

THE FACES AROUND THE BEND

You want to know how it is to kill someone. Everyone does, male or female or in-between. You will herein be given some idea of this (killing someone), whether you want to know or not. Some details will be stay fixed for clarity's sake, but many shall remain vague, lest you be alienated from and do not believe in the life herein described.

Imagine you heard that some very close friend of yours, a best friend who may be singular or one among many—he or she has tried cocaine for the first time. You may think: *My best friend would never do something like this!* Imagine it anyways. Of course it is a one-time thing, because *your kind of people* is above stuff like that, and something that couldn't hold you down could not hold down your friend. Your best friend is one of *your kind of people*.

You awake in a city—maybe Central California, maybe New York, maybe London, it doesn't matter. You live and breathe; the sun rises and warms your skin with its splendor. The clock reads 9:10AM, unless you're not a morning person. It doesn't matter, it's the weekend. Get up when you want. When you do, you will go to a café—you have enough gusto and money in your pockets to do so. As you walk, it seems that the city doesn't have enough buildings for all the people. Where do they come from? Different faces are an endless resource. This makes it seem that there are infinite possibilities of experience to be pursued. Maybe you go to college, maybe you have a job, and soon something new and unknown will come to you.

You know that everything is subject to change and is influenced by choices, but more often by unpredictable events. You live day-to-day life with a creek running under your feet, and the water coaxes you onward—the landscape ahead is surely your destination. This metaphorical scenery may make you feel as though you know the possible direction that things are flowing in (a snow-topped mountain range, a forest, a desert), but you would be wrong.

Choices rely on circumstances, which are naturally out of your control. You cannot choose something that you do not know. The thing you choose may not be expected, but it is one of a few possibilities. In life you sit at a dinner table and you choose from the constantly changing dishes at the table. The table is not endless. If you were a giant, the table would be small. Ignore this knowledge for now.

You are sitting in the café at a table. The weather outside is your favorite kind, and you are taking it all in instead of rushing off to whatever it is that you may or may not have to do. Your beverage of choice is just right, delicious even. There is a man sitting across the café from you, and he is staring out the window in a manner to be described as wistful. You may wonder what it is he could be wistful for. Are you wondering?

Following his gaze leads you to the sight of a woman parking a motorcycle outside—or, if your romantic preference is toward men, then it is a man, so imagine “he,” “him,” and “his” instead of “she,” “her,” and “hers” (for she will herein remain a female, as there is a higher statistical likelihood that you are able to relate to having a female romantic partner, given the rampant homophobia in the male population and the lack of this in the female).

It doesn't matter. For all intents and purposes, this person is a splendid sight to see, even if you are an asexual or otherwise find difficulty in your sexuality. Trust this. Also, though you might not be single now, imagine that you are. This is important for what is to come. Or, if the idea of infidelity is appealing to you, don't. It may work either way.

She dismounts her motorcycle and enters the café.

Let's skip the inconsequential, boring parts. She's sitting at the table behind you, wearing a leather jacket and jeans, and she pulls out a book that ranks among what you would consider to be the most respected works of writing. The sun reflects off of her hair, giving it at least three

distinguishable tones of color. Maybe you don't normally notice these things, but this is an occasion to do so.

Now comes the part where you decide whether to say something to her or not. What could it hurt? There's an easy conversation opener sitting in her hands, so you talk to her about it—if you're normally very quiet, surely you couldn't remain so given your love of this book.

She says she's read it before; this is her third read-through. You agree that it only gets better with time.

Though it sounds cliché, her smile is infectious—it's sharp in that witty and sarcastic way, but it also softens the edges of her eyes so that one can tell that some part of her deeply cares. Her casual cadence makes it seem that she often speaks to strangers in cafés, which may cause both trepidation and perhaps even thrill.

Maybe you talk more. You ask for her number, she gives it to you. Whether or not the matter is as simple as that is not important—you followed a man's gaze to a woman on a motorcycle, she gave you her number. If you were the giant at the table of life, things would be this simple. The two of you finish your café beverages, happy to have met one another, and you watch her drive away.

Though you don't know her at all, she could be instantly described as beautiful. This is a word reserved for people who have a clear inner light that has a hard time escaping. However stereotypical it may sound, if you have dealt with complex relationships, loved ones who stifle everything that is meaningful, or if you have struggled to say the things you mean to say to the people in your life, this is surely how you could perceive beauty.

Recapitulation: choices are limited and rely on an innumerable amount of unknowable incoming circumstances, which once stumbled upon, are subject to very limited change. You had

the choice of saying hello to the woman or ignoring her. Now that you've said hello to her, you are on a path. That path can, and may, be interrupted by circumstance, but you will not be the one to interrupt it unless given a cause to. The creek beneath your feet splits and turns, and you follow, meandering, eyes half-closed, enjoying the feeling of rocks under your feet, cool water, a forest breeze sharp with rotting foliage.

Right this moment, as you experience this and as you're wondering if you're really experiencing this on your own or if a hand is forcefully guiding you on a path you cannot control, you may be getting a grasp of the larger picture. Even with this knowledge, nothing will stop what is to come.

When you finally call her, two weeks since you last heard from your best friend (yes, take a moment to remember your friend, who recently did cocaine; you weren't worried then, and people would say you should be worried now, but you respect your friend too much to be because, like you, your friend wouldn't let that *become something*), you find yourself looking in the mirror and wondering if you look alright despite phones being purely auditory.

Your hair is probably medium-length and currently uncombed. Your chin-line may have the appropriate angle and width that is a large part in being found attractive. When you smile, there to be seen is the human who you are becoming more and more of every day, and this grants a sense of something profound, but you couldn't say what it is or even that it is profound.

When she answers the phone, she says, "Oh, it's you," and sounds like she was expecting someone else, and in this is a minute rumbling of utter disappointment. Maybe you're overthinking things, so you bite your tongue, which likely means you're nervous, even if normally you'd be confident in this situation. Trust that this time it feels different.

If you are having a hard time believing that this is your life, then you could just stop now.

Yes? No?

She agrees to go to dinner with you this weekend, though the distant, thundering discontent comes back into her voice with an ocean crash of disinterest. It's possible that you're a passing fling already. You don't *know* her, though if someone asked you how this call went, you might say that it went well. This is who you are in light of meeting this woman. Nothing could change this.

Despite a lack of desire to hear from you as opposed to some unnamed somebody, you sense loneliness in her voice, so close that you could touch it. Go on; try to touch it, distant as it is, and not to crush it. Do this for your own sake and not hers. If you try hard enough, you can do anything you want.

You cough, say goodbye, and hang up the phone.

After dinner, you end up at her place. You sit on her downy, purple couch while finishing off a joint she had proffered moments ago (maybe trying this for the first time, maybe not). She is looking you in the eyes much more than most people would, and this shows how unreserved she is about personal contact. This could mean that she is completely reserved about emotional contact, but you don't know this yet, and so when you kiss her and her hands don't wrap behind your neck to hold you closer, you don't notice what important thing is missing.

She gets up to get beers. On her table you see a small, wooden box that is closed with a bronze latch. It looks like something your best friend owns, and it is where this woman keeps her marijuana. A voice in your head asks if your friend keeps cocaine or other drugs in a small, wooden box, but you shake your head because your friend, like you, is better than that.

When she comes back with the beers, she asks you if you're having an internal debate. What could make her think this? Does she have some phenomenal understanding of you despite

not knowing you—is this significant? Is this a woman with whom one could let one's guard down? Who would coax what one means to say out of one?

She laughs at you and says you look pretty damn high, putting your beer (still closed) on the table. She asks if you'd want to watch a movie, which shows how comfortable she is you. Many individuals whom can be dated will keep to dinner and drinks because that's what they're told to do, and here you are smoking pot and watching movies when she hardly knows you.

While she sits a few inches away from you as you watch the film, she touches your foot with her own halfway through. The warmth of that is satisfying, though no one could be certain whether or not she did this is on purpose. This is what romance is now that you're with this person, charged and adolescent.

There is a swelling of your lungs when you're close to her, and it's not like when someone attracts you physically. It's her beauty—that light inside her that you want to see, that is just peeking out of the edges. How long has it been since you've known someone like this?

Think about it as you drive home.

Time passes. Are you the type of person to try to sleep with her right away? Even if you are, you won't, and it's not because she's not just a woman you met in a café, but because she calls the shots. You see her several more times, admiring the way her hair casts shadows over her eyes as she yells at cars on the street for being rude, taking in the spirited sway of her hips when she's happy that remain still when she's not, and appreciating how she looks amazing in all of her clothing without being the type to spend any superfluous energy on looking good to others.

Take a moment to imagine the best evening you could spend with a woman such as this. Is the moon full? Is there an ocean? Maybe the taste of rum on her lips is sweet as your hand cradles the small of her back and you sway to a song from your teenage years. Maybe her

thumbs rest on your belly, holding you close as the two of you watch your favorite band on a stage, and the press of strangers at your side is made into nothing by this. Anything can happen.

On this evening when you finally sleep with her (something heavy on your shoulders crashing through your body into the physical union between the both of you), it is certain you are in love with her—it really is that simple, even if you consider it to be as complicated as everyone says. Do you not believe it? Search your heart, if you can, and ask yourself: do you know what love is? If this life that is yours is beyond your ability to appreciate, then you can just stop now.

Are you still here?

Of course you are, because now you are in her apartment again, two months after you first met her. The moments that have passed between then and now are not so important (just color them by number as what you always live). The fact is that you met a girl who drives a motorcycle and makes your heart beat harder than jogging does. This is so much less complicated than anyone would have you believe.

In the morning, you both drink fresh-squeezed orange juice in her kitchen—lately you’ve found yourself in her apartment more often than not. You’ve met her friends, who are all interesting, yet half as interesting as she is. Whatever it is that you do with your life, she has outshone it, despite that light bubbling within her still being out of reach of your grasp, and right now she talks about the latest political news and expresses that the constant failures of society are less exasperating than the fact that everyone must always be disappointed by society. You nod and sip your orange juice.

Just then, you receive a text-message from your best friend. It says something like, “I’m sorry I haven’t returned your calls. I’m back home with family—things have been complicated. I’ll call you soon.”

Your best friend may have a tense family life (as most people do). Perhaps something came up with your friend's parents? It would explain everything. You had started to feel obligated to call once a week, but this message surely alleviates your worry. Your friend did cocaine once, just once—people must try new things to stay truly alive. Your friend, like you, would probably have barely even wanted to do it.

Your girlfriend asks you if everything is okay while she walks around her apartment and packs things into a shoulder-bag. You tell her that your best friend is having a really rough patch, and so she kisses your forehead and says it will all be alright, leaving you. Something feels...off, and perhaps not for the first time. Wouldn't someone who needs you inquire further, force you to tell them everything, notice that you are holding something back and pry it out of you?

You've been with her for almost three months, but maybe this is just a fling. You still don't *know* her.

It is a subtle shift, but this distance grows. She was never the type of woman to rest her head on your shoulder when exasperated, nor was she a woman who would hold your hand often in public, so the new distance is hard to notice and easy to write-off as a phase.

While the sex is wonderfully intense, and she will sometimes cuddle with you in bed, she's done nothing to show you that she needs you. She will come home frustrated by something, but will not come to you for comfort, but these things are not thought about in the moment. She makes you feel the best you've felt in a long time. *Should* she constantly wonder?

Certain life changes are so gradual that they cannot be noticed. You move toward what feels natural and good, even if the natural thing is not good for you. If you took the time to look back and carefully analyze your state of mind and emotions as they were months ago, the differences would be startling.

So it is that when you wake up on the couch at midnight, having dozed off, and the woman you love is not here, you feel that something might be wrong. When things like this happen more than once, the movements of life's tides come to light.

You ask her where she's staying so late, and she says it's an old friend. Her voice reaches you from the top of a sharp cliff, the stony edge of which tells you to stay away from this. Could you stay away? You respect her enough to, and so you do. Something in your stomach whines.

The days go by. She stops being as intimate as she once was, stops returning your kisses as you make love to her. Was the intimacy real or did you feel it because you find her so beautiful? Is there a light in you to be found beautiful, or is your kind of people really not the type to have a light inside?

None of these things are put into words when you're with her (even if you're the type of person to be very open and honest about how you feel, this sense of worry may be a suspicion, the likes of which is nothing in contrast to what is real: your love), and since you now spend all of your time with this woman and little of it with anyone else who matters to you, you have no one with whom to put it all into words. You still haven't gotten that call.

Four months into this relationship, it is three in the morning and you lie in bed in your own home. On a rare occasion, your girlfriend has come to your place instead of you going to hers. It was not so much her choice as your insistence, your making dinner for the two of you, your attempt to make this feel as right as you need love to be. You should be asleep, but a shift in the weight of the bed awoke you. You don't roll over to ask her why she's left, but you listen.

You hear her voice, soft in the distance, perhaps behind a door or in a living room. She says, "Did I wake you up?...I miss you...I'm sorry...I love you." After this she is silent. The sound of cars outside is audible. She returns to bed.

The woman you love isn't there when you wake up in the morning. In a dreamy haze, you forget what you heard or believe it wasn't real, but now the despairing weight of truth pours like a smoke stack from your drowsy head. This is the moment where nothing is the same as it was, and it is suddenly so much different from the past that it's hard to remember how it was before without being confused.

Are you the type of person to call her right away? Or mull it over for hours, weighing whether you can keep her or if you never really had her. It doesn't matter, because she doesn't pick up. You leave a message telling her that you need to speak to her.

When, hours later, your phone begins to ring, you answer it with a speed and urgency that may be surprising. Was your heart racing? Were your fingers twiddling? Were you watching TV, or were you distracting yourself with work? All that can be sure is: nothing else matters but knowing where she is. You don't look at the caller ID, so when you hear the voice of your best friend, you're caught off-guard.

The sound of your best friend's voice is a relief for all the wrong reasons—here is someone who can listen to you, someone who will give you the confidence to say what you need to say because the woman you love isn't allowing you to do this. This relief is dashed when you realize that something is very much wrong on the other end of the line—your friend is crying.

Your best friend needs your help being picked up from a bus or train station. There is too much to be explained now, but you get the gist that things are much worse than your friend ever let on (as you've only heard from your friend once in over four months), and so you must get in the car now and drive there as quickly as possible to put things to rights. What else can you do? It's your friend. In comparison, your standard problems of love seem irrelevant.

In the car, your leg shakes impatiently at every stoplight. The sun falls deep into the horizon. There is something bubbling up within, and if you have it in you, you might just scream. The phone interrupts this. It's a text message from the woman you love. It says, "I'm sorry to do this to you, but I think we need to take a break. I can't see you anymore."

You cannot deeply know and understand anyone with whom you do not share many qualities, thus it should not come as a surprise that people can do things that are unexpected simply because you can't predict what you don't fully comprehend. You live your life knowing people, and maybe predicting their general behaviors, but your understanding of them is always subject to change.

No one is static—people grow, adapt, try to be new people and fail or succeed. They keep secrets about the things that scare them most, and unless they trust you (which is not within your control to make happen), secrets they will remain.

You call her. She doesn't answer. You leave a message asking her to please call you back. At another red light, you notice your knuckles are creaking from gripping the steering wheel. You call her again. As the traffic begins to flow, you start typing a text message—you shouldn't be doing this, you know it's unsafe, but it's the only way she'll listen to what you say without you having to confront her in person. What should you say? "I need you"? Would the honesty of this put everything back in the right? It wasn't her job all along to help you say what you needed to say, because it isn't anyone's job to fix you. That makes sense. You brake to match the fluctuating speed of traffic. You need to do what's right, then it will all work out. What's right? If you tell her everything that's true and meaningful—that you need her, that nothing makes you feel like she does, that never in your life has seeing another person's smile filled you with such relief—then she'll see that you have worth. You must hurry so you can pay

attention to the road again. There aren't so many cars now, you're all driving at 20 miles per hour, so just get this done quickly while you're in the clear. Your hand is shaking, and this is too many things to type to her. How could you distil it to so few words? It isn't just a few words you need to say, it's everything. You need her to know that you see her, that you know how hard it is for the light inside to come out because of the fear that it will go unseen. Your fingers must spell out that you appreciate her light and you know so much more about her than you ever said, and it's hard for you to say it because nothing has made you feel this completely perfect and terrified. What should be more frustrating than anything else happening this moment is the fact that all of this is much simpler than it seems. You need to say you love her.

The red light next to the bus or train station is somehow not bright enough for you to see. The front bumper of the car collides with something.

The most obvious thing is: it is dark. This is why this accident has happened. Darkness obscures your sight and allows for accidents to happen. Maybe you could have avoided it, but if you think harder about it you might realize that you could not. There must be time to think harder as everything outside of your car passes by so slowly now, and a piece of plastic from your headlight is soaring over the car's hood.

What could you have done to avoid it? It's been done, you've already done it, the choices you made leading to you doing it have been committed to time (going as far back as asking a woman who drove a motorcycle to a café for her number, all because a man's gaze made you perceive her), and so when you didn't notice the object in the street (that is now passing under the front two wheels of the car, as the bit of orange broken headlight skitters across the glass of your windshield), there was nothing you could have done to change this.

The next most obvious is: you are angry. The emotions one feels are nobody's fault, they happen in response to circumstances, and they can't just be boxed away and controlled. The woman you love has left you for someone you've never known or met. You have been betrayed, thus your responsibility of looking at the road and avoiding stray things or peoples on it instead of trying desperately to reach the woman you love was obviously on the line. Is it your fault, really? Is it hers? Is it your best friend's for calling you out here?

The object you have run over has passed beneath all four tires of the car, and now come the endless questions. Was it a person? What else would be in the middle of a crosswalk? Did you see them? Did they dash out like a fool, or were they sauntering and enjoying the night? Are they alive? Who is it?

Though you just heard your best friend's voice over the phone minutes ago, you haven't seen your best friend in over four months. Were they crossing this street?

You don't know everyone, but that doesn't stop everyone from existing—their faces seem endless, but when you're the giant at the table of life, you see how finite they are, and this person whom you've most certainly run over is one of them. It could be someone you know, someone you would have known, and someone surely knew them independent of you knowing or not knowing them, so what remains to be seen here is the identity of the person who has passed under the car.

This is your burden. This is how it is to kill someone, leaving them behind on the road while just some discernable period of time in the past from now—a moment, a year—they were wholly different than what they have become.

Do you stop? Do you drive on?

You will think about these questions.