

Zee's aunt is behind the bar, drying a glass, nodding to what one of the guys at said bar said. Zee walks behind the front desk, into a backroom, leaving me standing at the front, index fingers interlocked. *I should just... Go to my room then? I don't want to talk to those guys at the bar. They look like the type of people who have an annoying saying for everything. And they'll say it with such confidence, like no one's ever heard the basic shit they have to say, and all his friends will be like 'hoho, there goes Hank again.'* FUCK- "Yo." Zee pokes her head from around the backroom door she'd just walked through. "Come on, stop being weird."

I suck my teeth and oblige.

Zee's and or her aunt's room was nicer than mine, objectively. It was maybe fifty percent bigger. The walls were white instead of the grandma wallpaper in my room. The floor was carpeted in comfy grey I-can't-believe-there's-no-stain carpet. The kind you wanna scrunch with your toes. The bed was pretty big, with those white wooden pointless pillars on each end. The bathroom door was on the same wall as the closet, which had louvered saloon doors. I couldn't see in the closet, but I was pretty sure there was walking room. And most surprisingly, there was an acorn TV on a TV stand, facing the bed.

"This your room?" I said, still looking around, still uncomfortable.

Zee plopped on the bed and picked up the remote. "As if, this is my aunt's room. Sit." she demands. "Is she okay with us being here?"

She looks at me as if she was too dignified to answer the question. "Do you know who I am? Sit." She answers anyway.

I plop next to her as she turns on the TV. It makes that piercing sizzling noise I remember hearing from fatback TVs as a kid. It sounds like what a nosebleed feels like. It was nostalgic, satisfying, and annoying all at once.

From the zap came CNN. But not the CNN I remember. This is acorn CNN. I can only assume this was from Zee's time- wait, "Hey Zee, is this CNN from when you were alive."

"You guessed it."

Huh. I spend too much time in my head.

The logo was in the corner, as usual, though it looked sharper without being any different than I remember. I don't know how to explain it. There was almost no other text on the screen though. No 'BREAKING' headline for every bit of information. Just the camera cutting back and forth between the then youngish baby boomer hosts discussing Regan related things, I'm sure.

"So you watched the news?" I ask.

"Hm? No, not really. My mom did, like, all the time. So did dad, when he was home. I remember hearing Walter Cronkite in the living room, like, almost every day. Then it was this. Never paid attention though. It's kind of like the campfire of our house, if that makes sense."

"No, yeah, I get it. TV was revolutionary back then, right?"

Zee scoffed, "For my parents, yeah. How long ago did you think I was born? I'm not a relic you know. But yeah, I guess it was *revolutionary* or whatever." Zee was looking up at the ceiling, paying the TV no mind, other than the comforting nostalgia the old timey news anchor cadence must be bringing her. Her palms were on her forehead, and her gaze was blank. A look that's probably on my face more than I'd like to be true. The look of deep thought and no

thought at the same time. The look you can only get when you're around a friend that'll let you be sad. The anchors report on the Israeli settlements being pushed further into Palestinian territory, the state of Nicaragua, and Reagan signing some Republican dream deregulation bill into law. All things I'd normally be interested in. But I'm torn between wanting to say something to Zee, and wanting to learn about the politics of her time, which she has no interest in. The anchors droned on, passing a distant thought, behind the comfy fuzz that accompanied anything behind a TV screen that old.

"Did you have friends?" Zee bashfully asks. *Did?*

"Um, yeah. I guess."

"What were they like? How close were you guys?"

"Well. my closest friend, Franchesca, lived down the block from where I lived. We went to school together, walked home together, played Nintendo together."

"Ew. My grown ass brother played Nintendo."

I sigh on the inside and continue. "She was, kinda like you actually." Zee propped her upper half up on her elbows and stared at me with sincerity. It was overwhelming- "Go on." she prods.

"She had a bright personality I guess. People liked her, she liked people. And she was always so nice. Too nice. But that's where you guys differ."

"Hm."

"Weeee hung out from kindergarten, all the way through middle school. But in high school, we drifted apart. But you know how that story goes."

"Yeah.... Was she your only friend?"

“Um, no. I made two friends in high school. They were more like me-”

“Nerds?”

“Um, no-”

“Geeks?”

“Zee!”

“Okay, continue.”

“They were more my speed. They weren’t so socially all over the place.”

“That’s a nice way to put your resentment of socially capable people.” she saw right through me. I grit my teeth. “Well, sorry we’re not similar enough for you to live vicariously through me.” *Oh no, too harsh.* I winch. “Touchee, continue.” She said, unmoved. There might have even been some admiration in that statement somewhere.

“But yeah, we were into, like, niche things, and we weren’t the easiest people to talk to, honestly.”

“Because the things you like, are like, so deep, and everyone else is, like, a stupid normie.”

“Huh. If that’s how you want to put it.”

Zee kicks off her shoes and sits all the way up, crossing her legs. She pulls her arms out of her jacket, but still wears it on her shoulders, like a cape, arms crossed inside. “I get it. But it’s a game. Don’t forget that. Try to enjoy it.”

“I-”

“Actually, I’d love to hear what you think of me. I must seem pretty shallow to someone like you, right?” She looks me in the eyes. For the first time, she felt like someone who’d died.

Her gaze was cold, and all-engulfing. I could tell she wanted me to confirm something deep within her. Something she wanted to beat herself over the head with. “No. Not at all. You’re a real emotionally intelligent person. You’ve been real nice to everyone too, well, except Aaron. But even that comes off as good natured. And that’s honestly priceless. Everyone wants someone to make fun of them the way you make fun of Aaron. It makes them feel important.” I was looking into my lap saying those things. I meant it, but it was too emotionally raw for me to say it to her face. I should have.

“You wanna hear my story?”

“..Sure.”

“I had a few friends too. In the traditional sense. But everyone knew me. The *it* of White Plains high. I had more than half the football team around my finger. The rest were total fags. That or they were head over heels for Tanya, the whore.”

“Zee-”

“Right, right. My only two friends were Kelly and Mahalah. We were the *it* girls of our own people. Kelly of the latinas, Mahalah of the Caribbean Americans, and me of the white folk. We knew we were living in a game. We could talk to each other about the bullshit underneath it. We could relax with each other, not have to worry about one sleeping with the other’s boyfriend. It was nice. Then we all got accepted into different colleges and went our separate ways. Everything outside of that was a game to be won. Absolutely zero-sum. That’s what made our friendship so important... But now I’m here.” I let the room stay still, and silent. The robotic reporters delivering heartbreaking news as they would announce someone’s car getting towed. Toes gripping the fibers in the shag rug. White walls holding my soul in place.

“Zee.”

“Hm.”

“What’s winning?”

“Hm?”

“What do you mean by winning?”

“You know. Happy life, being a happy wife. The American dream. Is that no longer the goal since I’ve been dead?”

“Nn. A lot of things have changed since then. Including how we refer to gay people. They’re people too, they shouldn’t be called slurs for their identity.”

“Awe, your time sounds like such a nice place. Like, I never thought anything less of gay people. It’s just what they’re called, you know? Isn’t that what the Bible says?”

“Yeah, but the Bible isn’t the constitution.”

“Huh, tell *that* to the people of my time and lemme know how that goes.”

“Ha, so you’re a Christian now?”

“Eh. I mean, I never really bought into all that. But clearly someone’s ancient voodoo was right, because I’m here.” she says, gesturing to her body, knocking off a shoulder pad, and the jacket attached to it, on her right side. “Yeah, either that or I’m crazy.”

“Hey-” she put a hand on my shoulder, “You seem pretty fucking sane to me.” she squeezes from her throat, horsley.

“Zee.”

“What?”

“Tell me you understand it’s not okay to refer to gay people like that. Totally not tubular-”

“Jeez, okay. I’m sorry-” she sighs, dipping her head and fanning her hands, “No, I’m serious. I’m genuinely sorry. I didn’t mean to offend anyone.”

“It’s just us. I don’t think you meant anything by it.”

“Heh. look at you. You’re like a warrior for social justice, or something.”

“You know, I don’t think you’d be that out of place in my time.”

“Zeeeeeeee!” Her aunt struts into the room, hands positioned like an Egyptian goddess in hieroglyph. Zee chimes in, “Zooooooe!” They embrace, giving each other pompous air cheek kisses, Zee’s jacket completely falling off. She turns to me. “Ciana, right?”

“Yes ma’am.” She hugs me. A more authentic one than she gave Zee.

“Ooo. *Ma’am*, I like this one.”

“Yeah, in her time, everyone’s formal, and courteous.” Zee half gabs. Zoe kicks off her flats and crawls onto her bed, dropping her body over the assortment of tasseled pillows that look like they’re meant for a couch.

“Busy day?” Zee asks.

“Yeah, a whole seven people came in today.”

“No check-ins though?”

“Haha, never. Except for our friend Ciana.”

“I hope that’s not an issue.” I plead. Zoe snuffles.

“No, we enjoy the company, right Zee?”

“Tots, are you okay? You sounded sick just now.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. I think I might be coming down with a cold though.” *ghosts get sick?*

“Then you’re not fine.”

“Hey shut up, eh?”

“Ahehe!” slips out of my mouth and now the spotlight’s on me. Both Zee and Zoe wore a face that said, *Oh, you like that?* “You guys are a riot.” I manage to say.

“Mmm. well, as much as I love rioting, I think I’m gonna take a nap, my head needs rest.” She closes her eyes with us still on the bed. “Zee, why don’t you go play in traffic, eh?”

“Ouch. Don’t get all bold because C’s here.” She shoots me a smile. I shoot back. I get up, with Zee reluctantly following suit. “And turn this crap off, please. You remind me of your mother with all this news.” she fans her hand, irritated, eyes still closed. Zee grabs the remote and turns the volume up to its maximum setting. It was loud in that grainy scratchy way. Too loud even without a headache.

“Zee-”

“Heeey! Turn it down!-”

“Stay woke, bitch!” Zee shouts, giddy as hell, pushing me out the room. Zee firmly closes the door, laughing like an idiot.