

Altar

"The wind roars by, I hear it blow, and know that I am free to go" – Constance Witherby

The connection was down again, and the pot of water had just boiled over on the stove. She sat in the chair, leaned forward over the table, propped chin in hands. She imagined her early-day woes being broadcast across social media - "foiled connection and pernicious pot of water rue the day." She laughed a little. Vent-a-post, as she had dubbed the phenomena of people's seeming streams of consciousness that leaked out and covered Facebook in a seething, gooey ooze of self-importance. The thought was enough to straighten out her posture.

She got up to turn the blinds and shield some of the morning sun, sat back down to face her open laptop. "Job today is to find...a job." She tilted her head to one side as her cat jumped up behind the screen, hugging it close, circling, and then walking over keys to come nest on Jeanine's hands. "And you, sugar plum, are trying to send a message...I know, you're hungry *again*?" She cooed as her tricep trembled in effort to lift the furry ball and set her down on the floorboards.

"I have very important work to do, I am very important." She had taken to getting the day started by voicing such proclamations, to help deter any diversions down side alleys and move things along. Controlling the pointer across the screen, she clicked the wifi icon to check her connection - weak, but still a pulse. It was this room, this spot on a scrubby city street under the roof of a derelict, 3-story red brick building, flanked on all sides by others just as wanting, that hampered the signal.

The owner of her building also owned the building next door, and others within the span of a few blocks of the scrawled city. Roman was Jewish. She had eye-balled and estimated that he was in his late 50's or early 60's, with dark playful eyes, a salt and pepper beard, and a pouch. He wore a kippah, and was married to a petite and prudent woman who worked with him at the small but formal office Jeanine had visited just one block west when first looking for a new apartment.

The pair had a grown son who had co-founded a string of indoor rock-climbing gyms in the small state. Jeanine had, coincidentally, climbed a few times at one of the locations down towards South Kingstown. Rafi had shared this bit of familial livelihood, as well as the fact that his daughter and her husband had recently become established in the family business, renting out apartments in the building across the street.

She listened as he showed her around the aged apartment, inside what might have been a smaller row house in the earlier 20th century. The building had since been chopped into 2 sufficiently sized apartments on each of 3 floors, the ground floor being the second floor and the location of the apartment for rent. The front room looked out onto the street, a throughway that connected the highway to a street full

of indie café's, beauty salons, and the occasional farmer's market. The apartment had hardwood floors, except for a small strip of cheap carpet in the hall connecting the back bedroom with the kitchen, the other two designated spaces. Black and white tile in the bathroom – she was a sucker for black and white tile. She adored old homes, which may have been the gloss over the dirty grout and subtle stench that hung over the place, and the catalyst for her rise in excitement that led to, “I think I'll take it”, which meant she *would* take it, though she hadn't voiced transparent.

The price was right - \$900 a month, and she surmised that location was part of the equation. Her new home was up a street that was technically part of Pawtucket, which had a pocket artistic crowd and an underdog charm that struggled to grow out of its half-starved and hacked roots. The street intersected and fed into Providence, a corner that quickly branched off of on the right into Hope Street, lined with eclectic shops and restaurants, a library, and the last of city suburbia; on the left stretched Blackstone Boulevard, lined with historic homes and split down the middle by a revamped park and gravel path lined with trees, flower plots and benches, a natural oasis running up the outskirts of the city.

A friend who had other male friends had helped her move in two weeks ago. Most of her boxes were unpacked and tossed out onto the curb for the next drifter. The bits of belongings that she toted about had been sifted through and organized, put into their place until she was inspired to move a table to a different corner or re-organize the dry goods cabinet, a routine that struck her as necessary from time to time, helped reorder her conscience. Sun strong and the city birds in chatter, as she now sat clad at her slim writing desk in a thin cotton white robe with a pattern of pink roses.

Opening a browser, she navigated to the central job site for hungry, wannabe teachers. ‘You have 10 active applications!’ She clicked to check the statuses – *Submitted, Submitted, Submitted, Reviewed, Reviewed, Submitted, Submitted, Submitted, Submitted, Reviewed*. Ducks in a pond. Hopes all in a row. One will bite, if I keep putting out bait, she thought. She had lost track of the number of applications sent. Surely, surely, it's more than, or at least as many as any other candidates. The word repeated in her head, enough times for the silent e to be dropped - Surely, surely, surly, surly, sury.

She was into self-improvement, whittling down on the small and insidious imperfections, and had implemented a quota on checking her email and social media accounts. No more than twice a day. Pragmatic asceticism. Pass that, and you break the resolve. Sending out applications with months of no response made it a little more difficult to mind this imaginary line. Until recently, she had been the last person her age that she knew without a ‘foo-foo’ phone, but she had recently acquired one with instant access that moved faster than her computer. New e-mails – 4 - since she last checked 10 minutes ago. Spam, spam, then a message. *Click*. “*Thank you for your application for such-and-such position. Your qualifications and*

accomplishments are commendable. Unfortunately...” she knew the rest. Not chosen, not even given an interview, not a word outside of this optic-fiber entanglement of doubt and self-pity.

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Afternoon. She picked up the phone when she saw her mother’s face pop up, flowing amidst strains of digitized chimes. A few niceties exchanged and then on to the inevitable. Jeanine refused to budge on the issue. “But I just think you shouldn’t close your mind so quickly to the idea.” Mother’s sage advice. “To be honest, I can’t even stomach the idea.” Her mother’s wrinkled nose and V-shaped brow came across the line like static. “Oh, now you’re just being dramatic.” Jeanine exhaled and squeezed the phone. “Well, then if you never meet anyone, are you okay with that?” Exasperation. “It takes a dramatist to know one!” “All I’m saying is – I want you to be happy. I worry about you.” “No need to worry mother, I’m a grown woman.” “I hate when you call me mother. Even grown women need to be happy.” “And who defines what’s ‘happy’? My shoes don’t fit the neighbor next door and he seems to get along just fine.” “What? What does that mean?” A reflexive softening. “All I’m saying is, it’s not authentic; it doesn’t seem real to meet someone through a profile. Sometimes, I want the world to operate without me consciously pulling the strings, and this is one arena where that applies. When I’m ready, I believe it will happen. He’ll walk in and what will happen will happen. And if I never find the right one, then I don’t. But at least I will not have stretched or prodded like a desperate feline.” A few long, silent moments. “Okay. Or she.” “What?” “Or she – you never know, it could be the right woman.” “Yeah okay, or she. You never know.”

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Her phone rang a second time that day. A number she didn’t know. Instant perk. “Hello?” “Hello, is Jeanine there?” Concave, air out and sucked back in. “This is she.” “Yes hello, this is Mary Anderson, Principal of New Hapford Elementary School, and I’m calling about the application you submitted for the open 3rd grade position.” Nodding along to the beat. “Yes, yes, that would be me.” “Would you be interested in coming in for an interview?” “Yes, that would be fantastic.” “Well I’m looking at next week. You’re the second person I’ve called, so you more or less have your choice of times. We have 9:30, 10, 10:30 or 11.” “Why don’t we say 9:30, that sounds perfect.” “Okay, and there will be a written component, just in case I run over between interviews.” “That sounds fantastic.” “Okay, Jeanine, we’ll see you Monday at 9:30.” Solid click. Fantastic.

Or, at least, she thought she’d see that promising school. After a Google map search, her stomach shimmied. The school was 2 and a half hours northwest. What had she been thinking when she applied? Should she toss her current life oerboard, pick and chart out an entirely new direction, somewhere in the middle of nowhere? Had that been why she’d gotten the call in the first place? She switched off her bedside light.

Her eyes had been closed for 20 minutes before the ceiling began to thump and shake. She knew what to expect next. Wild screams of forced ecstasy. This would

go on for hours. The girl who rented the apartment above was a nymphomaniac, a real live sex addict.

Most of the time, Jeanine tossed and turned, stretching and pulling the ends of her pillow over her ears or wedging in bubblegum-colored earplugs, remnants of the summer that she had lived in Florida with her grandmother, who kept the TV turned on to maximum volume until midnight. At best, the screams and bangs would be muffled but still perfectly audible. Occasionally, she would lay on her back and stare at the ceiling and feel strange pangs of longing, her hand finding its way beneath the sheets. A soft, quick rising.

In the day, she made an effort to get a look at her upstairs neighbor, who remained out of sight most of the time. Next morning, she heard a heavy step descend the shared front foyer stairs, the front door opened shut; she watched out the front window as a young male got into a parked car and drove off. Later that morning, sitting on the piano bench in the front room and reading Austen's *Mansfield*, her eyes were drawn to the young woman who had appeared in the driveway, in a black tank top and jeans; proportionally small on top with larger thighs. Jeanine couldn't decipher the girl's expression, wasn't wearing her glasses, but she made out enough of a face that she was surprised; it was the type of face you would pass by on the street with no premonition of what went on within the privacy of walls.

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The local fresh food market. A mecca, an oasis of calming clockwork in a hurried world. Drawn to the stacks of perfect-looking fruit, row upon parallel row. Dazzled by color, she made up names – midnight sky eggplants, verdant fields asparagus, unearthly magenta beets, golden robe heirloom tomatoes, velvet spruce jalapenos - and reassured by the infinite neutral shades of grains.

In the produce section, she pulled out a mesh bag, scanned the peppers, as a boy in upscale grocery market garb reached into a rolling crate and loaded more peppers on top of those. There was a pattern to his placing. She admired his precision. He was slightly older than a boy, actually, stocking vegetables and rearranging, whistling. "People keep mixing up the jalapenos and the habaneros", he offered - maybe to her, maybe to no one in particular. "Yes, it's a tragedy," she quickly and quietly replied. "Of pepperic proportions." He smiled, perhaps sympathetically, looked directly at her. Had she really just...? She smiled weakly back, nodded, picked and dropped a jalapeno into mesh, pushed her cart away. Her eyes were hot; had she touched them with her hands? She continued to push, blinking back salty wetness.

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She ran down the middle of the gravel walking path on Blackstone Boulevard. Her first time running the path, she had noticed a 'lost and found' receptacle propped on one of the benches close to the entrance, a brass rectangular box, the kind attached to one of the upscale houses for private mail delivery, whose lid you imagined lifting to reveal all manner of secrets. She found consolation in the existence of this box,

collecting the bits and pieces of the lives that rotated round, holding each possession in its metal clutches, the potential for faithful reunification. She formed a particular attachment to the path, reinforced when she passed the box.

Twenty feet of grass on either side of the path before one would intercept a car. The path was more or less a deciduous time tunnel through housing styles. The homes evenly spaced and guarding either side of the road, some 70's-mod given new life, but most late 19th or early 20th century, stately in their brick, stone and white-wood facades, character-ridden arches and walkways.

She had her favorites, the ones whose doors she would choose to walk through. If she walked through that door, the bright red one, what would she see and hear now? Perhaps the echo of emptiness; or the sound of privileged children sliding down a bannister, or holed up in a room with the TV blaring and molding their malleable minds; or kitchen utensils stirring and tapping in a hidden kitchen; the chime of a grandfather clock; the bark of a beloved dog; the moans of love-making squeezed in on a lunch hour; the comfortable laughter of two friends over a cup of coffee; the clack-clack-clack of a keyboard; the wretched cries of a heavy heart.

About a mile down the path, she would cross a rose bush by a bench on her left, and then turn to her right to catch a glimpse of the girl – a statue stepping out, palms facing invisible winds, slightly outstretched, the folds of her dress blown and stretched over the darkly bronzed silhouette. She had noticed the statue on her first run, the dark figure set back in a half circle of green, granite benches on either side. An obvious memorial. She stopped to stretch, propped her leg up on one of the benches and leaned towards her toe, studying the monument and the plaque mounted to the base. “The wind roars by, I hear it blow, and know that I am free to go” – Constance Witherby. Constance. She liked the sound, the way the syllables stuck together, strong and steady. The cadence and movement of this girl, the strong urge to question her identity and why she had been left in this spot, struck her. Jeanine grew to anticipate the statue's presence on her runs. She let her gaze linger, her head turn round when she passed.

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The week before the start of a new school year crept then sprinted, the lush green foliage still buoyant, the hushed air of autumn moving in covertly, lurking in the nooks and crannies of the senses in preparation for change. She signed into the teacher's job board. *Submitted, filled, expired, reviewed.* Her hopes not completely dashed and capsized, but the creeping sensation that the winds were sailing in some other part of the world.

Day closed. She crawled into bed and slipped into a dormant state, uneasy and too warm. Her arm fell asleep first. Falling in and out of strange dreams, a barely-waking reality, like one in the moment before you're born or right after you pass away into...what? Uneasy and restless sleep.

She is in a kitchen, sitting at a round table. The room has a 1950's design and feel. Kitschy. There is a yellow ceramic teapot resting on the counter that is covered in a tea-kettle cozy, made to resemble the top half of a rooster. She stares, and the rooster stares back with a piercing red eye. A warm light illuminates the room, but there is a strangeness, a sense of hidden danger. The silence is pierced by a sudden whistle, which grows increasingly desperate. She searches the room frantically with her eyes for the source. Her gaze roams full circle and rests on the teapot, the rooster, whistling as if it's in pain.

She fears it might explode and spew ceramic. Before she can work up the courage to get out of her chair and inspect, she notices the refrigerator, in an instant oozing, dripping, melting, spreading to the windows, the painted yellow cabinets, the floral-patterned aprons hanging on the walls, melting and leaving nothing but black space. She is only a witness. The sudden realization that she cannot move from her chair, she has no body. She is consumed, but the red eye remains, the shrill whistle reverberating. She is 'she', but nothing, a void, utter darkness, the whistling the only reminder of what was. Focus, focus on the breathing, a pounding in her eardrums, but focus on the inhale, exhale – still alive. The whistle fades, quiets for a moment, a morphing into distinct notes now, the melancholy lilt of some sad and foreign bird.

Out of the blackness of the in-between, a sudden flit out of the corner of her eye, a glow some ways away, distinct in an empty landscape. She walks toward the glow, which grows as she nears; she stops in front, the light now shimmering and almost pulsing. Constance. Jeanine is suddenly at her base, and Constance looms, radiating, larger than life. The pressed palm remains frozen, but she senses some other-sense of movement, a yearning for touch. Unseen fingertips land on her forehead, the sensation awash, everywhere and nowhere. She is touched, inside and out. Jeanine feels a great surge and release, a rupture, a seeping in of eternity, the statue's bodiless presence.

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In the morning, she sits at the kitchen table, inhaling and exhaling into the coffee mug in her hands, the steam clouding her glasses in a rhythmic pattern. Who is she? Why does she matter? I mean, *really*? Just another flicker floating along on a speck of left-over debris, destination unknown. Such an old, worn out cry. She couldn't help make it, shamed in its overuse and by this feeling of detachment. This life, popped out of the box like some deranged jester, laughing and jeering.

The dream haunted her all that day and into the following one. She found things to do that day in the apartment. Bleached all the counters and ran a hot mop over the floors. Changed the bed sheets and made the bed. Sat down on the floor to make a collage from old magazines, without vision. Found a recipe using ingredients on hand, marking the page with a hot pink sticky.

She wandered out into the side yard where she kept a hodge-podge of herbs in pots. A backdrop of overgrown vines and cheap plastic lawn furniture barely used and strung out. The late afternoon light slanted and infiltrated the plot, giving a halo-like glow to the old buildings, the mismatched furniture, and patches of unruly weeds. She turned her face towards the light, stopped moving her hands for a moment. This light always had a way of turning the shabby into something lovely and poignant, if only for a moment.

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End of day. Jeanine sat at her writing desk with one leg up, one leg down, her cat perched on her parallel thigh, purring like a mad machine and nudging her typing hands with her damp nose and soft brow, affectionately nibbling Jeanine's knee to remind her that her attention was appreciated. She closed the blinds against the glare of the streetlight that illuminated the gym in an industrial building behind the street, then turned to check her email – junk, Facebook – clogged with baby pictures and ads, and the job board - inactive. She returned to outlining and considered her options.

She was curious about the statue, its namesake, the echoing words. She opened a new web browser, typed in *Constance Witherby* and *statue*. A recent entry on Wikipedia floated near the top of the search list, *Constance Witherby Park*. Click. There was an entire park donated in this girl's memory in a nearby Providence location where the statue had once stood. She had been moved some years back, apparently. The park had been donated in 1929 by Mr. and Mrs. S Foster Hunt in memory of Mrs. Foster's daughter, Constance, from a first marriage. Her eyes scanned for an image of the statue. There – a bronze sculpture, the one she knew well. "A Memorial to Young Womanhood (or the Spirit of Youth)", by sculptor Gail Sherman Corbett, "in homage to the spirit of young Constance who died of heart failure just before her 16th birthday while climbing in the Swiss Alps." The statue was symbolic, not sculpted to look like the actual Constance Witherby, but to represent the unrestrained call of youth.

Jeanine navigated, moving deftly amongst the words. Constance had been a student at the Lincoln School for girls. She had been a performer and a precocious writer, had written poetry; her mother had privately published a collection titled *Sunshine & Stardust* postmortem. The quote at the base of the statue was Constance's own.

Jeanine sat in her chair, feeling the hardness against her spine. She was small, so small, shriveling and fading away. But the hardness, the hardness did something to her, something that she hated and for which she yearned. She closed her eyes. Her mind drifted miles, years away. She was standing in one of the backyards from her childhood with her father, who wore thick cotton gardening gloves. They were staring up at a tall tree – it seemed hundreds of feet tall. "The tree looks like it hurts, daddy, it can't breathe."

They were eyeing a large, thick hairy vine covered with triads of green leaves – poison ivy, her father had informed her, waving her back with his gloved hand. The

vine had dug its hairy roots into the tree's side, wined its way up, where its leaves blended and swayed with the tree's own branches. "It looks that way," her father remarked, "but the ivy isn't hurting much – it's not poisonous to the tree; it can only take over space – take all the real estate – and in turn the sun's energy." She had bit her lip, thinking this over. "So the ivy isn't bad?" Her father had laughed lightly, a chuckle that rose from his belly and was always contagious. "Bad to people, but not so bad to the tree. Only if it outgrows the tree will it take it down, which is why we're going to start cutting the roots. Eventually, the ivy will die." She stared up at the animal-like vine clinging to this massive tree, its green reflecting brightly as it wound its way to the sun, its life source.

She watched as her father opened the mouth of the thick alligator clippers – or at least that's what she called them – and snapped, with effort, the massive root. She looked up at the ivy, half expecting it to come tumbling down, or to shiver in pain. Nothing. It remained in its sun-bathed state, the remainder still clinging tight.

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She had dreamt of doing something like this many times as a kid, something moving and unpredictable, what great actresses or explorers must feel when preparing for the next performance or expedition...but she always lost her nerve at the minute of action. Now, as an adult, she felt slightly removed, but committed. She had the feeling that this dreamy midnight visit would bring her closer to her remote past, as if she could open up and crawl into the moment, turn it inside out, step back and marvel at its possibilities. In body-fitting black pants and a cotton, black-hooded tunic, she turned the lock behind her, stepped out and slipped out into balmy night air.

There were no stars, none that she could see, anyway. The park was only half a mile from her apartment, but seemed out of reach in the expanse of dark. For a few moments, she stopped on the sidewalk, hesitated. She had never gone out so deep into the night before by herself, felt that most normally functioning urban dwellers did not, save those without a home and those up to no good. She batted at these thoughts, annoyed by the air of stereotype mixed with caution.

The city din turned mute. Some windows still glowed with the electricity buzzing in the wires over her head. Cars drove somewhere in the slight distance; a sedan passed by and she prayed it would not stop. Raised voices came up and behind shadowed roofs; a car alarm sounded suddenly from somewhere amidst the entangled grid of streets. She reached the end of her block, turned right.

The park materialized and loomed before her as the street diverged. She turned slightly left toward its beginning, the dark branches guarding, reaching upwards to starless sky, ominous. She should turn back. What she was doing was crazy. Surely the city's homeless and downright insane found their way into this quiet enclave at night.

Heart beat the echo in a drum, steadily pounding in her ears, the sweat beginning to bead at her hairline and dampening beneath her arms. No, no way would she turn back. Courage or stubbornness or naiveté, she wasn't sure – didn't care which one. It had rooted itself, and she coveted the sensation. She crossed the street and began down the gravel path.

Jeanine walked in a heightened state of awareness, as if this ground were new to her kind, inhabited by the stuff of dreams or nightmares. The distinct crunch of gravel as she peered ahead into what lay ahead. If anything should happen, if it was her time to fight or die...more thoughts of fancy. Her eyes had adjusted. She made out the lost and found box resting on the bench to her left. She walked on, fully aware of any sound, real or imagined. The baying of a dog, a quiet cricket, the snap of a branch. She stopped, blood pounding and filling her head, turning in a tight 360. Waited. Nothing. She walked on.

The darkened rose bushes materialized on her left. Constance was just up the path to the right. She would stay at her base all night, wait until the earth had rotated just enough so that the sky lightened to periwinkle in anticipation of its arrival. As she approached she exhaled, slow steam released from beneath a tightly fitted lid.

Then, something strange...a smoldered light, a dark figure bent over in the clearing at the statue's base. She, Jeanine, the intruder. The black hump of back and head hunched over at the foot of Constance, the statue an extension of this creature in the dark, her expression unchanged, without fear or pain. The small, busied movements of the kneeling figure seemed to tug on the end of a line of tension that extended from Jeanine's chest. Shape of air changing as the figure seemed to become aware of another body, slowly turned, the head twisting, the unblinking stare of a wild animal caught in conscious observation. Jeanine dared herself to move or blink in return.

The interlude of frozen stare lasted, and then – the figure seemed to soften, meld into a harmless shape. It stretched out and slowly curled under a pointer finger, beckoning in slow motion. The mouth showed nothing, but Jeanine sensed that this stranger was extending an invitation, to join her within a dotted and flickering half moon of light. She noticed the small white candles then, set in a half circle around Constance's base, and those lit on her base. Jeanine felt some sort of confusion, her senses askew, her wires crossed. This was meant to be a sole endeavor, a solitary pilgrimage.

She clutched her satchel tight, tighter, feeling that somehow she was drawing closer on instinct alone, a moth to a flame. Feet moving against her will, mind convincing her body to float forward in time. Mixture of must and something sweet, a distinct scent that flooded her olfactory, brought her to some distant time and place from past, not certain where and when, not wholly unpleasant. The darkness closed in around Jeanine, the stranger, and Constance, defining, illuminating. A sudden collaboration of steady flickers, carving out, moving shadows.

Jeanine kneeled, close to this strange creature that could have been either sex, features appeared ancient amongst the many creases and folds, the hair still dark but stringy. She was there. She had made it. The figure reached out a hand, almost in slow motion. Jeanine watched, curious, as the long fingers floated through air and landed on her shoulder, patted. Soft, knowing, unexpected. Jeanine looked up and into a set of crinkled, glistening eyes, shining like two moons. Unaware of intention, but she detected the presence of kinship. The two strangers turned to the statue of the bronze girl, both glimpsing something of what once was and what is and what would be.

As the sky turned from deep purple to a soft pink, the candles had burnt down to almost nothing. Both slept, as the world began to wake.