

SURFACE

Her clothes were placed on the velvet red couch in the dank basement as if she were in them. Blouse, a brilliant yellow although with her lack of seeing any color but grey these days may have been something entirely different, was neatly atop the pillows, sleeves spread out, neckline on the edge as if her blouse was exhausted. Pants, a smart pair of dark jeans with machine-made tears on both thigh areas in an unidentifiable pattern, lay directly below the blouse. From there sported a gap of three inches or so between blouse and jeans to expose the red cushion - or a belly-button if one desired to broaden their imagination. Panties and brassiere had been pushed under the jeans with only a strap exposed to see where the unmatched pair was located. Shoes, practical dark brown flats, pigeon-toed right under the jean's hemline.

She was in the middle, on a basement-dirtied woven rug, surrounded by nothing but paper with nothing on at all.

He had tried to sneak down the stairs, but basement stairs, old and wooden, were not meant for stealthy undertaking. As such, he ever-so-carefully crept. He did not want to disturb her. Ever.

"I can hear you breathing," she flatly stated.

"I guess the stairs wouldn't have given me away."

"It's fine."

“Progress?”

“Just look around you.”

The paper, standard white 8.5 x 11, was surrounding her, all piled up in an arc around her legs that were forming a triangle with her lavender-painted toenails serving as two of the triangle’s corners.

“Impressive, Sheila.”

“All sorted by section, then by chapter.”

After a good look at her paper mesas, he responded, “There’s a lot in the middle.”

“It’s the middle. There’s always a lot in the middle. Beginnings and endings need not, ever – I repeat – ever be lengthy. As such, shorter stacks.”

“Can I sit?”

She gestured toward the couch, pointing at a spot directly across from her, right next to her clothes. He took his seat, carefully settling in to allow the couch to envelope him while taking care not to disturb her clothes. Disturbance of her semblance of order had, for a while now, been a delicate matter.

“Are you cold?”

“Why would I be cold?”

“You’re in a basement... and you’re naked.”

She scoffed at his response, stared at him and growled, “You. Dressed in a sweater.”

"It's November."

"You're such a pussy."

Sheila went on ordering her papers, dropping small stacks in particular spots.

"Hungry?"

Without looking up, she quickly answered, "No" before looking right at him and stating, "Why would I be hungry? Hunger is for those famished for truth."

"You've been down her for four days. I haven't seen you."

"No one needs too. I am writing my novel."

"I know that. There's..."

She dragon-stared back at him. "There's what?"

"Concern."

"Fuck concern. I'm creating here."

Sheila went back to sorting. He leaned forward just a bit, mostly to get his back at more of an angle so the soft couch wouldn't be so uncomfortable.

Noting his movement, she spat out, "Why did you move?"

"Comfort."

"Comfort. Writers don't need comfort. Writers need hardness. Inspiration never comes from comfort."

"Shower?"

“I have one down here.”

“Not what I asked.”

She took a small pile of paper and threw it at him, yelling, “DO NOT question my motivations!” Quickly calming down, she haltingly added, “Now. Since YOU made the mess, YOU can re-stack that section and hand it to me. Let me know when you are ready. DO NOT just casually hand it to me. I may have to re-order it you know!”

He picked up the strewn paper, some if it had landed atop the clothes. Taking care not to disturb the clothes, he slid sheet upon sheet, re-aligned them, finishing with a quick neatening with a couple hits of the paper’s edge onto his right thigh.

“Did I ask you to that?”

He paused, waiting for her eyes to slow their fire. He calmly stated, “You said to re-stack.”

“Give them to me. Jesus Christ, I have to do EVERYTHING myself.”

Stack gently handed over, he slowly moved his body to the couch’s back.

“I knew it.”

“What is it, Sheila?”

“The papers are completely out of order. Thanks a lot. Now quiet.”

“Okay.”

Lips tight, dolled up with a shimmery pink gloss, she glared at him, staring through him as she carefully moved single sheets of paper from one place in the stack to another.

“I showered.”

“When, Sheila.”

“Inconsequential. Move along.”

“Want me to go?”

“Do you want to go?”

Deliberately, he answered, “Not so much.”

“Seen enough of me? Want to see more?”

“No Sheila, I don’t.”

“Because you’re a pussy.”

Sheila laughed. There was a coarseness to her laughter, but it died down quickly as she muttered, “pussy” while keeping her attention to her stacks.

He leaned forward a bit more. She didn’t look up as he softly talked to her like they were in a tightly packed café with thin walls.

“Remember Sheila? When we were kids?”

“Of course I do. Remember what?”

“The water.”

“Jesus fuck, what water? There’s water everywhere.”

“The big muddy. St. Louis. We went swimming in it. No care in the world.”

“I’m sure there was care.”

“Not to me.”

“Me either. Your parents...”

“They had concerns. Yes. Big river.”

“We were naked right?”

“No.”

“No? Surely you’d remember?”

“I do. No.”

“Your parents weren’t going to allow us to swim naked. No way. And mine? Too bad.

It’s the only way for proper swimming... or proper thinking; doing; living.”

“It was the swimming Sheila, that I remember so much.”

Sheila scoffed, “We didn’t do anything else.”

“No. No we didn’t.”

Sheila went back to sorting. She was very careful, making sure each stack was in a spot and juxtaposed to another section so she could easily identify it later. He watched her for a few minutes, marveling at her efficiency. Her diligence and concentration reminded him of the kids at school. A math teacher at an elementary school, he’d watch

the kids in gym class during their cup-stacking segment, collective eyes lasered onto their cups, eyebrows furled, lips shaped in seriousness as the quick ones sped through the process. Gym class. Funny place for cup-stacking, but it was understood not every kid was destined to be a sports kid and this activity played into the hands of most of them.

He returned to Sheila. She had broken his process with the smallest of glances.

Sheila asked, "Want to do something now? It? Want to do it?"

"No Sheila."

Her stacking was evidently completed. She stared at him, asking, "What's your purpose?"

"It was warm in the water."

"It was July."

"Under the water, Sheila. Remember under the water?"

There was no answer save for her stare. It shook him, this whole ordeal, but he remained calm as he continued, "The hiss. All that hissing."

No response given after his hesitation, he kept going, purposefully slow.

"We'd go under and we'd hear very audible hissing, right?"

Movement, but just Sheila's lips cinching tight like her drawstring purse when she was a little girl and his next-door neighbor. He had watched her grow up, watched her

move in with his family, watched her become a teenager and now watched over her, now a woman of 34.

“But on the surface? There was nothing, just the sound of water slowly making its way to the gulf. We’d go under Sheila, way under, swim in the muddy water Sheila, hear the Mississippi’s constant hiss until our lungs would nearly burst, then we’d surface. Nothing. There was nothing but us gasping air, the world, our world and the calmness of water lapping river banks.”

She was still with the exception of her eyes. They could never look right at him for more than a second unless they were trying to stare him down. Once softness fell in, her pupils wandered. She’d capture his eyes in miniscule moments, then go about searching the rest of the basement as if looking for answers in its dark corners.

She wasn’t about to cry. Sheila never cried, at least not in front of someone. He suspected in times of clarity, those fleeting moments where her own reality came bobbing up, she did cry. However, no one was ever around to witness. If there were anyone, it’d be him. He was the only one remaining from her frenzy of friends and family.

She rolled her eyes up, pushing her pupils toward the stairs. He stared down at the paper, lined up, crisscross to separate sections or chapters or whatever. Whatever was the reality for anyone who’d have the chance to view her stacks for there were as many words on the paper as there were clothes on her back.

“I have to finish my novel.”

“I know, Sheila. I understand. I’m going to go now.”

He stood up, brushed off his pants as if he could brush off anything ever sticking to her or him. Sheila watched as he took care to make sure her clothes were still set in the same position on the velvet red couch as when he sat down.

“I’m going to go cook something. You’re welcome to...”

“I have to finish my novel.”

His walk to the stairs was no more than ten feet. Tennis shoes, picked to be purposely quiet, squeaked as he stopped at the edge of the steps. He turned to look at her surrounded in her own emptiness and stated, “I wish, more often than not, you’d return to the surface.”