

Section 1: Heat

The mid-afternoon Lawrence Harper died was swelteringly hot. I could hear the sizzling of his skin against the shimmering pavement mere moments after his fall, sweat condensing off of him like fog on a window. His face lacked the solemn paleness corpses are typically afforded-In the heat of an Arizonan July, even the dead are flush. And, I suppose, Lawrence Harper was never one for...physical expression. As the cops arrived and sluggishly trudged out of their cars, Jim Baker, the sheriff, looked directly into the Sun with a useless glare, resentful that death stubbornly persists in such draining conditions.

“One day, there’s gonna be a pool drowning,” said Deputy Jamison, clapping his hand against Baker’s shirt after he walked around from the driver’s side of the police cruiser, coming away covered in a membrane of sticky sweat.

“And one day, Jamison, you’ll mind your own fucking business and do your goddamn job,” rebutted Baker, in no mood for the youth’s callous remarks.

As the pair stepped up to the corpse, which had begun to smell, it quickly became obvious what the cause of death was. “Jesus Christ...what kind of psycho does this to a person?” Jamison stuttered, the sobering scene melting the cool act quicker than any blazing sun. Baker stood motionless, mouth hanging agape, reply trapped in a clenched throat.

Lawrence Harper was a man devoid of all passion and pleasure. A banker by trade, his deposits and loans were determined by computational algorithms, without extending sympathy to the struggling widow or considering the moral implications of sharing interest in fascist regimes. He had made enough to retire long ago, yet he continued to ring out the crusty, dried rag of capitalism. He had a beautiful wife who was capable of passionate love, though rumor was the hardest thing between them was their prenuptial agreement. In all his dealings, he was stoney-faced, never apologizing in victory or angrily nursing a loss. Harper was a shell of a man, his death as insignificant as the loss of a machine on an assembly line. He will be replaced, his entire life amounting to nothing more than a delay.

Section 2: Freedom

Meanwhile, a few blocks away, the sun pierced through the rain clouds of my mind, opening up horizons I’d never believed truly existed. As Harper’s body rotted on the sidewalk, blood gushing out in a crimson waterfall, I practically skipped across the very same asphalt streets. I was invincible, I was iridescent, I was infinite. Freedom is a funny thing-Sometimes you have to take it to obtain it, but once you have it, it’s intoxicating.

Having now reached my destination, I stopped at the playground I had grown up on. Well, it wasn’t the same playground-The old metal bars, rusty and sharp, had been replaced with a textureless plastic. Where there was once an iron slide, curving like a snake poised to strike, a hollow yellow tube stretched downward at a perfect 30 degree angle. This was another of dear Lawrence’s majestic works-When safety concerns had arisen regarding metal and burns, he had bought up the property and “renovated” it, then sold it to the city for a tidy sum.

This is what time is worth to a soulless man like Harper-nothing, or even less than nothing. A liability.

I turn away, feeling rage flow through my veins. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling, like sadness or anger. In fact, quite the opposite. I was drunk on it, cherishing this feeling of power. I was ready to adjudicate, judge, and execute. I prayed that someone would step up to me, and give me a chance to smash their head into the hollow shell of my childhood. I felt powerful, and I was powerful. Not because of physical prowess or mental acuity, but because I was a man without limits, looking for trouble. It wasn't hard to find.

Going back in the direction I came was Annie Harper, Lawrence's wife, presumably to ensure that the hole in Harper's head was indeed fatal, as people in denial are prone to do. She wore tight, green leggings and a slightly oversized Salt Life tank top, her long, dirty blond hair tied into a tight ponytail, with subtle but impressive makeup, despite being hastily done. It was almost too perfect; Her eyes weren't wet with tears, her cheeks weren't splotched with color, her forehead wasn't even damp, as someone's would be if they were rushing to catch a loved one's final moments.

"How was Zumba?" I ask, with a leering grin and a begrudging tone. "Hope it wasn't cut short! Goodness knows Lawrence needs a paramore in the *utmost* shape for his 3:00 fuck!"

"Fuck off, asshat. Y'know he's dead right? And it wasn't Zumba, it was Taekwondo." Annie spat back, in a surprisingly resonating voice for such a small frame. I'd always liked that about her-To be able to wield such power, such ferocity, regardless of circumstance.

"That did come to my attention. Actually, several years ago. Now, his outsides just look like his insides. Honestly, it's about time the man learned to have some transparency,".

"How do you not care? He is, was, your brother."

"And I rue that fact every day. The burdens we bear, eh? Listen, Annie, you don't seem all that upset yourself, so stop the 'holier than thou' bullshit. Do you remember the night we shared? Before we graduated...we can have that again, if you'd like." I was pulsing with desire, ready to take her like I'd taken Lawrence, though in another sense entirely. Some part of my fractured psyche desperately looked for consent in her eyes, though the much larger beast inside of me was bubbling to the surface, ready to pounce, mouth watering at the tantalizing possibility to be set free once again...to hunt.

Section 3: Pleasure and Passion

The first time that Annie and I were together was also the last, but I had never forgotten the night, it being etched into my memory like a brand, as these nights often are for the antisocial. We'd gone to the same university together-She was an Arts major, I was a Classics major, but had known each other from a "Gifted Kid" summer camp we'd both attended growing up. Anyway, one of the fraternities was hosting a block party that night, and it had spilt into the

art gallery. It was a humble collection, but nonetheless, it was precious to us. When I had seen the party advancing on Professor Harper's final work-An interpretation of a medieval tapestry, with my late father overlooking a kingdom of colorful wilderness, I knew I had to save it. I pushed one of the fraternity brothers out of the way, sending him toppling onto a keg of beer. I barely noticed, my vision tunneling on the last artifact of my family. Just as I began unhooking the tapestry from the pins holding it to the wall, a shoulder forcefully pulled me back, a deep, though controlled, strength behind it.

"John, what are you doing? The university will have you expelled if you take that." It was my brother, his shallow, dark eyes looking at me incredulously, unblinking. He wore an ill-fitting fraternity jacket, its cheaply threaded collar bursting at his fat neck.

"I don't care, Lawrence! Your 'brothers' are going to destroy it-The only thing we, sorry, I, have left of Dad".

"Look, John, I don't need your petulant fits right now. There are important alumni here tonight. Do what you want, but don't expect me to-"

Suddenly, a raging panther-Sorry, a drunk man with a 3 foot long beard and hair past his bare ass-pushed past us, a full beer spilling out of his hand directly onto where the tapestry was. Or, where the tapestry had been-The wall was now bare, not a tapestry in sight.

Shocked at this turn of events, I scanned the room for the thief, half-heartedly announcing in a monotone voice, "Fuck you, Lawrence. If you don't care, so be it, but don't be surprised when no one cares about you either."

"That's hurtful, John. Have you been taking your-John!". I had turned away from my brother, pushing myself out of this claustrophobic space, desperate to accomplish my original mission. Outside, I quickly found my quarry. A slim figure, dressed in dark leggings, a violet blouse, and a wispy skirt was Annie, clutching the carefully rolled-up tapestry beneath her delicate arms.

"Annie!" I call out, failing to conjure up some witty remark beyond her name, my legs suddenly shaking like melting jello.

"Oh, hey John." She turns to me, her emerald eyes, glowing like stars, meeting mine. I quickly look down, ashamed of my shitty, bland eyes. "I'm surprised you recognized me, with your eyes being locked to the floor and all. Have you found the bomb yet, or are you still looking?"

"Even the frat guy humping his bong over some priceless relic back there couldn't miss your feistiness, Annie Bulmer". I reply, smiling widely, proud of my 'recovery'. I'd been thinking about this sort of comeback for weeks, but hadn't planned where to go from here.

“Is that so? If by feistiness you mean ass, and by priceless relic you mean some art student’s lazy capstone, you might be onto something there!”

I laugh. Well, I do *my* laugh, which is closer to a lion’s condescending exhale over its prey, before biting down. “You take what you can get, in a shithole like this”. Sometimes I wish my main method of flirtation was reflecting on my own misery...

“Life’s one big shithole, blah blah blah. Tell me something I don’t know.” She stands there awkwardly, her eyes searching me, almost looking for something.

Finally, I muster up the courage and say, “Thanks, by the way. For saving my dad’s painting, I mean. He was a piece of shit, but he was my piece of shit.”

Her eyes soften, and she takes a step closer, her arm lightly tracing an outline of jagged teeth on my arm. “You’re a weirdo, but I don’t think you’re as much of a creep as everyone says.” She pauses for a second, then she does something I would never have expected. She looks down, her fingers tracing the back of her neck, clearly nervous.

“Is...everything okay?”

“Do you wanna see something secret?” she blurts out awkwardly, a rabid, pleading look in her eyes. Without replying, I take her hand in mine, surprised to find her damp with sweat, and nod vigorously, a hint of a smile curving around my lips.

She takes me by the hand and makes me close my eyes, leading me down rigid alleyways, with sudden, sharp turns. Suddenly, we are in a building, going up stairs, and then I am sitting on something soft and fluffy. There’s a sudden yelp, and now I am sitting on something still soft, but perhaps not quite as fluffy.

“Sorry Spankers!” Annie cries as I hear a cat hiss. “Okay, open!”. Opening my eyes, I see that I’m in her bedroom...My brother’s bedroom. There are pictures of them on a dresser-her watching him try on suits, him leading her through the bank he was interning at, and him driving her in a sleek Cadillac to a conference.

“This is secret? I’ve been here...at least a couple times” I say, suddenly noticing my heart was beating at physics-defying speeds and my toes were fidgeting with electricity. I quickly register that my father’s tapestry is disregarded on the floor, though it has clearly been placed there carefully.

She pulls herself onto the bed. “We go to university in a city, in a desert. Did you want to have sex with the rattlesnakes, in the dirt?” she whispers into my ear. After that, we curl up together, and suffice to say, it is the only time in my entire life I have been united with someone in both body and soul, or really, either.

When we had finished, we lay for a while in silence together, looking at the ceiling. I laugh to myself. Who would've known how entertaining it can be to count the blades on a ceiling fan? After a while, I speak up.

"Why do you stay with him, Annie? You have nothing in common-He doesn't even see you as a person. Look at these pictures-You're a trophy to him." I look at Annie in the eyes intentionally, the only time I've done so to anyone but my father or brother. My eyes plead-Just this once, I beg her, and through her, the Universe, to spare me this kindness.

Annie's face clenches into a sudden glare, the magic so quickly draining from the room. "Do you think I'm an idiot? I know that, and that's how I like it. Well", Annie rolls her eyes, then turns onto her other side, so I can't see her face, "not how I like it. But how I need it. I didn't have money growing up. With Lawrence...well, I won't ever need to work again. Let's drop it there". At the end, Annie's voice shakes a little. I knew her childhood had been rough, like mine.

Usually, I'm not one to argue. Not because I'm socially anxious, though I am, or socially awkward, which I also am, but primarily because there's no use negotiating with an idiot. However, I hold my breath here, despite knowing full well that Annie is deeply intelligent. Surprisingly, even for me, I don't speak out of respect and perhaps even a twinge of love.

After a while, Annie turns back over, and we study each others' eyes for a while longer. She absent-mindedly starts to trace those jagged teeth into my arm again, so I finally speak up and ask what they mean. "You would think they were teeth," she replies, giggling. "They're not teeth, John, they're mountains. You're a mountain. We're mountains. We're monoliths-We can see the world for what it is. We see the truth, and the grand majesty of it all. We're kindred spirits that way, I guess. Only problem is-"

"Mountains erode until they break" I interrupt, a knot forming in my throat. "Look Annie, I know things may not work out, but thank you. Thank you for the best night of my-"

The door to the bedroom suddenly opens. It doesn't do so with a bang of rage, or a stealthy whoosh. It is as ordinary as if Lawrence was coming home for bed. His eyes bore into mine, and he speaks up, "John, get out of my room. Take father's tapestry with you, I don't know why you worship the man anyway". He waves his hand dismissively.

I stand up, fists clenched, but knowing that by any objective metric, I am in the wrong. Hell, technically, I'm trespassing-This is Lawrence's property, not Annie's. He'd always been very meticulous about that sort of thing. I barge past Lawrence, too angry to look back. I still wonder if Annie watched me leave. All I know is that night, Lawrence ruined my life as nonchalantly as taking out the trash, which I suppose is all I ever was to him.

Section 4: Finality

Twelve years later, I finally am able to look Annie in the eyes again. “Absolutely the fuck not, John! Are you insane? He’s dead, John...dead.” There were tears in her eyes now. “Y’know, I don’t know how I’m gonna support myself...”

“All you give a fuck about is money,” I scream, my voice hoarse with tears of my own. “Annie, we had it. WE HAD IT.” I bellow that last part, before entering into a coughing fit. She goes to touch my back, and I use this opportunity to grab her by the throat and slam her against a brick wall. My fingers burn against the heat of the building. “WE HAD IT!” I scream once more, my mind careening like a spaceship plummeting wildly from space. I get close to her, and whisper into her ear, in a voice so low it was barely audible, “We had it, slut”.

Nonplussed, Annie scowls at me with pure hate, and sarcastically spits: “Your brother may have been a machine, your daddy a waste of space, but you, John, you’re something else. You’re a-”. She cut herself off, her scowl transforming into a face of shock and horror. “Who’s blood is that, John? Oh god...What did you do?”

Before I can reply, she knees me in the crotch, causing me to weaken my grip on her throat. My vision goes red, and as I regain some semblance of stability, her foot slams into my face with the force of a wrecking ball. But that didn’t hurt nearly as much as what she said afterwards- “I never want to see you again, John Harper”.

I tried to get up, but quickly, I realized my jaw was unhinged, and the area between my legs was bleeding profusely. I wasn’t going to be able to fight my base instincts-I was a prisoner of myself, and would almost certainly wait here until the police found me, then I would wait even longer, in a cell. I reach into my jacket pocket, wrapping my hand around the blood-stained gun that had already taken one life today-I suppose this is how things were always going to end. The handle was excruciating to touch, baking as it had for several hours. I pulled out my phone, whose case was now splintered after my hard fall, and began writing out a note.

Section 5: Lawrence

Dear Annie, You will think that I killed Lawrence. Everyone will. I suppose I did...I can’t quite fathom it myself, even as his blood mixes with my own. But I am resolute in this: It was the best thing I’ve ever done...

It’s funny; I wouldn’t have thought that Lawrence was the type of man to beg. Life is full of surprises.

“Okay John, why did you want to meet? I have a work meeting in 20 minutes, and I can’t go sweating like this. What’s so urgent that you needed to meet after twelve years of radio silence?” Lawrence huffed before me, offering up a cigarette from a noticeably cheaper brand than his own.

“Straight to business, just like always. No ‘I love you’, not even a ‘Where have you been?’” I say, throwing the cigarette into a trash can behind me.

Lawrence rolls his eyes, stomping out his cigarette. “You’re too old to be holding onto spite, John. Put it behind you, or at the very least, pout in private.” His condescending tone trended upward as he spoke, as if speaking to a stupid child, before lowering into a deadly serious, hollow voice.

I butt in. “No, I do have something. Actually, it’s about that work meeting. Y’know the local art gallery you just closed...the one I worked at?”

“Business is business John, you know that. Surely you can get started somewhere else? I’ll offer you a loan, could maybe even negotiate a family discount.” As Lawrence spoke, he covered his mouth with his hand-The man was so incorruptibly corporate, he couldn’t hide the lie that he would dare offer a family discount.

“No, no. See, we got a petition going.” I begin to clarify.

“We both know petitions don’t do shit.”

“But, one of the signees happened to be a private investigator, and he found something interesting in your bank records.” I pull out the paperwork, and point to the reserve ratio held by the bank.

“15 percent is not an abnormal reserve ratio, given the state of the economy. What is this about?”

“Perfectly normal, you’re right! You always were so business savvy! I think you’ll find, though, that people aren’t as familiar with reserve ratios as you. In fact, right now, I believe that every stupid fool who signed that petition-each of them an artsy liberal with no idea what the fuck deposit insurance is-is lining up outside your bank right now, asking to withdraw.”

Lawrence laughed at this-It was a haughty, dry laugh, like the harsh Arizona sun we talked beneath. “That is petty, even for you. Well, that’s all the more reason for me to be off. If this is your version of revenge, it’s pitiful. I really do feel sorry for you.”

I fumed. The heat mixed with the sun, boiling me. I could feel my shoes igniting, my pants burning, my shirt blazing. “Who are you, Lawrence! You’re nothing-A cog in a machine that will replace you the moment you become inefficient. You care about your stupid bank more than me...more than your wife. Just be angry...be something...for once. Please”.

Lawrence stared at me for a few long moments. He opened his lips and began mouthing words, but it was as if there was a pane of glass between us, blocking all noise. Finally, he spoke in a voice that flowed like water down a stream-smooth, clear, and steady:

“I’m sorry you’ve been neglected, John. Is that what you want to hear? I’m sorry that, as the younger brother, you’ve had the luxury to relax-to feel-to be. I’m not your shrink, but I am the one paying for her, even though you continue to ignore me. Even though you fucked my wife the last time I saw you. I’ve provided for you your entire life-I’ve been more successful in every possible facet. I’m sorry that to compensate, you’ve had to make me out to be a sociopath, so that you can play at being some tortured beast. You want to know the truth? You and I-We’re the same. Same blood, same everything. Now,” Lawrence’s pig-like eyes narrowed, focus singularly on me for the first time in years, “fuck off, you worthless animal, if that’s what you want to be.”

I stared blankly at Lawrence, my lips trembling. A tear runs down my face-Is this anger? Sadness? A longing, a nostalgia, for something I never had? Twelve years of misery-deteriorating until I became this. *No, this is who I’ve always been.* I close my eyes.

I open my eyes. I am back on the street, slowly bleeding out, pointing a gun to my chin. Everything is monochrome, grayish-yellow. They say that, in the end, your life flashes before your eyes. What a load of horseshit.

Did I enjoy killing the Harpers? To that, I ask, what is pleasure? An involuntary response-as instinctual as animalistic reproduction or clawing at the face of an attacker. Pleasure is mindless, rather than a state of mind. A person can be happy, can earn happiness, but they can’t earn pleasure. Pleasure consumes us, rather than the other way around. I didn’t choose to kill Harper, in so much as I don’t choose to breathe, forced to maintain my wretched existence. Well, until now.

Did I take pleasure in killing Lawrence Harper? In gouging his eyes out? In breaking his arms? In meeting his eyes, as for the first time in his life, he mouthed the word, “Please”? In ending it, with a final shot to the head, before leaving him to bleed out like the dog he-

Yes, I took pleasure in killing Harper. I’m not ashamed, nor am I pleased. I am singularly one thing-Lawrence was right.

I am the avatar of action, pleasure, and passion. I am an animal. I am a beast. I am more than Harper ever was-I take what I want before the world takes it from me. I am unashamedly human. I am everyone you’ve ever known, and ever will know. I am you.

I wrap my hands around the trigger, undo the safety, and think of Annie.