

Under the Pink

“Enlightenment doesn't mean the denial of demons in yourself,
but the confrontation of them”

Tori Amos

She was strange.

She was strange and there was something about her oddities that were so alluring it kept me coming back to the cemetery every Sunday. She came precisely at noon and would stay for an hour, sometimes two, planting herself in front of the same grave. There was never enough time before she would skip off into the chaos of reality, leaving me dazed at the existence of a creature such as herself. She gave the minutes wings, she taught them to fly higher and higher until they were gone. Seconds, then nothing. A blink of the eye.

The irony of coming to where the dead rest, where they wait for what comes after, in order to watch the living did not escape me. Cemeteries are sanctuaries of stillness, escapes from the endless movement of the day to day. Surrounding one's self with grave stones, with skeletons just beneath the Earth, can be transcendental. There is something about the silence. And then there was something about her.

I used to walk there from the shoebox with paper-thin walls that was my apartment just to get away from the sounds of arguing to the left and fucking from the right. So I'd get high and lay in the grass thinking about all of the people and all of their stories and lives and how they

were six feet underneath me sleeping peacefully. I'd think about how nice it must be to sleep like that, forever. To sleep without dreaming.

I don't know if I never noticed her before or if she just woke up one day and made the decision that Sunday would no longer be spent among the living, but I find the latter much more likely. She does not allow herself to go unnoticed.

Her bright pink hair almost hurt my eyes with its neon glare. I remember thinking, *what the hell is wrong with you, man, that shit is ridiculous*. But when it wasn't the most ridiculous thing about her I didn't really know what to think anymore. She had on white lace knee highs and one of those short little dresses that Asian girls wear to look like porcelain dolls or some shit. It looked like it was made out of Hello Kitty fabric. I will never understand grown females and their obsession with a little mutant cat girl in various shades of pink. The shoes were kind of hot though, I'm a sucker for long legs and stripper heels. Everyone has their fetishes.

She wore too much make-up and nothing turns me off more than too much make-up. You never know who you are really fucking until you wake up next to a face full of make-up on your pillow case and girl you have never seen before. It's kind of terrifying the wonders that stuff can do. Terrifying and screwed up, really. No one is real anymore, they hide behind so many masks. And honestly at first I wasn't sure if she was real, or if she was a hallucination. Something brought on by laced weed or something—that kind of shit happens if you aren't careful.

She had picnics, this girl.

That is what she came to the cemetery for. She would pack a basket full Sushi and candies. Sometimes she would bring those cans of jelly soda they sell at Asian groceries and she would pour them into a teacup. And the stuffed animals—she would bring stuffed animals like they were friends and she would sit them around her and give them their own teacups, their own

little plates and she would laugh and talk to them as if they were real. Weird as hell, but somehow fascinating at the same time. *She* was fascinating. If she wasn't I probably wouldn't have continued going to a cemetery where no one I knew or loved was buried. I came only for her.

Never once did she look in my direction, not for months. Not even once the snow covered the ground and we were the only life, the only color, in a sea of white and gray—she did not look at me. This was frustrating. Frustrating in a very existential crisis sort of way. How does a person accomplish such a thing? By nature we are curious of our surroundings. To survive we have to be aware of the world around us, right? It was like this girl didn't care. She had made her own world.

Curiouser and curiouser.

I did not exist there.

Did I exist at all?

“Sounds creepy, dude, not gonna lie.”

I made the mistake of telling one of my friends, Chris. Between knocking back beers and making a vain attempt at conquering a Call of Duty match with a positive kill-death ratio (while using an un leveled piece of shit gun, mind you) I wasn't thinking clearly. “How is it creepy?”

“It's kind of stalking if you think about it.” He adjusted his headset, “Even if you don't think about it, actually.”

“Shut the hell up. It is not.”

“What the hell are you doing?” He yelled into his mic, not caring if the person on the receiving end was a ten year old kid, which, given his lack of ability, he probably was. “We are

on C, fucker, help me secure the goddamn base! People do not understand objectives. Fuckin' A." He threw the controller and looked at me very seriously while lighting a cigarette.

I shifted in place, the way he stared into me made me uncomfortable. Chris is in no way a serious person. He said to me, "Ty, man, you mean to tell me if someone said to you—So, I've been following this chick around for five months and I watch her every weekend for hours and she's super weird and dresses like some kind of cosplay slut and I've never said a word to her—that you wouldn't be like—What the fuck, dude? That's fucked."

"You're making it sound creepier than it is."

"If you say so. In my opinion, you need to talk to her. Stop being a creepy fuck and say hi or something," and with that I no longer held his interest, not when we were losing bases, "*Where the hell are these idiots going? You better get your ass back to B! Do people not realize our team is getting slaughtered?*"

He finished off another beer and we said nothing else about it.

He was right though. Five months, going on six, is a long time to never say a word to someone you see every week. I thought maybe, eventually, watching her as if through some sort of looking glass lens would stop being my escape from my own monotonous reality of Xbox and school, bills, Ramen noodles. I never wanted to say anything to her. The fact that her life was so entirely separate from mine, the fact that we could easily not even be on the same plane of existence, is what made her so interesting.

But Chris was right—I would never tell him that, but he was. It was time to say something or time to move on.

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I felt like I was chained to the tree, the one under which I usually sat when I would watch her. It was old, crooked, it was almost lifeless—the kind of tree you wouldn't expect to find in such a place, not with so many bodies in the soil, their death giving it life. I was stuck there, my feet sinking into graves. With her long hair—now purple—cascading around her face—her eyes were so wide, like something innocent—and with the way she looked in her black tutu, the pink corset, even the tea party themed tights, it was almost intimidating. I had never noticed how perfect her body was, not really.

“Tyler, you've got this. If she rejects you then whatever, she's fucking weird anyway. Right? Right.” I tried to talk myself up under my breath and it must have worked because I found myself going towards her. My heart tried to escape through my mouth like a trapped bird, its wings fluttering inside my throat. Fast, then faster. My blood was hot in my veins. Burning.

The sushi in my hands felt wrong somehow and I swear my palms were sweating and I had never felt like more of an idiot, but I kept walking. Even when I was at the edge of her Hello Kitty quilt, the same one she always brought, she did not look up at me. But she spoke.

That bird in my throat went still.

She kept her eyes on the teacup that she held with both of her small hands. “It's all over now, you know. We can never go back. Are you ready?”

Her voice cut through me, the innocence was striking. She sounded as fragile as she looked. Something about that was unsettling.

“And if I'm not?” I wasn't.

“You have to be.”

I had no idea what the hell she was talking about but I couldn't keep myself from wanting to lay her back on that quilt and see how sweet she tasted underneath all that lace. I wanted to rip

it off of her, the skirt, all of it, except those tights and those shoes and fuck her right there. It wasn't until then that I realized how long it had been since I'd had sex and that these were probably the last thoughts I should be having while wearing tight pants. I looked down at my Chucks and started digging my heel into the dirt.

“You knew?”

“Knew what?”

“That I have been, y'know, watching you.”

“It would be difficult to not know, don't you think? We are always the only two here. Of course I knew.”

The tone of her voice assured me that it was okay to sit down, so I did. “You don't think that is...creepy? Weird? Stalker-ish?”

She smiled and tied her hair back with a ribbon. Was it hot outside? What was it, almost April? I was hot, too hot, I fought the urge to take off my beanie but I knew my hair would be all screwed up so I didn't. “If I were in any way conventional,” she poured wine, actual wine, into the teacup and sipped, “then perhaps I would think it was *stalker-ish*. But do I seem in any way conventional? I sit here and play with a tea set and stuffed animals. Why would I find you any stranger than I find myself?”

I didn't know what to say so—“I brought my own sushi”—is what I went with. Word vomit. Fuck.

“I see that... What's your name? We've known each other for so long now but you know so much more about me than I know about you, if you think about it.”

I did think about it but I did not at all agree.

“Uh, Tyler. My name's Tyler.”

“Tyler... I’m Ayla. You can call me LaLa though. I like LaLa better. It’s sort of fitting don’t you think?”

If I said yes, was that insulting somehow? This was why I didn’t have girlfriends. Females are such complex creatures.

“It’s unique, like you.”

“See? I think so, too.” She nervously picked at a loose section of the quilt, I could see her fingers trembling.

This was awkward. I knew it would be, but the tension in my chest made it hard for me to eat my sushi. I didn’t even really like the stuff but I wanted to seem like there was any chance in hell we had something in common, even if it was as minor as us both enjoying raw, rice wrapped fish bits.

“Can I ask why, Tyler?” She pulled her legs up into her chest and I could see the crotch of her underwear. *Look away, look away dammit.* For someone who I suddenly found undeniably sexy, she looked so innocent, so vulnerable at the same time and that fact made me feel sickened at my own carnal thoughts. I should have jacked off before leaving the apartment. Twice. *Fucking idiot.*

I pulled off my beanie and ran my hands through my hair. “Why what?”

“Why you have been watching me for so long?”

I could feel my cheeks go red and at that moment it almost made me angry how much she was making me feel like I was a fifteen year old virgin, I was twenty-two for Christ’s sake. “I think you are fascinating.”

“You mean, you think I’m weird.”

“Not in a negative way. You are different. I have never met a girl like you. Or, well, anyone like you.”

LaLa. LaLa. The way even the thought of her name rolled on my tongue was intoxicating.

“What are your opinions on the subject of Alice in Wonderland?” She shifted, tucking her legs under herself and began digging through her bag, which was a black plush cat I would come to find is named Chococat. *He’s friends with Hello Kitty. They’re lovers, really. At least I think so.* LaLa pulled out a box of chocolate Pocky, “You want one?”

Random. “No, I’m good. My opinions of Alice in Wonderland? As in...the book? Because I haven’t ever read it or anything.”

One of the strangest questions I’d ever been asked, hands down.

“Anything. The movie? The 1951 Disney version, not Tim Burton’s take on it. I’d rather not get into my feelings on that piece of work right now.”

“Um...I mean it’s trippy. I watched it when I was super high once—lame as hell, I know—but I was told I needed to do it at least once in my life so I did.”

I have never seen someone look more disappointed than she did at that moment, and of course it would be disappointment in her eyes the first time they met mine. If someone else had seen them right then, right in that space and time, if they had seen the way those crystalline irises looked like shattered mirrors, they would have thought surely I had just broken her heart. Did I?

“I need to go. It’s getting late.” Her bottom lip quivered as if it were buckling under the weight of holding something back.

Goddammit.

“You want me to, I don’t know, uh... walk you home or something? I could help you out with your stuffed animals.” *The hell is wrong with you? Idiot. Who asks that?*

“No, its fine, I’ve got it. Never had anyone help me before. I don’t need it now.”

With that she hastily gathered up her things and clutched her two stuffed animals to her chest like a little girl. For a second it looked like she was going to let herself cry, but before I could really tell she skipped away like she always did, as if she were happy. Always happy.

I had never looked at the name on the gravestone before, the same as how I had never noticed just how beautiful she was.

“Anya.”

Saying it out loud, into the silence that had settled over the stones since she left, sent a shiver down my spine—like nails running slowly down my back.

Anya. Born 4th of May 1996. Died 16th November 2006.

* * *

I dreamt she was broken.

Literally, she was torn into a sea of doll pieces scattered around my bedroom floor, as if she were a Barbie ripped apart by a small child. The eyes of her doll face were open and staring, not at me, but through me. Her lips were moving but I could not decipher the words, not at first. Then, “You did this to me,” spilled from her mouth, “you did this to her,” and I was confused but I believed her. Among the plastic chaos, there was so much blood pooling around her disseminated limbs and I hadn’t noticed it before. How had I not noticed it? I looked down at my hands.

They were red.

Dripping.

* * *

I woke up with my palms in my face and my heart racing. I searched them over and then over again. I threw aside my covers and sat up, giving my room a once over. There were no signs of a chopped up girl. No body parts, no blood, there was no bodiless head mouthing words I could not understand.

I never had dreams when I slept, I never had nightmares. I mean, I *had* dreamt before, but it was not a regular occurrence, and it was usually the result of drinking too much and sleeping it off. That was what made it so hard to shake. I think normal, dreaming people would have been able to cast it aside as nothing, as *just a dream*, but I found myself looking at my hands all day that day. I kept searching for the blood.

* * *

The days were bodies trapped in quicksand, moving slowly against the sinking pull. The anxiety weighed heavy on my chest, each passing hour another stone placed upon my ribcage. I woke up every morning in a heaving panic. I never knew the heart could beat so loudly; I never knew how quickly blood could rush through veins—rush through, rush out. Blood, blood on my hands.

I had the same dream every night that week. *You did this to me. You did this to me.* I needed to know what it meant—some people say dreams mean something, that they are your subconscious trying to tell you something. Mine was screaming.

When Sunday came again I sprinted to the cemetery, the images of her porcelain limbs sprawled on my floor pushed each stride faster, then faster, until my lungs were flames in my chest. There was an overwhelming feeling in the pit of my stomach, a small voice curled somewhere inside of me saying that she was not going to be there. It was saying that I said

something wrong, did something wrong, and I was never going to see her again, not in any other realm existing outside of my nightmares.

My breath came hard and fast. I fell to my knees with the sudden realization that I was extremely out of shape. This would have bothered me longer if I hadn't seen her sitting there with her back against the headstone. No stuffed animals. No sushi or candies or tea cups. Something about this sent chills through me. Other people came to cemeteries with flowers and tears, but not her, never her.

She had pink ribbons crisscrossed up to her elbows that day, as if they were holding her together. Those chills were nails on my back—slowly clawing their way to my neck, choking.

I wasn't sure if I should walk away, if I should just go home and continue my unhealthy relationship with my Xbox. Maybe make myself a pizza, avoid my homework. Continue leading my life of failures and leave her to her own misanthropic vices. It sounded safer. I had been warned at an early age to stay away from crazy bitches, and I would be lying to myself if I said I did not believe, to some degree, LaLa fit that description.

I'd also be lying if I thought I could bring myself to walk away from her.

Her face lit up when she saw me, but I could tell it was forced. Quickly she threw up her mask, too afraid I would see behind the curtain in which she was perpetually shrouded. The thoughts of wanting to fuck her were much more comfortable—I did my best to avoid psychoanalytic bullshit but here I was.

I sat next to her. It had rained the night before and the grass was still damp, pieces of it clung to her pink and purple striped tights. She looked down, like she was afraid she wouldn't be able to fake it anymore, and nervously began picking at her white lace tutu.

“She was my sister. My twin.”

Nothing more was said that day. Nothing needed to be. Her hand found mine in the silence.

* * *

It was a Wednesday, creeping closer to midnight at the speed the Moon moves away from the Earth.

It was raining hard. The past few days had been a montage of grey skies and campus girls in rain boots, their squeaking cadence following me from one building to the next. Inescapable. Even still, I had the door open to let in the spring, the smell of wet night air. Something needed to compete with the overpowering odor of Chris' chain smoking.

I didn't smoke, but with as little as I had been sleeping lately I sure as hell was considering starting.

I knew I was drunk. People say alcohol makes it easier to deal with shit and I found myself working my way from six packs to Jack and Cokes each evening after class until I faded into sleep. I knew I was drunk, but I wasn't sure what the fuck was going on when I saw the hazy outline of a girl lingering just outside the reach of my porch light. She was nothing more than an obscured silhouette in the dark, but one that I would recognize even through drunken eyes. She walked into the light, its glow illuminating the fresh pink of her hair.

It was disconcerting, just how much she looked like a ghost standing there in the rain. The dripping transparency of her clothes making her look as if at any moment she would evanesce into the fog beyond the glimmer of the lights. I rubbed my eyes once, then again—sure that Chris, being the brazen asshole that he is, put something in my drink. It wouldn't have been the first time.

“Dude, where the hell are you? Are you gonna help us kill this shit or not?” As usual, he was yelling into his headset at someone else on our team, not at me.

She was still there.

It made me nervous, the timid way she began walking closer, inch by inch. She was not supposed to exist here. Not here, not in this world outside the cemetery gates.

LaLa said nothing, something that she was undeniably good at. She only walked into my apartment, straight to me, her wide eyes locked on mine, and she curled her tiny body into my lap.

“The *shit?*” Chris’ voice faded into the background.

I had never felt my heart break until hearing her cry.

* * *

In the morning she was gone. Glitter dusted the sheets where she had slept and they smelled of vanilla and strawberries.

Part of me wondered if she had ever really been there at all until I walked out of my room to find Chris sitting on my couch watching one of those early morning yoga shows that look like they were filmed in the early 80’s.

“She’s fuckin’ hot, Ty. Closet freak sexy. What took you so long to hit that? How was she?”

Sighing, I grabbed a water from the fridge, vainly hoping it would relieve the pressure on my throbbing brain. “Nothing happened, Chris.”

And it hadn’t. If she were any other girl, the opportunity would have been perfect. She was vulnerable, weak, desperate for comfort. Thinking about how easy it would have been made me sick and semi-hard simultaneously. The image of her in her black polka dotted garter belt and

bra stretching out, cat-like, in my bed was burned in my mind. The way she slipped off her thigh highs and high heels and whispered through tears that she couldn't stand to sleep with clothes on and she hoped that was okay. For obvious reasons I had no objections.

Yet still, nothing happened. I pulled her close to me, holding her tightly as if she might otherwise fall apart. The softness of her naked skin pressing against my chest could only be described as feeling *right*.

"It's my birthday," she whispered to me in the dark, the lights from outside danced over her skin like stars. "Our birthday".

She cried herself to sleep in my arms that night. Panic spread through me like venom, the way her body shook with such sadness made me painfully aware of the truth that this could very well never happen again. Nothing had ever scared me more in my life. Not even the image of her body scattered on my bedroom floor. Not the feeling of her warm, slick blood painted a deep red, like roses, on my hands.

* * *

I didn't dream the rest of the week until Saturday night, but this one was different. Much, much different.

It was through my eyes as a child. Rarely did I think back to my childhood and there was a reason for that. Some things are better off forgotten. Ignored. Locked away. It's not that it was all bad, because it wasn't. But it was loud. Angry.

I dreamt about my dad. His breath was hot with whiskey, lips cracked. Spit clung to the edges of his open mouth. Yelling—he was yelling at me but I couldn't hear him. I crouched in the fetal position and pressed my palms hard into my ears. Tears burned in my eyes but I knew no matter how much he yelled at me or threw me around to never let those tears fall past my

eyelids. It only made things worse. *Weak. You're fucking weak, kid. Grow some goddamn balls. You've been spending too much goddamn time with your mother. Women make you weak, kid.*

My mother. She stood in the doorway, her own eyes glistening, but never crying. We knew better to when he was like this. She waited until he shoved past her, until he was done yelling and in need of refilling his liquid personality before it ran out and he went back to being ordinary. Kneeling down in front of me she pulled my hands away from my ears and held them in hers. She kissed my forehead and pulled me to her. *I'm sorry, baby boy. I'm sorry that I did this to you. I'm so, so sorry. I'll never let him hurt you again.* She looked me straight in the eyes then, with a determination that scared me. *Ever. I promise.*

I was left alone in the dark room, my room, and somewhere, in some distant part of my world, glass was breaking.

When I woke, I was crying. The memory of my mother's kiss tingled on my forehead as if it had been real. I pulled the covers back over my head and put my face into the pillow to choke on my own screams.

And then I realized.

* * *

This time I did not wonder if she would be there, I knew she would. She was waiting under my tree when I made my way through the front gate. None of her stuffed animals accompanied her, but she brought her quilt and her tea set, her usual Sunday cemetery picnic array. She was in a simple black t-shirt that clung tightly to her frame and a pair of leggings printed with rainbows and cupcakes. She had no make-up on. It was so strange seeing her like that, and I knew without any doubt that something was horribly wrong, but still I could not help but notice just how beautiful she really was.

I sat down beside her and she laid her head on my shoulder, linking her arm through mine. “I’m sorry you have to see me like this.”

“What do you mean?” I pushed a strand of her hair behind her ears.

“Like this. So simple, plain. I look ugly but I just...I couldn’t...not today.”

I knew what had happened to her sister. I had a feeling anyway—the nightmare had drilled it into me time and again. I battled my own mind then, wondering whether or not the subject should be brought up or left to rest.

“You look beautiful, LaLa. Either way, you look beautiful.”

She smiled and it was perfect, “I’m not, but thank you, Tyler... You’re very sweet to me.”

“She was murdered wasn’t she? Your sister. Anya. Someone killed her.”

The color drained from her face, knocking the air from my lungs. I bit my tongue, feeling like a dick for bringing it up. *Selfish asshole.*

She curled herself into me like a small child in need of comfort, “We were only ten, you know. We were only ten and then she was gone and I was alone. I’m always alone.”

“What happened to her?”

I ran my fingers through her hair. I remembered how it used to feel when my mother would do it to me, how it would always make me stop crying and lull me into sleep.

“It should have been me. She should have lived. We were the same. The same body, the same soul. Do you know what it is like to have your limbs torn from your body? That’s what it feels like to lose a twin. By losing her, I felt everything that she felt. Isn’t that ironic?”

“LaLa...I—”

“No, shh,” she looked up at me with her eyes that could fool anyone into thinking she had never been sad a day in her life, they were so full of innocence, “you don’t need to say anything. Just hold me. Just be here with me, in this moment. This time, this space.”

“Who did it? Who took her from you?”

The coldness in her voice sent chills through the entirety of my body.

“Our father,” she said, “our father.”

* * *

She looked small in my bed. She could have been a child with how tiny she was, tangled in the sheets. Her long pastel hair fanned out on the pillows. She could have been a child, or a mermaid. A faerie. A fantasy. The pale shade of her skin, almost translucent, whispered that she never had been real at all.

But what is reality anyway?

I crawled under the sheets with her, pulling her warmth to me. She smiled then, in her sleep, a real smile. Like a broken china doll, she could never be fixed—not perfectly, not completely. There would always be cracks in the porcelain, the pieces would never fit together quite right. But I didn’t want to fix her. I wanted her, needed her, perfectly imperfect as she was.

We’re all mad here, after all.

We’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.

You must be, or you wouldn’t have come here.