

Pier had told me I wasn't myself. I never knew if he meant emotionally, or intellectually, or in the there's-a-demon-inside-you kind of way. More and more, I began to suspect the latter.

One early morning when I stood facing the apartment window, Pier said, "Hanna, you sleepwalking?"

I wasn't. I looked past the reflection of the nightlight. A black shape rose from the ground three floors below, and swept past the window. In the park, homeless people warmed their hands over a blazing fire barrel underneath the playground's slide. Sparks of light flickered in the surrounding bushes. The sky had adopted the pale blue tint of early morning. The black shape appeared again, and disappeared into the facade somewhere to the side of the apartment window. I had considered naming it, the shape, but so far I just called it the moth.

"Couldn't sleep," I said.

"You? Couldn't sleep?" Pier said with emote surprise. "There's a first for everything, I guess."

I didn't reply. I glimpsed his reflection in the window: a shadow on top of the bed in the corner of the living room, his head partly obscured by the lampshade on the bedside table.

"Come lay down," he said.

I hushed him. "I've got an idea for a sketch."

"Since when do you work this late?"

"A bum with a wish-granting fire barrel."

"All those times you've lectured me on the importance of only working during working hours," Pier said.

The lights in the bushes around the playground wasn't sparks from the fire. They were familiar, cute little fireflies I'd cup my hands around and peek in at, a flickering glow, tiny heartbeats. I said, "Couldn't sleep, that's all."

Pier said nothing for a while. Then: "You're starting to freak me out, Hanna."

"Go back to sleep," I said.

We ate leftover thai food for breakfast next morning. We ate leftover thai food for breakfast every morning. It was our ritual.

If I slept more the night before, I didn't remember. When Pier began snoring, I entered my office and jotted down the ideas for my next sketch: a bum wishing himself and his fellow bums a better life, only for them all to turn out brain dead in front of a 75 inch TV's their connection to nature—each day waking up in dew drenched grass—lost.

I lived off cynicism, off wordless comic strips in damp colors. I knew Pier would disapprove of this piece, thinking it suggested financial well-being would make the lives of homeless people worse. But he would keep his criticism to himself. He would.

I looked at him. One-day stubble covered his chin. He sat hunched over his bowl of noodles, his eyes invisible. He had a strange face—hadn't I noticed before? His eyes resided deep in their sockets, his cheeks suggested the shape of his teeth, his lower jaw was indented.

"What?" Pier said. He now stared at me. The deep sockets made the color of his eyes imperceptible, but surely I knew. He was my partner. Surely I knew the color of his eyes.

"Just admiring the view," I said.

Pier laughed, a short burst, like a single bubble rising to the surface of a puddle of mud. "You hate clichés."

I took a sip from the cup of coffee in my hands. Lukewarm. Lukewarm coffee and noodles and fried vegetables in soy sauce: a normal breakfast.

"Is something up?" Pier said.

I said, "More sewage work today?" I asked because one day he'd fix refrigerators, one day he'd work at the dump, one day he'd waddle around in people's shit.

He nodded. "More sewage work today. Did you know they use water lilies in the sewage system of Las Vegas?"

We sat opposite to each other, we ate noodles, we inhaled the steam rising from our coffee cups, we watched the digital clock of the microwave change, step by step. Our morning ritual didn't usually feel this pointless.

"You're not going to ask what they're used for?" Pier said. He bared his palms, raised his eyebrows. Brown, his eyes. I knew that. "You love shit like this. Details. Water lilies in the sewers."

He tried to impose a personality on me. He tried to change me back to whatever false memory he had of my past self. I shook my head and returned my attention to the bowl. One noodle left, moving around like a worm.

After a while, Pier said, "You've closed the door to your office."

"Oh," I said. "Didn't notice."

"You hate closed doors. You were the one who wanted to put the bed in the living room. A few weeks ago you were about to take down all the doors with the screwdriver. I had to stop you."

I swallowed the last noodle.

Pier spoke as if I didn't remember, as if I had forgotten the me of last week. But I hadn't changed, he had: he was the one who used to shrug and smile and add, "Whatever you say," but now clung to insignificant detail and pointless rituals. He was the one who tried to make me someone I was not.

7:32, the microwave's digital clock displayed. I got up and emptied the last of my coffee in the sink and left the kitchen.

At 17:49, Pier returned home. "You're not in your office," he said. He had already changed from his working clothes. Of course he had, working in the sewers. But his skin had a dark tint, and his eyes hid deeper in their sockets. Moving forward through the hallway, he never quite lifted his feet from the ground.

"Done working for the day," I said. I had been staring at the roof, observing the movements along the walls, listening to the heartbeats. Now Pier was here.

"Lovely to hear," he said. He stopped in front of me, and looked to the side, towards the closed office door. "You left the light on."

"My bad," I said.

Pier smiled at me—tiny wrinkles in the corners of his eyes; the closest thing he ever came to a smile—and squeezed my shoulder, before he continued to the kitchen. He held the plastic bag of thai food in his hand. This was our ritual.

After dinner, I went to the bathroom, and stared at my reflections in the mirror. She didn't look as tired as she used to—no bags under her eyes, no strange wrinkles, no frown, everything relaxed, her features the raked shapes of a zen garden.

Pier tugged at the handle of the office door. Did I hear it through the bathroom's walls, over the howl of the pipes? Even if I didn't, I knew. I felt his spastic tugging, I sensed the moment when he realized the door was locked.

I exited the bathroom and looked across the living room, right at him. Pier's left hand rested on the handle of the office door.

"What are you doing?" I said.

Pier spun around. "I was going to turn off the light," he said. "Why is it locked?"

I moved closer, but positioned myself to always keep something between us—the armchair, the bonsai plant, the bed.

"Why do you close doors all of a sudden?" Pier said. He didn't gesticulate as he spoke, he didn't display any emotions, he maintained the monotone of his voice. "You've been acting weird. I think you know what I'm saying." His eyes would soon be nothing but black holes.

Behind Pier, outside the window, the moth swept past.

"I would just like some privacy," I said. "Why does a closed fucking door bother you so?"

"I'm bothered because I know you, and this"—his first gesture: an arm thrown out towards the office—"is not you. I know you. When we first moved in together, you didn't even close the bathroom door when you took a shit."

"Would you stop telling me what's like me and what's not?" I said.

Pier moved his lips as if he was about to say something more, but didn't. He shook his head. "I'll go for a run," he said, and began to dig around in the wardrobe, presumably looking for his exercise clothing.

When Pier had left the apartment, I placed one of the crutches he used after his foot surgery underneath my side of the bed, and I hid a kitchen knife among old sketch papers in the drawer of the bedside table.

For a minute, my hand hovered above the phone, my sister's number on my fingertips. I could have phoned and told her to call me each afternoon, to make sure everything was alright. But she would have worried, she would have asked questions, she would have insisted we met, here, when Pier was away.

She would have wanted to see my work; see the office.

That evening, Pier and I kissed, and Pier told me he was sorry, that the sewage work was stressful and felt less and less meaningful. Like he didn't get the appreciation he deserved. He didn't say that last part, but I knew him. I knew him. I knew he loved the dirty work because no one else did. I knew "someone has to do it" was a sentence he'd never utter, but probably thought about once a day. I knew he found pride in being the hero, being the person who took out the trash. But all people saw was the slurry of shit covering his boots.

In bed, I listened to Piers breathing. His breaths were slow and deliberate, a steady rhythm. He either slept, or simulated sleep. Lights moved in the corner of my eyes, in the crack below the office door.

Before I had the chance to get up, Pier spoke. "Is that...?" he said. He lit the bedside lamp, and everything got satiated in suffocating light.

I sat. "What's going on?"

"Wait," he said, and turned the light off again. He put a hand on my shoulder, pushing me back down. "Look at the roof."

"Pier?" I said.

"Just look at the roof."

I did. Pier pressed up against side of my head, warm air against my chin, his coarse, stuttering breath in my ear.

"What are you doing?" I said, and let my left arm fall down the side of the bed. I reached for the crutch, but couldn't reach it with Pier holding me down. Not the knife either.

Pier recoiled, rolled off the bed and down on the floor with a sharp wooden *clonk*, his head hitting the bedside table, setting the lampshade askew. "There's a glow," he said. "Fuck, there's something glowing in your ear."

I turned on the light, squinting, keeping Pier in my field of vision. The slanted lampshade casted the apartment in a ghost-ish almost-familiar light.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I said.

Pier shook his head, hurled it from side to side. He crawled around on the floor in his underwear and picked up his scattered clothes. "This is too fucking bizarre," he said. "I can't be here."

"There's nothing glowing inside my ear," I said. "You're going insane."

Pier just repeated, "I can't be here, I can't be here, I can't be here," while he got dressed. He left, and shut the door behind him, the echo of his steps and the singing metal railing audible through the walls.

He would come back, this time maybe with a baseball bat by his side. Maybe he'd beat me up and rape and kill me and break the office door open. Maybe he'd stomp around in there, and ruin everything. Maybe he'd snatch the fireflies from my cupped hands.

I got up. The moth moved above me and slipped inside the office at the same time I did.

Again, Pier returned. It was early morning, and he wasn't himself: sleepless, his skin not quite his size, his eyes black pits, the stubble a two-day beard, coffee stains on his shirt. He shivered, and brought the stench of cold sweat with him. He had slept at a friend's place, or on a park bench, or not at all.

"I had nightmares," he said, stumbling forwards. "Shapes and lights in my head."

I sat on the bed, waiting for him. The tiny heartbeats in my cupped hands had told me he was approaching. Above and behind Piers head, in the hallway, the moth hovered.

"I want to apologize," I said.

"What's in the office?" Pier stood right before me, half crouched. A drip of sweat dangled on the tip of his nose. He kept his hands slightly extended, his fingers bent. He was here to kill me.

“Pier,” I said. “I’m sorry I’ve been acting strange. Let me make it up to you.”

Pier’s hands shot forward and grabbed my neck. He pressed his thumbs at my throat, his nails cutting into my skin. Jolts of pain shot through my body, up my palate and down my spine, to the tailbone. The world seemed filtered through ice. I was below the ice. An eyeless monster faced me from the other side.

The moth made erratic circles of shadow in the roof.

I placed a hand on Pier’s crotch. I caressed. I looked into the hollows where his eyes once were. I looked at him in the way I used to look at him. Spasms shot through my body, but I kept caressing, caressing the junk of an eyeless being, its penis probably the dead arms of an octopus.

Pier eased his grasp. “I’m sorry,” he said. Water escaped the dark sockets.

I rose, and hugged him, getting up close, my thigh between his legs, my hands digging into the flesh of his back, my mouth kissing the side of his neck. He tasted like toilet water. “It’s alright,” I said.

“I’m sorry.” Pier’s face crumpled, and he said, “I don’t know what’s going on. Please tell me what’s going on.”

The moth held a glow worm in its claws, and hovered right behind Pier’s head. While I kissed the corner of Pier’s mouth, the moth guided the worm up his shoulder, into his ear.

Pier cried, and kissed me back. Lights flickered among the shoes and coats in the hallway.

When the entire glow worm had disappeared into his ear, I leaned back. I looked into the blackness of Pier’s used-to-be-eyes, and smiled. “I think I left the door ajar,” I said, nodding towards my office.

He looked. The door was ajar. Pier untangled himself and approached it slowly. The moth followed, upside down in the roof. Pier pushed the door open with a closed fist, and stepped inside.

Maybe I could have made this to a sketch: a piece depicting the descent into madness of simple man whose only desire was to clean the streets and make sure people could shit without worrying about crocodiles chewing at their genitals.

At least Pier might have approved of his own end: he’d be part of the nest, of something big, his body giving birth to new life.

I stepped inside the office. The moth perched on top of the desktop lamp, surrounded by flickering lights. On the floor, Pier lay, his eyes still black, but his ears now glowing. He gaped, wider than a live person could, and from his mouth, more flickering lights got born—fireflies, and I cupped my hands around them, peered inside at the flickering glow, tiny heartbeats.