeting points of the liner and smacked her lips into a smile. The gloss was the perfect shade of pink. She preferred it over a classic red or a safe coral. Pink was the most feminine, the sexiest color for her full-blown lips.

In the corner of the mirror she noticed the hobo outside, twisting a thin hot dog shaped balloon, apparently trying to make it into an animal. He was wearing a faded wizard's hat on his head. Or maybe it was in the style of Uncle Sam. It was red, white, and blue, but she wasn't sure what the reason behind it was.

"That damn magician wannabe," said Mirabelle under her breath, puckering her lips into an expression of disapproval. "His crappy tricks are what scare people from coming into this store." She stared into her reflection's own eyes. "Then again, Jerry frightens away enough customers on his own." She threw her head back and practiced her laugh. It sounded loud and powerful.

She checked the time and saw that she still had several hours before it would be acceptable to go out. Whether or not she was dressed in drag, Mirabelle did not buy into the concept of happy hour. It was a scam for the overworked upper middle class, who drowned their complaints of emails and phone calls gone awry with swigs of margaritas. Mirabelle's night began only when those people went home, when the crowd she felt she most belonged to emerged from the darkness that they had spent the day hiding behind.

The Unstoppable Gill was talking out loud to an audience of no one. It was certainly not the first time, but it was the loudest he had ever been. It was seven in the morning. The store didn't open until nine, but Jerry had nothing else going on. So he had texted Shawn and told him that he wanted to smoke a few before work, if he wanted to come hang out.

Shawn's response had been instantaneous. "Sure. See you in a minute." And just as he had promised, Shawn was waiting by the door when Jerry arrived.

Jerry didn't feel normal. He couldn't place what was going on. He hadn't drank more than two beers last night, so he wasn't hungover. He had remembered to eat dinner, so he wasn't exhausted from lack of food. He had slept fine, besides the fact that he had woken up early at five and couldn't fall back asleep, no matter how tight he shut his eyes and tried to empty his mind of everything.

Going into the shop early was his solution. He walked there as if in a dream state, as if his steps weren't hitting the *real* sidewalk, but some alternate pavement that he had hallucinated. The street was silent around him. It was too early in the day for a single store to be open. With all the barred windows and chained doors, he couldn't take comfort in any familiar sights. The only people who seemed to be awake at this hour besides himself were Shawn and the fucking magician.

"And now if you will kindly pick a card, why any card at all will do. There's no need to be shy. I'm not a man of black magic." He chuckled at his own quip. "There you go! That was an excellent card to choose...or was it...perhaps...the worst possible card you could have taken from the whole hand?" The Unstoppable Gill made a point of selecting a card from his hand, and sliding it out from the direction opposite him, as if a willing participant were actually there, watching him perform the trick.

“Where the fuck does this guy get his energy from?” Jerry said, rummaging for his keys in the back pockets of his pants.

“Pills, probably. Some loose prescription from the local homeless shelter. They give the bums little pills of speed or anti-depressants, depending on the diagnosis, so they can feel like they’re helping them.” Shawn said all of this while staring intently at the Unstoppable Gill. He hadn’t even said hello to Jerry.

“Are you watching his trick?” Jerry asked. “Don’t encourage that bullcrap.”

“There’s nothing else going on, you asshole.”

“Yeah, well I have some boxes we can stock, once I get this goddamn door to open.” He was still trying to find the correct key for the lock. It was foggy out, if that could be considered an excuse for poor vision. While he experimented with the keys, he felt sorry that the Unstoppable Gill didn’t own a car that he could fantasize about vandalizing with the teeth.

“I don’t think that bum belongs to a shelter. He’s always here. The past few years, ever since he first showed up, it’s like his feet have been nailed to the ground in front of the store.”

“So he doesn’t go anywhere, but he sure talks a lot. They probably have him on speed, then,” said Shawn.

“I’m telling you, he doesn’t leave his homemade booth, not ever.” He got the key to click and the door pushed open. Immediately he took out a cigarette and lit it.

“Smoking in the store now?” Shawn seemed amused.

“We have hours before we open. I’ll buy a pinecone air freshener if people complain. I just can’t hear any more about that damn deck of cards.”

The shop had set a new record for customers this week, and it was only Wednesday. It was all thanks to Mirabelle, who had ordered some “impulse” items for Jerry. He had stocked the shelves with them, but there were so many that he had no choice but to decorate the windows and countertop as well.

Jerry believed that Mirabelle did not deserve all the recognition for the spike in business. Some of the sales credit belonged to him. Mirabelle would never have made any purchasing decisions if Jerry hadn’t picked up on the fact that Once Upon a Time would be going out of business within the next few years, considering that its youngest customers were in their sixties. Young people with watches never seemed to care about fixing them. This generation was content to throw something away when it was broken. Even when their timepieces were working better than clockwork, sometimes they still hurled them into the trash. Kids were one unpredictable mood swing after another. And the idiotic parents who bought them expensive shit in the first place just kept buying them more, year after year.

Mirabelle had listened to Jerry’s whining as she leafed through the catalogs that had come in the mail. Jerry never opened such things. He paid the bills, and categorized the rest as junk. Mirabelle liked to browse through the shopping pages, nodding and offering an “I know, dear” whenever Jerry paused for breath. The catalogs were shiny, the lipgloss of reading material. Each product inside glimmered with the promise of a profit. A brand new watch would reflect a brighter future on whomever’s wrist it happened to lie on.

“Here’s what you’re going to do... what *we’re* going to do,” said Mirabelle, recognizing the light bulb that had manifested in her mind. At last, she could offer to do

something fruitful for her friend. “We’ll order jewelry, all these necklace chains and rings with clocks on them. It’s a new style that every girl in the city wants, even the ones who don’t know it yet. This will open up your market to young women... all the way from the teens, to the sluts and prudes, to the stay-at-home moms.”

Jerry sighed. “Fine. I don’t know what else I could possibly do to save this shithole.”

With his admittance to listen to advice and a two-minute phone call, something was accomplished that had not been done since the first few years of the store’s opening. Jerry had placed an order for a new line of inventory. The change felt permanent. The store was going in a different direction, and he would have to live with it from now on. He didn’t know whether he should be worried or not about the store’s future. He was uneasy and lacking in confidence, feeling like he might as well have just gotten plastic surgery.

But it worked. He couldn’t believe it, and neither could Mirabelle. Even the Unstoppable Gill became overwhelmed by the sudden flux of customers traveling in and out the door. The magician had moved his show down to the other end of the street for the time being.

The same groups of girls continued to come in after school. Only one would purchase a necklace, the rest promising they would buy one soon. Jerry knew they needed to go home and convince their parents to give them the money. If they couldn’t be persuaded, once their parents weren’t looking, they would nick the necessary cash from their wallets. The shop was contained in one medium-sized room. Much to Jerry’s dismay, he always heard every word his customers said.

Mirabelle’s marketing scheme had been right on the ball. The so-called sluts stopped by, their eyes caught on the glitzy pieces that would help suitors find them in the darkness

of a nightclub. A few girls who wore significantly more layers of clothing, the ones who fell into the prude demographic, would come into the shop during the daylight hours. The prudes spent the most amount of time weighing the benefits of one jewelry item verse another. They often made several phones calls before they brought their decision up to the register. At least the prudes often traveled alone. Hearing only one other voice at a time made Jerry feel slightly less crazy.

The moms who came in were the easiest of the customers. They had already pumped their daughters for information about what was cool to wear and consulted their husbands on what was within their budget. They were in and out of Once Upon a Time as quickly as Jerry could slide their credit cards.

Jerry wasn't pleased by this fresh set of responsibilities and finances to calculate at the end of each day. He figured he might as well amputate the shop and sell its profits to Macy's or Bloomingdale's. All this work was cutting into his thinking and drinking time. And Mirabelle was around 24/7, chatting with the womenfolk, gossiping like she was a member of all of their social circles. He hadn't seen Shawn all week. He even missed the sight of the Unstoppable Gill and his multicolored rags all tied together. He dreamt about setting the shop on fire. Or maybe asking Mirabelle to take on a paid role, as sales associate, just so he could gulp down some liquor in the break room and take a nap every once in a while.

She runs her fingers through her air, twirling strands around her index. She pulls it gently out to the sides, lifting it off her shoulders.

I'm behaving like a crazy, stupid woman right now. Completely irrational and fine with it.

All because of a man. It's the other sex, that drives people up the wall. Or the same sex. It's people, in general, that suffocate the souls of other people.

Although sometimes people lose their minds simply by thinking too much, as Mirabelle was doing now.

Who was it, that she came onto last night? She can't remember the face, only his dick getting hard as she kneeled on top of his lap. She was riding the imaginary wave, acting as if she knew this man, as if the two of them were in their bedroom or hotel.

She leaned her face into his and kissed him, a saliva-filled exchange. It was so sloppy that she had to wipe her mouth afterwards. She did not kiss him again.

"Let's take this party where no one can see us," he said.

Mirabelle got off of him. He walked into a dark passageway, a space between two closed off rooms, where the wealthier clients spent their nights. *He's not even trying to sneak into a room with me. He doesn't want to see me in the light.*

She was upset now, mostly with herself for starting the whole thing. But she wanted some satisfaction from it. She wouldn't walk away before that.

He pushed her against the wall and her skull knocked hard against the surface. She couldn't tell if he was trying to be playful or if he wanted to hurt her.

She heard him take off his belt and unzip his fly. So she followed suit. She unhooked her bra. When she left it to the man, it always delayed things, and it would risk his dick getting soft. The boys loved the feel of her implants. She was proud of them. They were B cups, the perfect size to mesh into a grabbing hand, or hide beneath a large shirt if she

wanted. Without a second thought, she pulled her panties down and hiked up her dress a little, as if saying hello to a stranger on the street.

He slowly maneuvered his dick into her newly constructed vagina. This would be the fourth man she'd slept with since the operation. He didn't feel good inside her until he was all the way in. He kept Mirabelle against the wall, his arms on either side of her like the bars of a jail cell. He thrust his body against her, and Mirabelle closed her eyes.

She couldn't help herself; she pictured Jerry. Sweet Jerry, fucking her on top of the counter in the watch store. Ever since she had the surgery, he was the only one she fantasized about. She came, loudly. Somebody walking by made a noise of disgust. Mirabelle smiled. She loved ruining people's good times at this club.

The crowd here was of low quality, no morals whatsoever. Mirabelle pretended like she was just like the rest of them. It was only towards the end of a long night, when she was having sex with some nameless, faceless dude, that she would let herself admit that she couldn't keep this up much longer.

They were in the shop, taking inventory of what had sold that week. Jerry couldn't believe how fast the store had emptied of these crappy jewelry items. The women who came in couldn't wait to hand Jerry their money. The necklaces and bracelets all bore real watches, so it's not like Jerry had completely sacrificed his true intention with the store. Although the timepieces on the jewelry were rather small, and he couldn't imagine anyone actually having the patience to scrutinize the miniscule arms of the watch to figure out the time.

"We're sold out of five pieces this week!" Mirabelle said. She handed the paper over the counter on which she had been tallying numbers. Mirabelle was happy with the store's

success, and proud that her ideas had turned the place around. Jerry could care less how high the numbers grew. But he had to admit he was a happier man since the change. He and Mirabelle could now put in an honest day's work and have something to show for it. Plus he got to see her everyday, awake and smiling. She was a totally different person from the sultry, brooding Mirabelle he had known so well a few weeks before.

"You're the brains behind this lucrative operation, Mir," he said. "You hold the key to all of these ladies' desires."

"I would rather find the way to unlock yours," she said. She had her arm on the counter, her head held in her hand. She spread her fingers over her eyes, but kept her gaze steady with his.

An elderly woman was standing at the register, waiting with her jewelry selections piled in her arms. "I sense an office romance!" she said, squawking with the tone of an parrot. She gave Jerry a wink.

"Anything else I can get for you today?" he asked her. He took her items from her. All of a sudden he forgot how to ring up a sale. He looked blankly at the register, pressing a random selection of keys and praying for one of them to make the correct screen appear.

"Maybe your girlfriend can help ya," the old woman said. She winked at him again.

"We're just very good friends," Jerry said with an urgency in his voice.

"Friends can be useful for many other things," she said.

Mirabelle had been silent this whole time, staring at Jerry and the old woman. She kept smiling at the woman's remarks, wishing that Jerry would listen to her. She wanted him to be brave.

“Here, I can do this one,” she said. She touched Jerry on the shoulder, and he allowed her to slide him out of the way. She rung up the sale in two seconds.

“Thanks. I don’t know why I couldn’t get it to work,” he said. He turned away toward the wall, pretending to return to counting inventory.

“Goodbye now! See you two again soon,” said the old woman.

“Thank you,” said Mirabelle.

The old woman gave her a wink too. As the door sounded behind her, Mirabelle hoped she would come back with more to say, perhaps one more encouraging gem of wisdom to bestow upon her or Jerry. But the woman did not return.

When the buzzer sounded at the end of the game, Shawn downed the rest of his glass, which was half full of beer. Foam lingering on his lips, he pushed his seat out from under the bar and walked out.

“Guy musta had good money riding on that one, to take off like that,” said an gray-haired man sitting at the end of the bar. He was here every night, talking to the room, convinced that everyone was listening. The bartender only acknowledged him when he needed a refill. “I can always tell when a man’s night starts to go sour,” he said, splashing whiskey over his mouth, not quite getting all of it inside.

Shawn didn’t know who had won. He could barely remember who had been playing. His head had been cloudy before he had drunk a single sip tonight. The last few days had felt especially long.

Last night he couldn’t fall asleep. He had tried all the tricks he knew. He consumed a six pack by himself, watched TV until the infomercials took over, and even cracked open the

book he had been reading for the past three years. Yet he remained awake for hours. The last time he had checked his watch it had been 4:30. He must've fallen asleep sometime between then and the sunrise because he woke up late, shaking off the sweaty dream that had followed him into his slumber.

He dreamed that he was getting married. He was in the church, wearing a dress and holding a colorful bouquet. It held all types of different flowers, all kinds of shapes and smells radiating from his hands. There was no one else at the wedding. Perhaps he had arrived early.

Knowing Mirabelle's expectations, she would have insisted on her own private dress rehearsal for such an event. The figure in the wedding dress had Mirabelle's hair, but the face was hidden. Shawn was convinced he was only in partial drag, since no one else was around. He had his energy reserved for the real day.

He roamed around the church with his arms outstretched, dropping flakes of pollen onto the aisle. His fingers grazed the smooth paneling on the pews. When he made it to the altar, he turned and walked past it, choosing instead to admire the stained glass windows that covered the walls. He wondered who it was he was about to be married to, and what their song would be. He thought about the vows, if he had written them or had a friend with a better grasp on language do it for him. He wondered what kind of church he was standing in. He had never believed in religion before.

The blaring alarm woke him up. He threw on his jeans and a plaid shirt that he had worn earlier in the week. Then he made a quick exit for the door, not bothering to button or zip anything until he was in the car. He had a spare toothbrush, travel size bottle of

mouthwash, and hand sanitizer in the glove compartment. He would have time to put himself together, once he hit a stop light.