

Whisper

“What did you say to Sara, the night we met?”

She’s lying on top of me. We both just came, so our chests are surging. I’m dripping with her sweat. All the windows are open; I wonder briefly if the neighbors heard our activities.

“Excuse me?” She grapples with the skin of my waist beneath her nails, kneading it like a cat digging into a couch.

The memory just swept into me with the midnight heat. Sara, a girl I went to high school with, a girl I used to crush on in a calm, undesiring way, walking in front of me onto the shadowy beach. It was our first year out of school, and she had brought home a friend for vacation. Someone who danced in the ballet company with her, someone who, sitting next to the bonfire clutching a beer and listening to Sara’s sisters chattering about this and that and this and that, looked more fragiley beautiful than anything I had ever seen.

“On the beach. When we first, first met, and ended up taking a walk down to the point, and I kissed you under the dock. When we walked back to the fire, you leaned over to Sara, and whispered something to her.”

It’s astonishingly clear. I can’t remember the kiss, or what she was wearing really, but I remember watching her shoulder curve over as she placed a hand on Sara’s thigh and whispered into her ear; I remember the sort of awkward way she arched her back when she laughed, the way Sara snorted in response, and we all dissolved into glee. I don’t remember the brand of the beer, but I remember, in that moment, seeing the way the drips of condensation from the auburn bottle gripped her thigh where she held it. She rolls off me, and glances out the window, at nothing.

“Oh, I don’t know. I probably told her that we kissed, or suggested you spend the night, or something.”

Her hand on Sara’s thigh. The way her whispering lips bumped into Sara’s ear. The way Sara’s hair cascaded over that ear, so that she had to pull it back around her other shoulder to hear the secret.

“I haven’t seen Sara in so long. We really should go visit your parents, and see her too, while we’re home.”

“Hmm.” I’m not sure if I’m agreeing or disagreeing. Sara used to call my murmurs “Walker Wonders.” She used to say, “You always know there’s a Walker Wonder on the way when he looks that way.”

“Isn’t the night beautiful?” She’s up and out of bed now, naked as the stars, standing by the window. We’re on the 44th floor, so I can’t imagine anyone noticing her. The lights are out. Maybe, somewhere across the way, there’s a goddamn little twerp of a kid with binoculars, beating himself silly while he watches our window. I laugh.

“What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing, it’s not funny.” It’s not. We should-” I swing my legs around and off the bed, yanking my underwear up- “go see her. Get out; into the country.”

She comes from the city, always lived in this city. I remember her saying that, on the walk along the beach.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” I had said to her, the moon shining down and tracing the rocks in rigid relief in front of us.

“Yes. Of course. I mean, I personally like skyscrapers and busy streets, but you do live in a beautiful place.” I remember how odd the comment was, but how I hadn’t said anything else until I had kissed her.

“I kissed you, you know,” she says as I slide my arms around her waist, one hand tracing her vivid hipbones.

“Hmm?” I say again.

“That night, on the beach.”

“Oh, right.”

“I kissed you. I had to. We stopped walking, and you were just looking at me. I didn’t know what else to do.”

I’m sure she’s remembering it wrong, but I don’t say anything. The city starts to sound louder the longer I stand by the window. I turn to look for something, then turn back. I’m not looking for anything, really.

“If you say so.”

“It’s true. That’s what I said to her, actually. To Sara. Now I remember. I said, ‘I kissed him. He looked scared,’ and she said, ‘you’re a scary motherfucker, you know that, right?’ “

“Really?” It’s hard to tell, sometimes, if she’s just making her stories up, if she’s just exaggerating for dramatic effect. Everyone loves her stories, but they’re usually so many degrees away from the honest truth. She turns to me, and I can’t see her face. The city backlights her, and she looks like a mannequin, an indistinct, putty figure in the dress shop she works in.

“Yeah. She said, what was it, ‘go easy on him, he’s one of mine.’ I don’t remember it being weird then, but it sounds weird now, doesn’t it?”

I'm casting around the room, trying to figure out what I'm looking for. There's a crackle from the baby monitor on her dresser; Haven seems to be farting profusely tonight. Finally, I settle on the painting. It's something I picked up yesterday, in the flea market in Soho. A boat: a big, ugly, gray boat. One of those ships that used to dock at the Maritime Academy for a few days on end, with rusty stains on the side that looked like it shit itself. Only in the painting, it's clean, sparkingly clean and floating high in the water, its prow tipped up like a nose in the air.

"Anyway," she turns back to the window as I lift the painting and stare at it in the hazy, city light just before 5 a.m. "We should see her. I bet she gets lonely up there. There's probably so little to do, especially in Winter."

She's got this weird, traditional Chinese mask hanging over our bed, staring out at me with these gouged out eyes, no lids, no lashes, no brows. I slip it off and place it on her pillow, while she continues to stare out at the city.

"I'd ask her to come here, but you know how she is, how protective of her sisters she is. God, if only we could convince her to move out here, to abandon that big empty house her mom left her to deal with."

I slide the painting onto the nail, and spend a few minutes trying to find its balance. She's lit a cigarette at the window, and is glowing with this slow pulsing light, almost in sync with the searching headlights from the cabs below us. Finally satisfied with the painting, I slide under the covers.

"Come to bed, munchkin," I say to her, half-heartedly. She shakes her head.

"No use now. When I'm up, I'm up. Goodnight, Walker."

The last thing I remember before falling asleep is staring at the mask, the mask with those empty eyes, right there on her pillow like her own goddamn head.