

“Writer”

“Can you listen to me?”

I drifted off. My thoughts carried my eyes to another table. Engrossed in their honeymoon-esque naivety, the couple and their generic mid-twenties pairing quickly lost my attention between their mouthed ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhs.’ I’m no romance eroticist, my cares aren’t for the movements and gestures between lovers. My concerns are of a higher importance. Among the mix of tables organized to maximize the number of patrons and there too the profits, amidst the minimalist and modern stylings of this fashionable Vietnamese-Bavarian fusion joint, my thoughts are compelled to the space between those otherwise uninteresting silhouettes:

Why is there a succulent on their table?

“Please? It’s not a big ask.” A surprising tenderness came through her timbre that even she didn’t expect.

“I am listening. I’m sorry, you know what happens when I start thinking...”

“You can’t do both.” The tenderness retracts to slight bitterness.

“Why do you think there’s a succulent on their table?” My eyes move across our native place before returning abroad. “We don’t have one.”

A twirl of amber hair floats through my periphery as she turns to look over her shoulder.

“I don’t know—”

“Did they bring it themselves?”

“Probably not.” I feel her eyes return back to me.

“None of the other tables have one. They must have brought it.”

“Maybe they bought it on their way in, why does it—?”

“But what if they bring it with them everywhere?” The plant’s three prongs protruding from the chipped earthenware pot seem to lean over to listen as I speak. I feel some validation from its attention. “What if it’s the surrogate child they can’t have?”

“That’s not what a surrogate is.”

“Maybe that succulent fills some void between them. Maybe it allows them to cope while bringing them some hope?” My profundity shocks me at times. “I think there’s something there.” If only I had a pen...

“I don’t care about the succulent.”

“No? Well.” Not everyone gets it. Not even her.

“Did you hear what I was saying?”

“Of course.” And I had. The problem is that I am always listening. Not only did I take in what she expressed, my senses were inundated with experience: the jostling of metal on ceramic; the shuffling of uncertain feet; linen straining against faux-leather upholstery; banter floating to no point between ill-suited dates; whispers brushing against lover’s ears; arguments from the kitchen; fire bursting from a pan; the front door opening, the heated air resolving with the cold outside; laughter from the hostess; snide comments shared by the waiters; the bartender stirring in silence; impatient taps on the marble tabletop across from me.

“You went away again.”

“No I didn’t.” Of course I had.

“I can tell in your eyes. You start to look through me. You hardly ever look at me.”

“What do you mean? I’m looking at you right now.” I’m not. My eyes coast over her head to where a busser has run into a waiter. Spilt plates settle on the ground beneath them as they argue over who was wronged. Nearby, a table assesses the damages hoping the food wasn’t

for them. ‘Is that your chicken?’ and ‘looks like your tofu schnitzel’ both brings them to resign to the fate of a prolonged wait. I could use this somewhere if I remember.

“You’re not looking at me. You went off again, *again*.”

“Didn’t you hear the—”

“Could you listen when I ask? Is that too much?” Though she has the right to anger, she moves through pleading.

I make sure to focus on her pupils. “Of course it’s not, I’m sorry. I’m listening. I’m looking. I’m here.” But I don’t actually look in her eyes, instead I get caught up in a single strand of hair plucking itself in the wrong direction on her left eyebrow. Standing in opposition to its siblings, it seems rebellious at its length. Some sort of kinship comes from the stray hair—perhaps there is something more to be written out.

“No, you’re fine. I’m being annoying.” Her brow twitches with a sign, the lone hair still refusing to agree with the rest. “I know you get carried along by thoughts sometimes. I was hoping, y’know, that we both might be a little more present tonight? We’re celebrating *us*—I want to give us proper attention.”

“Of course, that’s what I want, too.” Yet my focus remains on the hair straining against conformity. What did it hope to achieve? Wasn’t it rooted to the same face as the rest, after all? What use is there going off in a new direction if there is no other place to go? But isn’t that just the impulse, to reject where one comes from and take a strand toward a new conclusion? This hair has purpose, as does the succulent and the food still spilled on the ground. A mop makes slow but steady work at cleaning the latter, and so too will the succulent go on its way. Then too the course of the coarse hair would be corrected back to being uniform.

“I know. I know. Should we get the check and go home?” She presses a foot against the inside of my knee.

“Let’s.” We lift our napkins from our laps and place them on the table, both of us taking one last polite wipe at our mouths as we look for our waiter. “You good to split the bill?”

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A breeze from the water catches us as we begin to cross the bridge. Chills are expected in mid-February, though still unwelcome. We cling to each other as she buries a cheek against my chest.

“We should have gotten a cab.” Her voice is muffled in the wool of my coat.

“It’s a little romantic, isn’t it” My intent in walking isn’t such at all.

“It’s nice to hold you.” Another gust of wind almost takes us from the sidewalk. “But it’s also cold.”

“The cold helps me think.” The evening was supposed to be more calm and mild, with some stillness caught up and held in the air. We should’ve been able to see the city’s lights trail off building by building to the horizon, each flickering bunch a collection to remind us of our miniscule breaths against the whole of being. The hope was that such a revelation might keep her friendly to my new way of living, that a glimpse at such ideas might make my renewed focus seem worthwhile. But a cloud of mist descended against the forecast, and with it came an unfriendly wind. Instead of romanticizing the city, our eyes are filled with spitting rain, and where the water should be calm a northern wind whistles down to spite us. The weather is the adversary to my intentions, and I take mental note of the antagonist for later use. “It’s a waste to call a cab for a fifteen minute walk.”

“Twenty. If you didn’t want to split the cab, I could’ve paid. It’s not a big deal.”

Another blow from the wind. She tightens around me as strums of anxiety play at my chest. So the money conversation was coming back up. I avoided it for a few weeks, but one can only stall from the subject for so long. I need to be smart with my words, but that won't be an issue—words are all I have.

Pulled loose by the persistent wind, I flatten my hat down closer to my head. I feel the potential impulse for the little cap to be taken up by a gust and go along with the air. There it would go on the currents that guide as they please, carrying the hat along without worry or care for direction, following the unknowable plans of the fates that blow it along. Then could my cap observe the world as it likes, taking itself along on whims and following them briskly, not caring for the cold or the fact it is without a head to warm. Freed from its natural perch to pursue its own interests, it could wander the city until, dirty, fraying, and unconcerned with its intended design, it would become a part of the discarded world of which we're all ever more a part. What lives might it come upon? Who might try to wear it? How long until the knit fibers went their separate ways, the observer becoming a past idea?

“What are you thinking about work? Her grip parts so she can pull back to look at me. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes pointed, hesitant.

“I've had some thoughts.”

“You have?” Some relief for her.

“Yes.”

The bridge is nearly crossed. It does not burn yet behind us, instead the cold continues to force us along, carrying our steps quicker than she likes, but not fast enough for my nerves. I wanted to discover the city with her: to share the lights, the crowding of buildings, the compactness of life; to be two bodies in total solidarity, to join hands as one vessel, four eyes

sharing the world; to let her see what profundity I had found, to let her better understand my urges, to make clear the need to encompass some small part of existence through my own words.

“Are you going to share, or...?”

“Right. Yeah. Well. I know it’s been a little while since I quit.” The wind secludes itself, leaving no excuses in its stead for my words to stick in my throat.

“And you know I support your decision. I really do.”

“It was the right choice.”

“You needed some time to rest and to think. But, it’s been a while now. More than a few months. I’m trying not to—it’s for you to figure out—but it’s hard not to have some concerns.”

I have my concerns as well. I am consumed by them. Most of my nights have passed without sleep due to concerns even long before I was fired—I had neither the heart nor the honesty to tell her I hadn’t quit. My performance was poor, to no surprise. Instead of working I was taken up by concerns; to take away the concerns I turned to writing. All matter of anxieties and worries kept my mind from ease before the strain of looming financial failure destitution added themselves to the pile. She was the only reason I had been able to clutch at some shambling notion of normalcy for the months I had passed enveloped in writing without lifting a finger toward finding a new job. Concerns are fears pressed to emotions that nag after every action—all of the world’s injustices, the great disparity between lives, the threat of disease and illness, the relentless march toward monopolization, the constricting invisible hand of all-encompassing capitalism, the descent towards total consumerism, the flawed and fleeting nature of everything, the world’s structure towards total failure: the pressure feels close to total collapse. And though I collect and distill these concerns to writing, what are they worth? All scratches at nothing, meaning forever absent.

“You’re not listening. Again.”

“Yes I am.”

“I know it’s not easy to talk about, but we have to get it out of the way sometime. I love you. I care about you. I want to know what you’re really thinking.”

The bridge is crossed. With all that’s behind us, all that follows the wind at our backs is my heavy sigh.

“You’re right. I promise I’m listening.”

“What is your plan?” Direct. I could make use of that.

“The plan is to work.”

She stops, pulling me back to her mid-step. I stumble, but she manages to catch me.

“You haven’t looked for work at all. Be honest with me.” Her eyes know too much.

“I want to write.”

There isn’t anything readable in her face. Not disgust, not contempt, but certainly not relief or happiness. “You and everyone else.” She turns away, walking a few steps back toward the bridge.

“You wanted me to be honest. I’m being honest.”

“I know you are. Writing’s the only thing you pay attention to. Me included.” She shrugs. “Everyone thinks they should go out and express their neurosis for the world to read, but should they? How many people have something worthwhile to say? Maybe a half-dozen a generation?”

“There are plenty more bad writers than that—”

“Do you aspire to be a bad writer?”

“No. I think I could be a passable one.”

“That’s inspiring.” She chews at her lip where the skin is chapped and peeling.

“I want to support you, but you don’t let me read anything. How am I supposed to know if you’re good or an expensive waste of time?”

“I shared that one dog story—”

“That was a paragraph. I’ve seen you fill journal after journal. There has to be something else you can share.”

What point is there in sharing loose rambling without sense or plot? She knows what I already fear: none of it is publishable.

“It’s not ready.”

“Will it ever be ready?” She grabs my shoulder as if a parent lecturing a petulant child. “Or are you going to keep yourself hidden under a blanket safe from criticism and reality letting you know it’s time to give it up?”

“It takes so much time—”

“You hardly have much left. I know you’re in debt. I know it’s getting worse. I support you but this can’t be forever. You can’t keep blowing more money on books you won’t read or notebooks for new stories you’ll never finish. I know writing has become important to you, but you have to take care of yourself. You’ve gotten lost in your own margins.”

The moment holds us. I know I must speak to the delusion I’ve found as my truth.

“I don’t want to work. I want to write.”

“Well, that won’t work. You have to be realistic.”

“When I work I’m too tired to write. When I write, I’m too tired to work.”

“You’re being stubborn and melodramatic. You can work and write.”

Work is the death of writing. “I guess.”

“I want good things for you and I want good things for *us*. I don’t think we can last without you putting in the effort. The last thing I want to see is you spiraling down like this.”

I know the truth of her words, but even as she pleads for me to come back to her, my mind has been elsewhere. Even as we talk my brain is preoccupied in writing a story upon some neurons, hoping the words can be held onto long enough to find paper. The story starts at dinner. The narrator sits with their partner waiting for the check. The partner wants to talk about their relationship, but the narrator can’t help but get caught up in innocuously unimportant details beyond her. They can’t even pretend to listen, not out of spite or disinterest, but from genuine inability. And so the partner can’t get her needs across before they leave. Outside the restaurant they walk through the cold towards home, passing over a bridge. Though they cling close together for warmth, the couple feels all the more distant. The narrator knows an ultimatum approaches and wishes to temper the partner’s expectations. The partner sees the narrator’s impending ruin, but they cannot help. The narrator only wants to write, and really that’s all they can do. They stand, having crossed the bridge, and the narrator can only think of this story. And so it continues itself. How many times has this all been told?

“Does wanting to write mean that I’m spiraling down?”

“That’s not what I said—”

“Do you not believe in me as a writer?”

“How would I know?”

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It’s warm between the sheets. Leaves pile onto fluttering leaves. Skin touches skin. Paper touches paper. We hold each other close, eyes moving over our bodies. Words run along close, enjambling to fill the page. She bites at my ear. I fold over the corner of the notepad. She

descends, kissing below my navel. I finger along the line. She pushes me down and gets on top of me. I thrust my pen into the journal.

I start at a fervent pace with inconsistent rhythm, filling line after line with middling thoughts as I write toward succulents, bridges, eyebrows, and a relationship—

Nude under the covers, she lays in bed staring at me. Or so I assume, I am too enthralled to look at her face from my spot at the drafting table. My own eyes are occupied by filling the blank space before me, in spilling myself out, spending the little worth I think I have. All concerns, all drifting thoughts are at my hand as I convey them to the void, never to be realized. No more am I a “writer” than committing the basest action.

“I think you should go,” she says.

There fills a page, there another; all wanton, nothing.

“Can you listen to me?”

What a wonderful way to start.

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