

She is not perfect.

Few are and I stopped hoping. Well, I lie. I do hope. I hope and I wish and I shut my eyes so tightly sometimes tears escape through their cracking walls. I dream they are hermetically sealed. I want the world to shut away, close in my thoughts that never quiet. It's always a hush, a million trickling whispers that crawl from my ears like the birth of a parasite nest, tickle my arms, my flesh, my body, and return to their home at night.

At night. At 6pm but not a minute later. It is the third and final time they escape. Each day, every day. At 6pm and not a second later. It's addictive, really. I learned to love their needle prick feet coating my skin. Every inch of it. At least that's what I tell them.

*Welcome and goodnight. Goodnight. Goodnight.* I want to say it to each of them, to each thought that finds its way out with a promise to return before curfew.

But I cannot. It kills me that I cannot. There are too many and they eat me whole and they don't even know. They just...do. They crawl from my ears like open faucets and make their rounds, whispering in hisses that sting with a poison too familiar.

I never just...do. I think and I think and I think. And she is not perfect.

I knew that very well when I swiped leftleftright, leftleftright. Mother told me to. She died, she passed away, she left me. Twelve years ago, but she is part of the swarm that escapes my canals thrice a day and kisses me goodnight on her return trip. Her legs scratch at my neck, but oh, do I love her.

I do love her.

I do love her.

I do love her.

I am a lover, no matter what they say. They try to hide it from me, like china on a shelf. They try to stack high and mighty the rapid drummer beat against my ribs, the warm tingles that sting but sting too good to stop. I know what love is, so here I am. Proving it. No matter where they crawl and what they say.

I love.

I love.

I love.

My hands do their work. They have become efficient. I can't remember a time when they had not moved as if through nothingness. A vacuum of fluidity, as if guiding the autonomy so routine. So perfect.

After my friends return home, I pull free the Lysol from its throne. The best view from the linen closet, middle shelf, center spot. It cleans my phone, my glasses, my fingernails, phone, glasses, fingernails, phone, glasses, fingernails, phone. I must end on the phone or else it would not work. None of it would work and the frail perfect would nag and plead as it collapsed at my feet in a helpless heap.

I love, so I prove it.

I love.

I love.

I love.

Every month, the action is the same as the rest. Come the twenty-fourth, 6pm, and not a second later. After they are put to rest and the thoughts quiet to lowly jeers. *Tinder*, it's called. The process is as meaningless as the result, but just as vital. Just as vital as it all and no less routine. Because I do love. No matter what they whisper after curfew.

Leftleftrightright. Leftleftrightright. Leftleftrightright.

I do this for five full minutes and stop my tick-tick-ticking wrist bomb before it blows. Three hundred cycles, clean and easy. I do love.

Within half an hour my box bings. It fills me with no more joy than the shrill of a pecking morning alarm or the preheat completion of an oven. Jenny, thirty-two, two-miles. We arrange a time.

*'7pm on Friday?'* I ask her with words that do not belong on my lips.

*'See u there :).'*

She did not complete. She is not perfect. But few are. I take a breath.

"I do love," I tell them again.

*'7pm is good. 7pm at Fellini's. 7pm?'*

*'U got it!'* she says and I stop my fingers.

They squirm in place, uncomplete, unsatisfied, but I hush them to sleep. It is time to sleep. My phone turns black and I check the shower. After twelve safety confirmations, I rest easy. There is not a waiting man with his knife, nor a spec unsettled on the porcelain tub.

Friday comes. Of course it does, I made sure of it. Everything is right, each tooth was allotted three brushing circles in either direction, the door was locked five times and tried six because Friday morning dictates. They dictate that I must. So I do.

I leave at 6:30pm and not a second later. My blazer is an undisturbed lake, my sweater a desert of smooth and perfect valleys. But she is not perfect. I do not expect her to be. I do love.

"Hi," inferno lips tell me at 7:03pm.

Our reservations were set for 7pm. I take a breath, but the ticking roars in my head and on my wrist. I take a breath and raise the strings set on the corners of my mouth. It is habit now. I practice twice, long and tight, before the lights are shut and the toast is made. The muscles are trained and I feel a release once they reach their coordinates.

Three, two, one. I let the strain go.

"Hello."

"Your hair is impossibly neat," she tells me.

Her own slices through the air with machete precision. It is slicked back into a seamless tail and does not shift as she rotates, looks, checks, to see something I will never know. Her eyes shift. I like her hair. I do love. But her eyes shift and the birthmark on her cheek yells at me, taunts me. I want it to rot and fall from her face like dried fruit. But it does not.

"Thank you, Jenny." I smile again, but not too large.

I watched the movies at half speed, studied the false gleam in their eyes and the spill of their mouth when laughter was required. I do not laugh, but I practice. I do love. She will know and they will know. Perhaps they will understand this time because I try.

I try.

I try.

I try.

She is not perfect and it kills me. I follow her home. I sit by her side in the passenger place, but it feels as though I am trailing behind by foot, never lingering too long beneath the yellow-glowing streetlamps. We pass by their watching beams quickly. I wish she would slow, but I do love and I do not say anything. My smile remains as a hint on my face; my eyes compressed into thinning slices of obvious but false joy. It is only natural.

Fifty-three lamplights and we arrive at her house.

I do love and it is her house that loves me. It breathes. It stands tall, towering, protecting. A mouth of porch swallows me whole. Red brick burns blacks in the hour of none. It is home, yet

new and unfamiliar. I have found peace in a breathing interior that is not my own. I disappear inside and allow it to consume me.

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I wake up in the heart of the beast. Jenny of a surname I know not did not offer me a warm beverage. Her mouth did not curl upwards the last I had seen her. I have not felt fear many times. Urgency, yes. Pressure, yes. When I do not allow them to crawl along me, the pain begins at the base of my skull and spread like a secret cancer. I feel it, nagging, crying, its high-pitched squeals, as the white hot agony coats my skull.

Today it is not pressure, nor urgency. It is everything I have known and worse. It is fear, raw terror, hopelessness, darkness. It clouds and it consumes. Quickly, like wildfire, it does not linger. It eats and ravishes. But soon, I see a figure in the darkness.

My glasses are not clean and there are cracks in my vision. I groan and moan but the sound is lazy to come out. I am trapped as I had wished, it is sealed and impregnable in the black.

There is a pinch at my back, around my outskirts. I am pinned. Last I remember, I do love. It's as if the wall loves me back with the strength of Mother. Pinching, prying, peeling around the loose layers to observe the bleak underneath. The immaculate, blameless desert of tissue.

The figure approaches and sports grey-blond tail of steel. It slices through the fog and glints in my eye, tormenting. It is close, very suddenly. Too close. I hear a new voice at my ear.

"I like you more than the others. Your hair is not a strand out of place and your eyes are trenches." I do not like this voice. It does not crawl, it does not comfort. It is hated at once.

"I do love," I groan.

"Hush, child." I am not her child. Mother has ink-black curls and many legs.

The woman lies.

"You are my escape and I need you to be silent."

My vision seals to a focus. I look around the room, past her breath on my neck. There are men and women lined along the walls. The flicker of yellow bulb tells me that I am somewhere hidden from gaze of the mundane. The pressure builds and runs away with me, but my eyes refused to remove themselves.

Their backs are sealed against the wall. Molded, glued *into* the surface as if one. They slouch against it, free of clothing as I now realize I am too.

"Why?" I say as something new takes me over. It devours.

"Because I'm out. And I need my fix just as you do." The figure is no longer blond. The blond has collapsed into a shell of pale and empty at my legs. I try to run.

I try.

I try.

I try.

But my back does not let me. My flesh is bound and belongs to another.

"Out of what?" I managed, but my mind contracts. Soon nothing will seep through its once forgiving membrane and I will remain without reason.

"Out of escape. You are mine now and I can leave this damn hell hole. The furniture is not nice, as you insisted too many times it is. It moves in my way and does not let me free."

I quiet and flush away all heat. My eyes trace the room, forcing themselves away from the darkness at my ear. "How? Why me?"

"Not just you, dear." I hear a smile in its voice. "The first was my sister, my fucking empty sister. She did not last long at all but she was the first and allowed for practice. You are next."

At once, I am stolen from myself. It happens too quickly and I do not have time to wipe the blur from my glasses. To tug on the oscillating string that swims from the ceiling. I am outside again, but inside.

The house has spit me out and I sit in my bathtub. It must be 8pm because my eyes scan for spots. I see a darkness among the bloodless vessel. The spec crawls from my pant leg and sits in the center. It sits and stares and does not whisper to me anymore. Its many legs are motionless. It has run out of things to tell me.

I exit the bathroom and do not touch the lights.

I do love.