

Willi Beu

It all began one day in November, the type of late autumn day when the wind whispers of the darkness that has already descended upon the city.

It was on this day that I had decided to spend the morning at a cafe just across the street from what was then my place of residence: a tall home of several stories wedged into a row of similarly Georgian-styled buildings. It was a rather grandiose street, all straight lines and stately windows edged in white trim, far removed from the shambled zone one would find further downtown. It was the first home I had occupied since taking leave of my family's country estate an hour or so west. I had done it all by myself too- gathered enough money to lease the house after winning a few key sponsorships. In those days, as long as I kept posting photos, the money kept flowing in, so much I hardly knew what to do with it all except spend it. It was a good business model, very sensible, because nothing made the photos look as good as the money did. Looking back now, the whole affair seems to have a hazy glow around it. It really was a wonderful time, a pastel era of smiling selfies and cell phone flashes... that is, while it lasted.

I had been sorting through various Facebook feeds that morning in the cafe, interrupted only by a few brief interludes in which I had looked up to contemplate the falling rain that patterned against the gray pavement and dulled the streetlights to a fuzzy yellow on the other side of the window. A cold yellow, if that was possible. I knew then that this would be the first of a season of truly cold days to come that year.

He found me there on Facebook, or at least that is where he made himself known to me. Reader, believe how I wish I might have known, might have halted in my tracks, but alas, I was young in those days. Oh, how I have aged in the months since.

It was a simple friend request, not unusual. There were days I received dozens of such requests and many more on my other platforms. My handles were in a particular state of flux at that time, and I welcomed every new follower, even expected it really. And so I accepted the friend request of Willi Beu without so much as a second thought.

Willi's first message came later that evening as I was lounging in my fluffed goose feather armchair. It was a short message, simply a question mark. I shook my head. I had established a habit of never worrying about things of this sort that did not seem to be worth my time, such a precious commodity to me. Closing the app, I went to join a group video call with some of my dearest friends, and I forgot almost entirely about the whole incident.

In the morning it was still there, sending an inquisitive look down to the depths of my soul.

*Willi Beu: “?”*

After posting my morning yoga pictures, it was still there, besmirching my screen even as it was buried under the onslaught of new messages that had come in throughout the morning.

After brunch, after my luscious salad lunch, after a tarot reading and the subsequent follow-up posts, after my daily deep dive into all the apps, and my hour of staring blankly at the wall, it was still there. For two days this ritual continued. I stopped

scrolling and started searching out the message just to check its status. Finally, on the third night I opened Facebook to find a new message waiting for me at the top of the feed. The green message light dared me to view Willi Beu's new correspondence.

For a minute then two, I hesitated, until my shaking fingers opened the message as if they moved on their own.

*"Answer the question."*

I almost threw my phone across the room. I would have if I had not been utterly frozen with shock, with dread, with that deep knowing feeling that someone has managed to slip past your defenses and now they are watching you and they know things, secret things that not even you can truly comprehend.

As I could not stand to imagine another day of silence, another day stalked by the stealthy Willi Beu, I typed a reply.

*"What question?"*

Despite my efforts, Willi was silent again for one, two, three days. In the meantime, I had attempted to go about my life as normal, but the crippling curiosity made my daily activities seem an almost impossible feat. Debilitated, I missed many of my social obligations, and even failed to keep up with my scheduled posts. I had expected my managers to call, even come to my door and demand an explanation, but there was only silence, a loud cavernous silence echoing with unanswered questions. I did manage to complete an inventory of my followers every night as perusal, and despite my inactivity, my numbers held steady or increased slightly on a few apps.

On the third night, I was there, waiting for him again.

I sat, huddled in my bed, staring at our conversation, trying to discern what he could be asking and why it struck me on such a deep, primal level, when suddenly I saw him begin to type. My heart raced wildly.

*“I’ll answer for you.”*

I jumped and dropped my phone to the floor as a violent crack of thunder struck at the window. By the incandescent glow of a flash of lightning, I crouched down to retrieve my phone. For a moment all was silent. Then a feeble ding sounded through the darkness.

This time the message came on Instagram.

*“Yes.”*

Reader, I cannot say what came to pass in the moments after this nonsensical revelation. From the few dark memories I can grasp in the chaotic slurry of my mind, it seems I fell into a sort of fit of confusion. This was nothing like the gentle curiosity of children, but rather a heavy weight that fell around me like so much murky water, choking me within my own bedroom.

I must have fled the room at some point during the night. I remember running down the stairs then running back up and down the hallways, trying to determine where I should go, where I might be able to face this situation. At some point I found my way down into the basement, perhaps thinking the unfamiliar space would offer an escape from the torments I somehow associated with my life upstairs.

The merciful rays of the morning slipped through the small basement window to find me sprawled across a dusty velvet couch. Slowly, I sat up and came face to face with an aged photograph propped against the wall.

I rose to my knees, peering through the misty glass to the sepia tones of the picture behind the frame. A young woman looked back at me, dressed in a glamorous dress suited for high end clubs and exclusive garden parties. She was posing with her elbow leaned against a kitchen counter, an elegant glass of champagne in her hand. But that counter, the shape of those windows, the arch of that high ceiling, it was all somehow familiar, and with a shock of emotion I realized why; the woman was standing in my house, but my house must have been hers at the time.

With a feeling of horror whose intensity surprised me, I leapt from the couch, which must have belonged to her as well. There was to be no respite in the basement. Everything down there, the spare lamps, the rug rolled-up in the corner, the pile of magazines, must have all been hers or perhaps even of those who came before her. How many people had lived within these walls? How many had been replaced, fallen and forgotten, their remaining keepsakes hidden away in this dark underbelly of this house? I ran to the stairs, shuttering to think I had been living above this woman's belongings all this time. More than belongings, these items felt like a creeping presence, and I had to get away back to the house that was bright and sunny and still mine.

I soon put myself to work in an attempt to calm my disturbed spirits. I found my work nearly unbearable; not only my frayed nerves, but my laptop itself seemed to be conspiring against me. I attempted in vain to recollect a time when I might have spilled

something on the keyboard or some other such incident to explain the mysterious malfunctions I now noticed in the hardware, namely a certain unresponsiveness in the trackpad. The screen also showed signs of dysfunction in the form of a strange flickering that made the words and images twitch with a life of their own.

It was midmorning by the time I mustered the courage to return to my phone and confront Willi's messages from the night before. But upon opening Facebook, I remembered that Willi's final message had actually come on Instagram, a rather shocking realization given that I had not even been aware he followed my public account. I looked up slowly and met my face in the mirror. I watched an unnerved expression settle across my features as I allowed myself to ask how many other platforms Willi had infiltrated.

I opened YouTube, Tok-tok, Snapchat, and to my sinking suspicion- Willi Beu, Willi Beu, Willi Beu- he was everywhere- in the followers list of every social media I had, everywhere with the same name and the same vague profile picture of an ornate mirror reflecting a white wall.

I blocked Willi Beu without a moment of hesitation. I tapped the screen so hard I might have cracked the glass. The process was cathartic, but a sort of instinctive rage persisted its pounding within my chest.

I laid back on my bed after I completed the blocking spree. Looking back, I think I knew even then that it was a temporary safety, little more than a minute of rest in an hour of attack.

Sinking into the false notions of security, I began refreshing my phone, waiting for something new as I had so many times before; this life of mine was one of watching,

watching the feeds, the trends, the likes, watching and waiting to make my own appearance.

At some point I must have fallen asleep again, still weary from the difficult night before. Once again, my sleep was anything but peaceful. I woke with a start when I felt something touch me, but my eyes would not open, and my body refused to move. Not touch me exactly but envelop me in a substance of terror like a cloud of poisonous gas, blinding me, then shaking me, filling my mouth, my throat with smoke and charged electrical current. I felt myself sinking slowly, then all at once through the floor into utter darkness, a darkness for the unknown, a darkness that stole my features. My face was gone then once and for all.

I sat up in bed and my phone buzzed once and lit up on the bedside table. I waited a moment and my phone buzzed again insistently. I reached out my hand and picked it up, relaxing into the dopamine-rich light, comforted by the way it pushed away the darkness that had fallen over the room as it did a little earlier each day now.

Another day passed much the same, trying to work or sleep and failing quite miserably at both. Eventually, I decided it was time to get out of the house. I thought the fresh air might do me good. I found myself walking towards the park imagining I could sit by one of the fountains and listen to the sound of the birds and the children playing with their toy boats and forget the entirety of the past week.

Along the way I crossed paths with a friend I had not seen in weeks, perhaps even months. She gave me a hug, and the feeling of her bony hands on my back sent a shudder through the length of my spine.

“Thanks for the support on my last post,” she said after we had finished the rituals of the greeting.

“When was that? I had to take a few days off,” I tried to explain.

“You poor thing,” she attempted to make a pained face. “Oh also, sorry I didn’t respond to your message yet, but I would love to do that collab. Great idea.” She let out a carefree laugh. “Well, have to go. But let’s get brunch. I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever.” She laughed again and patted me on the arm, leaving me to watch her strut away.

I stood there confused for a moment. Then I opened my phone, and there it was: a conversation between the two of us with the very message my friend had described. But how could it be? The last message had been sent the very night before, and I was nearly certain I had not communicated with her in at least a week. And yet, there it was right before my eyes.

I sank down onto a bench beside the street. Scrolling through my conversations, I found more and more messages I had absolutely no recollection of sending. I scrolled faster and faster, trying to trace the messages back to a point I could remember. I rushed to search for my conversation with Willi Beu, but there was no trace to be found. Searching for his name, it seemed he had disappeared from every platform, like he had never existed at all.

And then the screen went black. Suppressing a rising scream of some unidentifiable emotion, I shook my phone and held down the power button in an attempt to revive the device.



I started walking again without any perception of where I was going, only knowing I was too restless to sit still for a single moment longer. At last, my phone powered on again, but instead of opening onto the home screen, Instagram was already within view. I hit the home button without any response. Then a peculiar movement caught my eye. I turned my gaze back to the center of the screen as the keyboard appeared, and I watched my phone type out a new text message.

To Greta, one of my managers, *“Let’s meet at 8 tonight.”*

I could hardly comprehend what was happening. I tried to delete the message to stop it from sending, but it was already gone and my phone had already begun to type another.

To a yoga friend, Morgan, this time. *“Hahaha will I?”*

Then I watched in horror as my phone pulled up a photo of me standing in front of something shiny in what looked like a museum. I held the phone closer to my eyes as the photo settings were adjusted, the light and color compositions tweaked to create the desired effect. I let my arms drop slightly, and it was then that I realized it was not an image of me on my phone, but my reflection because the thing I was standing next to was a brilliant gilded mirror, just like the one in Willi Beu’s profile picture.

I think I dropped my phone as the scream that had been building for the past week finally escaped my lips in a cry of pure terror.

I remember running through the streets, dusky with the setting sun, and suddenly the sidewalks were full of faces illuminated by screens. Forgive me, reader, and gather your patience, for I can hardly find the words to describe the perplexing sight I saw laid out before me. These faces seemed to float like specters, shining with a pale and

deathly light, their eyes hallow pits of dark nothingness. They rushed at me, so I was forced to swerve away to avoid them. I knew they would go through me and tear me apart if I let them touch me.

I know not the time that elapsed before I stumbled back to my beautiful Georgian house on that beautiful street, but it must have been a while, for it was then undoubtedly night. Placing my hand on the doorknob, I found it locked. I tried the electronic keypad to no avail. The little screen glowed red.

Desperately, unwillingly, I looked slowly up to my perfect windows and what I saw there will haunt me for the rest of my days. There was a face, peeking out from behind the curtains. It was my face, and I was smiling.

My phone rang in my hand. I had not dropped it after all, only forgotten I had been holding it, clutching it so tightly my fingers had turned white, numb to the feeling. I watched my face disappear behind the curtains again. I turned on my phone.

*“Will I Be U: Your turn. Who will you be now?”*