

THE SWEET AND THE STRANGE

Stoned, strolling down Central Park West wearing sunglasses, smiling and skipping under the trees. A city sanctum, away from honks and horns. It appears open, like a green palm. Step in. That downtown bustle swings away like a closing door. Down there is a different kind of wilderness. Not worse, just impure. In both places, a new adventure every time. Where you might cross your tracks, but never your paths.

LCD's "Home" sneaks through my headphones, and my dancing feet slide me forward, tapping towards a knick-knack shop on Amsterdam. I slow into a bouncing-walk of sorts, almost imperceptible.

I keep walking, loathing to leave the park. These trees, shadows and gaps of sun. A bright blue smile above. The dogs all over the downs. Kneeling down next to them, seeing almost human eyes, curious and imploring. A busker massaging a violin with a faded bow, under a tunnel telling their struggling tale.

But I do leave. The shop has dusty rows of goods, smelling of mold, musk and wood. An old romantic wood. Dried out typewriters stood like sentries, with tired flags. Faded signs and posters announced the past. Seals imprints with monograms greyed from lack of ink. But throughout, an undercurrent of hope and promise move below this encasement of humanity's treasures.

"E'rybody bought this crap in the 80's... *sold* in the 90's," the gruff owner boasts to a couple, young and holding hands. They shift their legs. "And there's all kinds of things..."

I flip through several records before stumbling onto the Grateful Dead's *Europe '72* tour, smiling at a distant summer, singing "Tennessee Jed" with all our hands and eyes closed around silent air guitars, and drums. The Dead remind you of life.

Jamie's older brother had given us that CD, improving our world a always. He'd stood tall, with sensitive shoulders not unlike Jamie's, but pinned back with a bit more confidence. He was a kind kid. To everybody.

I wrap the plastic bag around my finger, bounding west to Riverside Park. A slight wind picks up, at first smelling sweet and distant, but getting slightly stronger. I find a bench overlooking the Hudson,

removing my glasses. It's a darkened, glass sky. The wind wafts scented flowers and I close my eyes, as if to enhance the experience. Honeysuckle—and roses, certainly. Also unknowns I'd someday love to meet.

I love the passion of plants—their beauty borne from dirt. Despising darkness, they rise proud, perfect, imperfect, towards the light of the sun. Even when they could no longer hold their weight, and had to fold over, they still became ladders to help others climb.

My eyes sink into the river below, heavy and transfixed. Choppy waves swayed in the dark water with black teeth and tips. Tomorrow it might smile again. Flowing streams, same all over the world—only the life around them is different. They say to visualize all your negative memories, and emotions, packed into crates. Then when the tides' right, release them downriver, around the bend and outta sight.

My thoughts fall to my father, those last few days he knew it was over. Weird seeing him like that: eyes clouded like blue blurs, shriveled skin around the neck. Bone-shaky fingers. The last few Times crosswords I'd brought remained unimprinted by words. Seeing me stare at those empty letter-boxes, he chuckled something about saving the best for last. I forced a weak laugh as a thick tear fell from my welling eyes, blurring the lines on eight across.

Growing up, he'd insist we use first names when discussing “business” matters, like college tuition, or help on a rental deposit. So when he brought up his will, voice hollow, I started saying “Caleb —” but he raised a frail arm to stop me. He told me he was donating his money to the Prostate Cancer Foundation. “Shit I'm going through,” he said, looking down at the catheter. But his tone was uncertain, like he hoped I might object.

His smile quivered. He rolled silent, burdened eyes towards the lighted window. They glowed like fireflies. I finally said, “Dad. It's ok, you know? That's a good thing.” He nodded back at me, slow and dreamy, reassuring my wrist with gentle fingers. The words I wanted to lift up to him then were too heavy. I needed to get them right. But a few days later I got the call.

Within six months I'd flown back to London, quitting my job, joining the dream I'd long set for myself. The sky was open. Taking only my notebook, I set off to Eastern Europe—going anywhere I'd not been before, gathering stories. Now I was home, feeling like a foreigner. I wanted to keep traveling, keep moving, but then I'd thrown this ball that I now had to catch.

My mitt's raised, but that ball keeps looming in the sky now, blocking everything else, growing like the dark shadow of a swooping dragon roaring battle cries I'd soon need to face. Perhaps my limitations. And with funds dwindling, I need to sit down and work. Pure madness, trading job for dream.

But I love it—like lighting off fireworks, and writing out the booms.

The party's in the West Village, and I say "I'm here to see the Mayor of Tarrytown" through a slit in the side door.

"Chase, yes!" Jamie rushes over, bear-hugging me until I tapped my right hand weakly against his side. "Welcome back! Hair's getting long. Looks good, dude."

"Cheers," I laugh. "Bit hot in the summer. First time I've really gone for it though." I hand him the record. "Happy birthday, brother."

He tilts his head over an outstretched arm, closing one eye with a smile. He brushes a smooth hand across, as if wiping dust off a window. Glancing back up, he wipes his greyhonest eyes, and we both step in for another hug.

"Heard you and Brooke just bought a place," I cough.

"Yeah—yeah we did," he drawls, turning the album over. "Got lucky with a spot in Greenpoint. Little outdoor space, too."

"Outdoor space changes the whole situation." I picture my old patio in Notting Hill. Everything dripping in plants; everything left behind.

"Gotta get you over for beers soon, man. Or dinner." He swigs his drink. "Brooke'll hook it up. She's better than me now, anyway."

I force a heavy smile. "Home-cooked meal sounds pretty good," I admit, thinking about what a wholesome, nice night that experience could actually produce. "Not had one in months."

"So whereabouts you living now? You never answered my text."

"Just renting a room on the Upper West. Really nice lady owns the place." I blush, adding, "Quiet, but I need that."

“Back for good then?”

“A while at least.” I scratch my neck. “Feels weird to sit still though.”

“Well we missed you, man. Didn’t know if you were ever coming back,” he shakes my shoulder, then turns and hands me a beer. We clink.

“What’re you doing work-wise?”

I take another drink, wiping foam off my beard. “Just focusing on the writing for as long as I can.” Jamie nods. “Still so much to learn, and so much to do.”

I’d been back a month, and blowing through cash was my only success. Each night out, buying drinks and dinners, was like stealing a full day or week from the timeline I’d painstakingly carved out over the London years. Years of cubicles and florescent lights. That next day, hungover, I’d stare at the screen—finding anything else to do—scrolling through *Instagram* or watching the Phoenix video for the tenth time on *La Blogothèque*. Frustrated, I’d go out again for a “quick” walk that turned into hours. Walks were easier than facing the truth. Was like if I didn’t start, the writing couldn’t be bad. But if it’s never bad, how can it ever get good?

We duck outside for a joint. The streets are pouring with people now, as the day dips into the night. A wind stirs, trees flickering all around us like leafy jazz-hands. It’s getting cooler. I slip off my Nikes, stretching bare feet against the naked sidewalk.

“Seeing anyone these days?” Jamie asks, taking a hit.

“Not really. Need to sort out my own shit before I can be there for anyone else’s, ya know?”

“Yeah, I hear ya,” Jamie says, thumping something off his tongue. “Well look,” he adds, shifting from one leg to another. “Brooke wants to set you up. I told her it was trouble though,” he laughs. “But seriously, let me know. Cool chick, really smart. Plus Brooke already told her you hate commitment. Somehow she’s still interested.”

I take a hit and contemplate.

“Honestly though, man,” he says, clasping my shoulder. “She’d probably be good for you.”

I rub my foot against a mossy strip in the sidewalk. “Chasing pleasure is costly,” I admit.

“Especially on time. But still,” I raise my eyes. “I need those amusements. I ne—”

“You need a muse.”

I focus on the fiery point I'm holding between my fingers. It burns, even as I hold it still. It always burns. I chuckle to myself. How long had it actually been since Hennie?

We'd crossed paths at an English bookstore in Paris, where she'd been studying at the École des Beaux-Arts. I was looking for good translations of Balzac and Baudelaire, as she reached for *Wuthering Heights*.

"There's a real love story in there," I said to her, after a beat. "But sure seems sad at first." She turned child-blue wide eyes toward me, curiously naive for someone so beautiful. It was late afternoon, and a dusty shaft of waning sun glowed on her blonde hair. The sides of her mouth seemed permanently curled upwards, as if someone whispered an intimate joke into her ear, but it wasn't right to laugh.

We walked out together, wandering all day and night through Parisian streets. I couldn't tell you one place we passed. We kept walking blindly, talking, with me happily carrying her books like it was middle school. She wanted to be a Gallerist featuring unknown, local artists. She'd start small in one city, and then keep branching out—showing people undiscovered beauty.

We shared fears. *Failing* topped of both our lists. More scared of not trying. We covered half the city that day, and everyday after we covered even more. Her mind was entrepreneurial in every sense. She'd call me out on my bullshit, laughing when I'd do the same to her. We kissed on the first day, making love on the second week. That euphemism finally made sense to me. She confessed I'd been the first guy to go down on her, and ever since then I'd felt this overwhelming need to protect her—from a dark world. And later, from myself.

For two years we met on weekends, rendezvousing throughout Europe, or in our respective cities. It always felt new and intense. Hennie was the first person I'd shown my writing to, expecting to be laughed at, or worse—told I was great. Instead, she came back with a marked-up draft, with all these insightful comments sprawled out in red ink like it was really a serious business.

Her coursework completed, Hennie brought up moving to London. Her sweet, sunrise eyes offered me a chance to be better than I was. But then having the sweet, I wanted the strange. I could feel myself straying, wondering what other girls were like in the height of their ecstasy. So I cut things off, cursing my stupid sunset-soul.

Tired from tears, we'd stood embracing at the Gare du Nord. I said she was better off without me—that she'd be fine once back in New York. It wasn't grand, but I meant it. We kept slow dancing in small circles, eyes closed, her feet on mine. "You're so stupid," she whispered, as I kept squeezing tighter—a foreign, female voice overhead announcing my train's imminent departure.

"It's funny," I tell Jamie, exhaling. "Sometimes I wonder if this romance thing isn't just a big game of musical chairs. Like if you don't settle soon, you'll get caught without a seat—and nowhere to sit—when the beat stops."

We head back inside. The bar is darker now, more muffled. It's filling up, but the din's dimmed down with the light.

"Well I hope you find that sweetheart tonight."

"Yeah," I shrug, ordering beers. "That girl that makes you dance."

Jamie cocks his head, giving me a side-smile. "And allows you to stop."

I grab more beers later on as two girls sitting at the bar lean into each other, giggling. One's a pretty, light-skinned black girl with twisting braids and large breasts. The other is Latina, with a hard beauty—sharp cheekbones, pointy almost, like they'd been pinched at the top. Dark brown hair, pulled back tight.

"We were just saying you've a nice face," the Latina laughs. "I'm Kat." She raises her hand like a waitress serving a platter. "This is Shayna."

"What's in the notebook?" Shayna nods to my left. "Drawing something?"

I give them the quick version. There's a pause, then Kat claims she has a project to discuss.

"Get anything good done today?" Shayna asks.

"Not really," I admit, looking down. "Couldn't get past the first sentence."

"Go on," she smiles. "How's it start?"

I look around the bar, considering how good it might feel to finally open these pages to someone. I'm sure they'll be unable to read my handwriting—a strange, cursive hybrid—but before I even decide,

Shayna gently unburdens my clasped hand, turning to the last page: *We're all just loose souls, tip-tapping toward rabbit holes, while dancing on the dusk.*

She looks up, then reads it again. "Couldn't take that anywhere?" she finally teases. "Seems like it could go in a million different directions."

"Probably right," I laugh. "But by its nature, I'm not sure it can ever end."

"Well," she says, rubbing her finger along the rim of her martini glass, "He could finally fall into one."

I fall transfixed by the pink liquid in her glass—how impossible it would be for a shrunken person to climb out of a glass like that.

"Been here a while?" I finally ask.

"Just got here," she shrugs. "But Kat's been at it all day. She's dragging me to an afterparty in Noho now. You should come."

"Yes! Tequila!" Kat cheers, sliding off her stool for the bathroom.

"I would, but all my friends are here."

"Can't have that then," she smiles. "A drink, another day. Here," she says, scrawling in my notebook. "Take this."

Kat comes up behind me, brushing breasts against the back of my arm. She asks if Shayna gave me her number.

"Well, I guess you got the prettier one," Kat lies. "You smoke?" she asks me. "Wait, where're my cigarettes?"

"In your bag," Shayna scoffs.

"So, you smoke?"

"Pot—cigarettes just when I drink."

"Well you're having one now." Kat nips two Newports, pulling my arm towards the door.

A pout pours over Shayna's face. I hesitate, not wanting to hurt this fellow creature's feelings. Smiling over my shoulder, I give the helpless look of a parent humoring a child— though I'm unsure what the roles actually are.

Kat pats the seat next to her on a bench outside. “Sit.” I move closer, but stay standing. She lights both cigarettes, handing me one.

“So what’s this ‘project’ you mentioned?” I fill my mouth with menthol, letting it tingle, before inhaling sharply.

She gives me a puzzled look. “Oh, right!” She fidgets, then examines the tip of her cigarette to ensure it’s lit. “A screenplay. I need help writing a pilot.” She relights it. “For instance, you like strip clubs?”

“Well, yeah,” I laugh. “At least—I don’t not like them.”

“Very passive are we?” she taunts, ashing her cigarette. “So yeah, I help organize, like, ultra-private strip shows. Parties, really. Loads of finance types. Guys with too much money. Like if you have stupid money, we sort you out.”

“It’s amazing how—”

“But it’s an art,” she continues. “Pulling cash from the client, stringing them along.” She takes a long drag from her cigarette. “Just gotta make sure they’re satisfied.”

I cut her a knowing glance.

“The girls don’t have to do *everything*,” she laughs. “Only what they want.”

I pull thoughtfully at my Newport. “Not sure you have a whole series there,” I say, exhaling.

“Depends on the writing,” she shrugs. “I’ve got contacts. Friends who’re producers.” She pauses. “So wait, what were you doing in... London, right?”

“Worked at a bank. Hated it though.”

“Like T.S. Eliot,” she winks. “You know, you could actually do well with it,” she muses, crossing her legs. “These parties. You’d be a great asset to clients.” Seeing the look on my face, she smiles. “You wouldn’t have to do anything. Some just wanna talk—discuss stock picks or whatever.”

I chuckle, looking up into the black-orange sky. Starless. “Maybe I’ll just show up wearing a *Sex Police* hat. Get the rubber nose and glasses disguise. Fake mustache. Bust up tables—confiscate drugs.”

“Seriously,” she pokes my thigh. “Could do a lot for yourself money-wise. Especially since you’re not working.”

“What about women?” I say, playing along. “They don’t want this?”

“Mostly just guys—pay a lot more, too.”

The bizarre edge on her statements gives me the troubling, yet sensual sense that this girl could lead me anywhere. Perhaps a place I didn’t know I needed to go. Those dark, daring eyes you could only guess at, or watch over like a charming thief on a house tour.

“That street behind you,” she nods, “Actually, this whole triangle,” she sweeps her arm over the area, “Is a place where you can get anything you want. Nothing’s illegal in this part of the city. Well, nothing’s *impossible*, let’s say.” Wistful, she adds, “It’s almost too good to be true.”

“Sounds too true to be good,” I grin, flicking my cigarette into a small, hissing puddle.

Shayna comes outside, with a tight look on her face.

“Ready to go?” Kat smiles at her. “Wait, where’s my phone?” She paws through her purse.

Shayna lets her search a while, before finally reaching into her own pocket. “She asked me to hold this for her an hour ago,” she rolls her eyes. “Said she couldn’t be trusted.”

Kat and I look at each other, considering the unsettled account. I kick myself for not grabbing her number earlier. Of course, something tells me those ten digits will do me no good. That I’m better without them. But then, that luring look in her eyes pulls me outside of myself.

Faint footsteps—drawers open and close. I knock louder. Two bolts turn, and the door wedges open. “Oh, it’s *you*,” she says, re-closing to unlatch the chain.

“Expecting someone else?”

“No, just—it’s Bushwick,” she shrugs.

I step into a long hallway, dimly lit like a moon river. Ambient music floats through a dark doorway at the end of it. The lock latches behind me. My bones feel suddenly heavy, though my insides lighter, like on that first slow climb up a roller coaster.

Scented candle flames of lavender dance along the walls of the living room, glowing orange. It's like a Jack-O-Lantern. Kat passes behind me, gently stroking her nails along my back. I shudder. She strikes a match; a fleeting, tangy smell of sulfur and sin.

"I remembered what you said," she smiles, lighting a joint. She passes it from outstretched fingers. I take a hit, holding it in, growing light-headed with watery knees. I sit down. It feels like a weight's been put in my hips. The music gets louder or lower, seeming to only come through one ear.

"What is this?" I hear myself ask.

"Just a little twist on the traditional."

I take another small hit, before handing it back. She places the joint in the ashtray, letting it burn.

"Surprised you took so long to call," she says, pulling my hair playfully. "Been almost a month."

"Guess I felt bad about Shayna."

"You felt bad about choosing me?"

"No," I pause. "Feel good about the choice—just bad about having to make it."

"Makes sense. She's a great girl. My best friend."

"Why'd you give me your number then?"

"Because I'm not *her* best friend."

My eyes begin adjusting to the dancing darkness. Open boxes sit against most of the walls. No TV on the stand—just piles of paperbacks. Walking over, I smile when I find *The Master and Margarita*. I pull it out, seeing it doggy-eared midway through.

"You didn't finish this?"

She squints to see. "I never finish a book."

A long silence, which she breaks with, "Did I ever tell you, I used be a stripper?"

"You sorta alluded to it." I look at the books again, then turn. "A good stripper?"

She jumps up from the couch, twirling in front of me, whispering a promiscuous promise. Her red robe unfastens, flaring out like a dress. Black tank-top and panties underneath.

"I was a *great* stripper," she laughs. "Gave 'em what they wanted, without losing what I wanted

to keep.”

I pull out another book. “That’s... a delicate dance.”

She leads me back towards the couch, stopping, pushing her hips back into mine. Feeling goofy and stoned, I slip my hand under her shirt, gently cupping her breast. Her nipples harden between my fingers. I kiss her neck, and inside her ear. She pulls away, sitting down. I follow, but she holds my hips in front of her, unzipping me slowing, peering up all fang-toothed like she’s got me dead-to-rights.

Reaching her hand into my jeans, she strokes the swelling outline of my briefs. Smiling, she curls her fingers inside the elastic waistline, licking just above it. She slides them down to my ankles, but doesn’t let me kick them off. Her tongue teases around it. My breathing shallows as her upper lip curls like a ski jump, and now I’m flying out the gate.

Before I know it, I’m on the couch with my knees up around my shoulders as she goads my gooch. I’m putty. Every part of me aches to be touched. She keep changing pace, delaying my climax, while my feet dance in the air like pompoms.

I’m almost *there*, when suddenly she stops, pulling me out of her mouth.

“That’s a good boy,” she says in a business-like tone, closing her robe.

“What?” I croak, my legs falling limp. “You’re not gonna finish?”

“You can finish yourself,” she shrugs. “But I’d suggest you wait. Could make tomorrow night more interesting.”

My insides feel like a plummeting elevator. “Tomorrow?”

She leans back, crossing her arms. “7th & Waverly,” she says. “Midnight.”

I’m seated at the bar, finishing my seventh Champagne—its last bubbly drops warm and sweet. Dense, gray cigar smoke engulfs me like quicksand. Neon lights pulse to the beat of music. Dapper guests gab huddled into dark nooks around the cavernous space, subway tiles along the floor and walls echoing the strange, hollow music. Private lairs flank the main hall, pink lights spilling from their silent doorways.

I'd blown off Jamie and Brooke once again, but I tell myself that I'm here to find a story—that it's not just circumstance. Mrs. Farrington had come knocking that morning; three light taps on my open door. Her speckled hand hid a dust-broom behind her leg. She asked about my health, how my writing was going, such nice weather, etcetera. Then she went quiet, bending down to smooth out a crinkled piece of carpet.

On Fridays, I'd wake up sometime before noon—a tray always outside my door. Two hardboiled eggs, a grapefruit, yogurt, some cereal. Milk in the fridge. Once, there was even a note with a little doodle of me overpowering a typewriter, smiling, threatening to pull out its ribbon.

Her face averted, she finally asked if I could maybe pay my next two months' rent in advance, since I'd still not provided proof of income. My stomach started throbbing. But I understood. She was on her own as much as I was. I gulped, quietly, then told her of course it was fine—that I'd have it in a few days. She lingered, her sullen eyes apologizing for the request, so I mentioned how great her new plants looked in the kitchen. That they'd grow good there. She smiled with quivering lips, saying, "The key is not to overwater," before closing the door.

It's almost pleasant sitting here now, on my eighth glass of Champagne, though Kat keeps calling me to mingle. I scratch my neck. Sure, this party might pay—but what is the cost?

Cocktail girls in black lingerie bring out finger foods that no one touches. Men wear dark suits or tuxedos; crisp cuffs and black ties. The women are striking, mostly. But even the ones that aren't have this quiet confidence about them: the chin-up dignity of an entrepreneur—selling their bodies, but owning their souls. Eyes forward, they strut like models on a catwalk, chatting to different men, moving on as they please. The girls barely drink. The men can't drink enough, sniffing coke out of small silver spoons.

Large bouncers stand by every doorway. At least two flank each side of the bar. They stand solemnly, hands clasped in front of them, wide shoulders held back. Indifference borders on disdain for the clientele. Tender toward the girls.

Of the guests, a big man in a navy suit sports a gold pinky ring on his left hand. Black hair, combed back with gel, shows a hairline in retreat. Churchill cigar. Puffing smoke into his mouth, he nods at a smaller man speaking next to him while his eyes scan the room.

His acquaintance wears a black dinner jacket; bow-untied, slung around his neck. Bushy brows, and hair wild with wizardly grizzle. Holds his cigar differently, between thumb and forefinger, like a mobster saying “Capisce?”

Two girls approach them. One has long blonde hair, perfectly straight. Her back is towards me. Her angel-white dress glows unblemished, even under the blacklight. It’s like she walks with a spotlight. Something about the way she stands thumps my heartbeat into my neck suddenly, but I don’t know why. It keeps pulsing and my stomach feels heavy again.

The blonde whispers something to Churchill. The other girl laughs—white teeth, gleamed clean—though she missed what was said. The wizard waves his tobacco wand, expressing something. More drinks appear. He tells a joke about an optimist who falls off a ten-story building—how passing the window of each floor, people kept hearing him say, “So far so good!”

They waltz over to a back room. My mouth waxes over. I order a tequila shot, but the bartender shakes his head, giving a slight nod towards Kat. A waitress refills my flute, and I follow the group, avoiding Kat’s eye.

Pink light shines along the near wall. Three doorways had black curtains drawn, their satin secrets safe. Stooped against the wall, my neck grows hot though my body shivers. I can’t remember what I’m doing here, but I wish Kat would tell me to leave—that *anybody* would just tell me to leave.

But no. I loiter, wet-sweating whatever’s behind that curtain. I feel like I’m in a free fall, but that it might be better to finally hit bottom. So as to stand back up.

A tall brunette saunters past me, sliding a curtain. The shrill of metal hooks tingle down my spine. A white pile glows on the floor of the small chamber, now unconcealed. Farther in, that blonde girl is bent over naked with the big man’s head bobbing behind her. His nose is buried. Loose wisps of black hair stick up as his head starts jerking from side to side, fingers sinking into her butt cheeks. Pinky ring. She throws her head back in pleasure, eyes closed, biting her lip. One hand pulls her hair as she pushes at the wall with the other. She’s smiling.

I drop my glass, seeing her face finally. My back slides down the wall. The room spins pink and black and bad. Everything blurs—music blaring hollow as if we’re all in a tin frying pan. I keep gasping

“Hennie” but my mouth is dry and nothing comes out. Standing, I stumble. The tall brunette closes the curtain, signaling to someone.

A bouncer rushes in, yanking my arm as I creep towards the curtain. I pull away, lashing blindly a punch to his face. My hand hits bone and I scream out in pain. I look towards the closed curtain as a fist slams into my ear. Everything rings. Another punch to my stomach—room spinning more. I puke, my eyes pulsing like heartbeats. Everything is red and watery. I keep screaming, “Hennie! Hennie!”

Kat swoops in with two more bouncers. They drag me by the collar while I wail wild punches, wanting one last look—just to be certain. To take her away. A hard knock to my eye and I drop to the ground, curling up against the kicks, shouts, shame and almost enjoying the pain now, as if it’s all I needed to worry about.

Like lighting off a firework, and riding out the boom.