

Sunken Future

She couldn't see anything under her closed eyelids, but the unmistakable voice of Jill Scott filled Lea with visions of another possible reality. There, in another space, Lea danced down an empty sidewalk where the sun's spotlight shone solely on her. She was on her way to meet her friends for Sunday brunch, dressed in a bright sundress, and paid no mind to those she passed by, the streetwalkers of this other place. Those strangers smiled friendly smiles, they bobbed their heads synchronously to the music that filled the streets. There, wherever it was, Lea was one with the world and the world embraced her.

But when Lea opened her eyes, she only found the familiar landscape of the cramped apartment she had left behind for those few blissful minutes. Her brown couch, that had faded into shades of grey, remained in its place below the two flanking windows of her main room. The self-painted art was still shoddily nailed to the wall above her twenty inch television, whose glare spared enough light to reveal the dirty wooden floors where her socks continued to glide as she danced. Reality had crashed back down.

This had all started as an act of hope and imagination, a large glass of wine and a soul playlist upon arrival at home, but it had turned into a ritual of defiance. The life Lea had been living wasn't the life she had wanted, but she no longer hoped for joy and peace and comfort. Now she willed it with any remaining energy left in her body at the end of each day. She reminded herself of what life could be, a visual mantra meant to sharpen the resolve. Happiness wasn't this alternate reality, but was a future one just around the corner.

When a thin line of sweat appeared on the stretch of skin where Lea's hair and forehead met and her head felt loose like a melon ready to fall off the counter, she retreated to the comfort of the graying couch. She turned down the music to a soft murmur, her visions retreating into the recesses of her mind and reality came into full focus. She pulled her phone from the table and scrolled.

She scrolled through social media, applications and algorithms, remembering all the things she had yet to do and being reminded of all the life she had yet to live. There was Bali to visit and the coast of Italy too. She had yet to sign up to volunteer at the homeless shelter and seeing it now, she made a mental note to do so later. Find a boyfriend at some point, that was something she never forgot. She scrolled and scrolled, an endless void of lives passing through her, until finally she was tired of the reminders. She silently thanked those friends and strangers, grateful to be refocused on the important things to do. The list was full, but no progress would be made tonight.

But yet, there was one more thing to know before the night's end so she opened her work email. Between the three hours of leaving the office and now, there were twenty two new emails, four instant messages, and one crisis. The college student turned viral social media star, who had started their own clothing line and was being interviewed by Lea's online publication, was threatening to cancel. Without their Tesla, which was in the shop, Casey of *Yep Co.* had no way to make it to the interview tomorrow. For the last time that day, Lea reminded herself of the person she was to become and knowing she could order him a car, she instead emailed and texted Casey that she could pick him up tomorrow morning at ten.

Lea had arrived at Casey's Santa Monica apartment, an apartment she could afford only as Future Lea, at nine thirty, professionally early and had been holding onto the hope that

Casey of *Yep* would be too. But now it was ten twenty and Lea had long drained her social media feed and many times refreshed her work and personal emails. She had resorted, finally, to the YouTube channel of a wellness instructor, who was currently laying out the scientific foundation of manifesting and the good news of the morning was that Lea was already doing so correctly.

At five minutes to eleven, Casey Hubbard exploded from his apartment door and had done so in what Lea would describe as not fully dressed at all. In a fitted blank tank top, a true blue bucket hat, and baggy, blue, cargo pants, he entered the backseat of Lea's Camry with a short and sweet "Sup".

"Ready?" Lea replied with her practiced enthusiasm.

"Yeah," Casey muttered back.

Lea pulled away from the curb, now over an hour late from the schedule.

The car ride to *Edge* was only about thirty minutes and the whole way Lea had done her best to make conversation. She brought up the interview first.

"Is this your first interview with a publication?" She had asked.

"No I interviewed with *Cross* last month," Casey had said.

"How was that?"

"Chill."

Five minutes later, she tried again and asked about what she presumed to be his passion, clothing for teens and college students. "So did you always have a passion for fashion?"

"Nah, not really. I just designed a couple of T-shirts online and all my friends liked them."

"Wow! Just like that, huh?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Cool."

After that, Lea had given up and let the soft synth of her trance music take over and for the last fifteen minutes her mind wandered towards her mother, Betty. Betty, the Filipina immigrant turned travel nurse, had worked long hours as long as Lea could remember, often not being home for an entire week at a time. Her father Jacob was a dentist and between the two of them, they worked close to one hundred hours a week so Lea and her brother and sister could go to private school and have clothes new enough to fit in.

She wondered quietly what Casey's parents did and what Betty would think if Lea had started a clothing brand.

"Well, we're here," started Lea when they arrived, but before she could introduce *Edge* or its headquarters represented by a glassed, modern building, Casey had already climbed out of the car and was closing the car door behind him. Outside, her boss Grant was waving her a "thanks, you can take off now" and was putting an arm around Casey, leading him inside.

Lea parked her car and after walking through security, and climbing two flights of stairs, Lea found herself walking briskly towards the studio to make up time, and past the glass windowed conference room where Grant and Casey were drinking a RedBull and laughing hysterically. Lea repressed her ancient resentment as she walked, that feeling that she was working harder than the rest, and instead resolved herself to focus on the more productive emotions. She met Jackie and Lou in the studio, both already studiously setting up the cameras and audio system.

"How are we looking?" Lea asked between pants, half bent over her knees.

“Audio is almost up,” replied Lou. He wiped the sweat from his brow from his crouched position, then continued messing with cords on the ground. Lea could see the thin line escaping both his jeans and the edge of his tee shirt and was tempted to tell him to pull his pants up.

“Cameras are up, but the composure needs some adjusting,” Jackie said from the corner, fiddling with the wide shot camera and taking her glasses off to look through the camera’s aperture.

“I’ll take the center,” said Lea. She dropped her bag and got to work on the center camera, but then remembered. “I think we need -,”

Jackie cut in. “I’ll grab two lights from the back.”

Soon after Lea, Jackie, and Lou finished setting up all three cameras, testing out the lights, the audio, and having Lou do a trial run interview where they asked him if he was indeed Batman, Casey and Grant entered the studio. The interview ended up being brief and mainly uneventful with the only surprise being how well-spoken and generally talkative Casey became, seemingly out of nowhere. He told the camera of how the brand was taking it all to “the next level” and how they had infiltrated college campuses world-wide. He spoke glowingly of his staff which was comprised of some of his fraternity brothers and the sorority sisters of Delta-something. Then he handed all four of us discount cards to his website before Grant offered him an Uber to wherever and led him back out of the studio.

Once gone, Lea and her crew all gave each other knowing smirks as they disassembled and stored equipment and did their best to avoid any commentary before they all grabbed a sandwich from the lunch display in the kitchen and headed back to their desks. Then what had felt like minutes really became hours and Lea had to be disturbed away from the editing on her computer.

“Hey, are you coming to Sunk?” asked Jackie, standing behind Lea who was removing her headphones.

“Yeah, I think so,” said Lea. “Team player and all that.”

“Oh, thank God,” Jackie said, leaning on her desk. “I hate when I’m the only woman at these things.”

“There are plenty of other women at *these things*.”

Jackie sighed. “Okay, women that are cool.”

“Yeah I guess there’s just us,” Lea said, smiling. “I guess it’s already time, huh?”

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” said Jackie, motioning her head to the computer which was stuck on a frame of Casey sitting in a metal chair.

“So much fun,” Lea confirmed.

The pair packed up their things and met Lou just inside the office doors. They dropped their things off in their cars and walked the two blocks to Sunk, a battleship-themed bar. Sunk was the same bar where *Edge* held every Issue party, the monthly excuse for company debauchery and to celebrate another month in business. When they arrived, it became clear the festivities had been well under way by Grant who was at a table with the Editor-in-Chief, a few male interns, and Jessica, the lone female intern, and with two empty beer glasses in front of him, a third in hand. More bodies were spread throughout the bar, already working on beverages of their own. Finance was huddled in a circle by the ship’s mast, a large wooden pole in the middle of the room encircled by a plastic table under-lit in red. HR sat in

a booth in the bar's starboard, or more accurately crates stacked serendipitously to offer a table and two benches. Legal and Facilities were on their crate booth port-side while Writing and Editing were posted at the command center, taking shots at the bar faster than the bartender could refill them. Everyone was encased in their own organizational clique and Lea had to admit that adult life had turned out to be much closer to high school than she had ever wanted to admit.

Then, at that moment, and without warning, Lea was filled with a unrecognizable emotion akin to loss. Loss of what, she wasn't sure, but watching her colleagues divided amongst the U.S.S. Beverly Hills, the divide between the future and today felt expansive. The air felt heavy with the weight of disappointment, like it had infiltrated the air conditioning. There were smiles in every corner, but the smiles seemed to crinkle and bend in all the wrong places. The portrait of her office party felt like the antithesis of those visions of her future. Could it be that everyone else was waiting for *their* future, the underside of this reality?

"Who wants a shot?" Lea asked.

Lou and Jackie grunted in agreement.