

Disclaimer: This story contains themes of body dysmorphia, self-harm, body horror, eating disorders, and gore. Readers be advised.

It had gnashed, knackered, rotting auburn teeth spewing out from its gums, aligning into a wicked, disgusting open-jawed smile. Its face was white, pale, and speckled with infected dots of diseased pores leaking greasy liquidated sinew that dripped from its face. Its brown eyes were wracked with yellow jaundice, bloodshot with pus and crust. Its hair was black and dark, but speckled with residual dry dandruff; paradoxically, it was wet from the oil and fluids crawling and caking on its scalp. Its nose was crooked and small, like it was smashed by a frightened strike to the creature's face, mangled in desperation to get away from its ugliness.

...

Every time I look into the mirror, I forget a little more of who I am.

Friday, September 12th.

My name is Benjamin Milthrew. I don't go by Ben. Not because I hate the name, but every time I introduce myself, I say my full name and nobody ever says 'can I call you Ben?'. Actually, that's not true, once an overly lax manager at my first job during high school called me Ben. She must've seen the complete confusion on my face when she did so, because she never called me Ben again.

I don't really have a way to describe myself. I'm just some guy. I wake up and work a job I tolerate (assistant programmer at a gaming company) drive in a car that's close to *my* age, and eat food I really shouldn't eat.

My therapist once gave me a journal and told me to write in it and describe my day, feelings, and myself. I don't care to talk about myself, but if my therapist wants progress, I'll give it to him.

"You're a nice guy, Benjamin," he went on and on. "I don't know why you hate yourself."

I don't hate myself *all* the time. Sometimes I'm pretty pleased with myself. I just don't want to linger on those feelings.

Feelings... feelings...

There was this girl at my job. I know it's wrong to like a co-worker, but it doesn't matter. She was way too pretty for me. She had long brunette hair she ties into a bun, a crooked but cute smile, hazel eyes, and a slender... maybe too slender, form. She always dressed herself in a homemade-looking sweater and a long skirt. It was conservative in nature, but doesn't give off that 'I'm better than you cause I cover my ankles' way.

One could think I crushed on her hard.

One would be right.

But I didn't want to ponder a lost cause.

Wednesday, September 17th

My (only) friend, Linus, invited me to hang out with him at his place. We were coworkers and we met in college, but we didn't talk too much to each other back then. He was tall, around six feet, perfect jawline, darkened amber eyes. He was bigger built, but not like me. He had some weight on him, but you could tell he went to the gym and lifted weights because his arms were lightly sculpted. He was a strong muscle man, not a pretty boy muscle man. He had an appropriately charming grin. The guy's teeth were a bit off-yellow, so he didn't smile with them often, unless he was really happy.

He grinned when he saw me.

"Hey, Benjamin!" He gave a loud, boisterous greeting. I enthusiastically smiled and waved. Then, when my guard was down, he threw his arm over me and leaned me in close. It was a bit too sensual, but I swallowed my slight discomfort for him.

"You talkin' to any *girl*?" He asked, a weird, shiver-inducing tone in his voice.

I didn't really know what to say, except the unfortunate truth.

"No," I said.

"Bummer, man," He shrugged.

"You said there'd be others?" Linus nodded. "Crew's on their way." I rolled my eyes. They're not 'crew', I don't know these people. Not really.

They showed up.

There was some tall girl with buck teeth, some guy bigger than me with a goatee, a little woman with a nice face but a weird mole on her hand, and a bunch of others I barely recognized from the office.

She was there too.

"Benjamin?" She gave me a demure wave with her crooked smile. "You know Linus?"

I nodded. "Yeah, we're coworkers."

"Well, I knew that," She smiled. "It's just you're really quiet, so I didn't expect you to--"

"Have friends?"

She laughed at my attempt at humor. Her laugh was light, airy, rare, like she choked on something right before the joke. Kind of like a high-pitched guffaw. It charmed me anyhow.

"Well, I never see you talk to people around the office."

Me: "I prefer the solemnity of solitude."

With an entertained smile, she rolled her eyes: “Oh, what video game did you get that from?”

I smiled as I stuttered like an idiot. “K-Kindred Darkness.”

She widened her eyes. “You like that game too? Oh my god! Who’s your favorite character?!” I shifted in surprise. “Didn’t think *you’d* know it.”

“Of course I do, I *love* video games.”

It’s always cute when girls say that.

“Okay, okay! Answer my question.” Her awkward teeth sang off-key with her smile, but I didn’t mind.

“Probably R-Reysto.” I stumbled on my words yet again. “I like his whole-”

“Cool, confident, ‘girl getter’ vibe?” She rolled her eyes with another smile. “Most men do.”

“I’m not a chauvinist, I swear.” I laughed. “It’s just he’s a cool buff guy that punches stuff. I’m a simple man.”

She giggled as she tapped her red solo cup. “Well, he’s my favorite, too.” I widened my eyes in glimmering surprise. “Really? Even though the whole female cast drools over him?” She nods. “That’s only in the earlier games. I like... his confidence. Y’know? The way he storms in a room and takes charge despite the consequences.”

Me: “You like his confidence?” I smiled knowingly.

Her: “I do.”

Me: “And not his bulging muscles?”

Her: “Well they certainly *help*.”

We both shared a laugh against the chatter of conversations.

Me: “Typical.”

Her: “Not really. I actually prefer a guy with a bit of... substance to him.”

What?

She did not just say that what-

“Hey, girl!”

Oh god, not this guy.

Trent was a tall guy... maybe I have to stop describing every guy as tall. Most guys are taller than me. He was taller but shorter than Linus. He had sleepless nights under his eyes but a hungry glint in his iris. He was skinny but sculpted. Looked like an athlete who needed to eat just a bit more. I could tell this because he wore a dark violet unbuttoned button-down shirt with a tank top underneath. My fat ass could never pull that look off, I tried. With that he had a silver cross tied around his neck and baggy black pants.

Usually I wouldn’t pay this much attention to a guy’s outfit if *she* didn’t pay so much attention to it.

“Oh my God, Trent, look at you decked out!” She beamed as Trent threw his arm over her. “Oh thanks! This is just somethin’ I threw on!”

Her: "Well keep throwin', man!"

Trent: "Oh, hey! It's you!" Trent faced down at me, half awkwardly. "...Berry, right?"

Me: "It's pronounced Benjamin, actually."

Silence...

Eventually their conversation started back up. One I was not invited to. Not once did they try to include me in, or talk about something that I cared about. They laughed, jested, talked about old times and I just sat there, not receiving even the scraps of their bonding.

Eventually, Trent greeted Linus and off he went, leaving me alone with her.

We made awkward small talk, none of it contributed to a lasting conversation. I kept seeing her eyes drift away between the awkward silences. In the back of my mind, I could've sworn that she kept giving Linus a glare or two.

This feeling turned into a fear, this fear flickered into a flame.

She gave a sad huff and glanced over at me, and tilted her head a bit confused.

"Hey, everything okay, Benjamin?"

I nodded and rolled my eyes with a sigh. "Yeah. Everything's **fine**." Her eyes widened and she clicked off her red solo cup a few times before losing interest. "Oh, there's my friend Carly, I'm gonna go chat with her, but I'll catch you later, alright?"

I didn't respond with words, just a forlorn nod.

God I'm an idiot.

I had her in the palm of my hand and I dropped her.

For the rest of the party I just meandered about the studio apartment, watching her.

She was stunning, unattainable, yet so tangible. I saw her walk from person to person, greet them warmly and them greet her back. The way her eyes never ran away from theirs, the way she walked in the light confounded the very foundation of my form. Was it fearlessness? Was it courage? Was it apathy? I hadn't an idea. She twirled around, danced and played, all while they hung off her every social cue. In this light they gave, she performed. Hell, it didn't even look like a performance. What was this magic she had?

And what spell had she cast on me?

Linus came over a few times to check on me, concern about me growing and glimmering in his stupid pretty green eyes everytime.

"Hey man!" He'd greet.

"You good?" He'd check.

"Doin' alright, bud?" He'd pity.

Screw off.

I harbored animosity, but I was too guilt-ridden and lonely to leave right after. So after the 'crew' left I stayed.

Linus picked up stray cups while I grabbed the two 7/8th eaten pizzas. “Hey,” he said. “Want those?”

Pizza is greasy and bad for my skin, and I had already eaten almost half of the pepperoni one.

“Sure.”

He threw the cups into the trash and walked over. “Hey, dude, you sure you’re okay? You look down.”

I always look down. I’m not an excited person. What’s he getting at?

“I’m fine.”

“Look, I saw what happened with Ava.”

Ava was *her* name. The number of times I’ve spoken to her made me forget it every once in a while. Linus continued. “I spoke to her, too. Asked about you.”

“Why would you do that?”

Linus put his hands up defensively. “Benjamin, I know you like her... so I invited her.” This idiot.

“I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“You don’t have to! That’s what friends do.” He smiled and patted me on the shoulder. In fact, he just threw his arm over me and did that weird guy-hug thing again. I didn’t care for it. “You don’t seem all that happy about the conversation, though.”

I’m not.

“Ava said you just looked... bored. Like you weren’t interested in a conversation.” Why would I? What’s the point? She doesn’t like me. She probably likes you. Girls always like guys like you.

“That’s a shame. I do like her. She’s nice.” I said with my perfected monotone. Oh, she’s nice? Like you don’t lie awake thinking about her every day? Like her smile doesn’t make you sing solemn poetry? Like her cold touch doesn’t stir waves that overpower Poseidon in your heart?

I’m bad at poetry, yet I wrote all that down.

“Right, so talk to her.”

“She probably doesn’t like me.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Just doesn’t.”

I had a feeling Linus knew what I was talking about, but he played dumb anyway. I eventually tired of being manhandled, so I went home.

I rent a shabby apartment. The walls are a verdantly and sickly stained white with dark gray stained carpet. One could poke at me for not cleaning it up, but it was like this the day I walked in. Old dishes crowded and stretched across my kitchenette surfaces, and a pizza box

from Linus' last party sat on my coffee-stained coffee table. I threw it away and replaced it with a new one.

I flicked on the TV mechanically, as I lost the remote about a month ago, and stared at an old cartoon from my childhood. I knew everything these characters were going to say before they said it. This predictability gave me a small and... stale comfort. I got no joy from it. Just comfort.

After I got bored of that, I went to the one big window I had on the other side of my apartment and stared.

The city's night sky was flooded with light, but not from the stars. The sickly buzzing of neon signs and the false jubilations of party lights accompanied the desolate yet hurrying glow of the traffic's headlights. An amalgamation of man-made luminescence stole starlight from the New York City sky. Not even the moon tried to compete with the superseding anthropocentric glow; it wasn't out.

In the window, I breathed foggy air and stared. Silently, I licked my coagulated yet still bleeding wounds. Eventually, I got tired of it. I shut the window, and I saw-

It.

Its eyes were sullen, tired, and bloodshot. Its frown furrowed and caused raucous wrinkles around its mouth.

I sat down in torturous silence. My hands clung to my chest, and my ugly face furrowed. I wanted to cry, but for what? I didn't really know. For being this way? For looking so-? Why? Why do *I* have to be like this?!

Tears did not roll down my face. I cried a million times when I was younger. What hurt more was the fact I couldn't. It seemed I was too old to sob, even when alone, even when...

She was right there.

She was right there, I could've talked to her right there.

But she wasn't interested.

No one's ever interested. Not women, not men, not anyone in what I have to say. In who I am. I was cast out.

I wish I were idiotic enough to be angry.

I was just sad.

Despite the lifelessness of the sky, I wished on the not-starlight from the Earth. It was the only one that glimmered.

It was the only one I could see.

Thursday, September 18th

My bed sheets wrapped themselves around, binding me to my comfortable bed. Their softness comforted me, shielded me from the world.

My alarm did the opposite. It blared, screamed and reminded me that I have to get up and face it.

I hobbled into the bathroom, the coldness of the tile floor both pricking at the bare sole of my feet and comforting it. I didn't quite see where I was going, but because it was home, I knew what I was doing. My hands clutched the ceramic sink riddled with toothpaste.

I groaned.

For some reason, I had a small headache.

Then I opened my eyes.

His eyes were a sparkling amber, light flowing around in his iris like rivers, setting themselves into glimmering banks. His skin was regally smooth and heretically flawless except on his chin, where he had faint traces of stubble along the sharp lines of his jaw. His smile was slight, his bleached white teeth aligning themselves perfectly like a choir of pure singers. His hair was black and straight, combed even if it had never been wrestled.

His body was tall, his shoulders stout but charmingly menacing. His arms were sculpted by masons of a king's highest favor, curving into strong, robust muscles clinging to him. His waist was not slim, but wide in an athletic way; it seemed trained and worked.

I jump back from the shock of having this *stranger* in the mirror. I recognized him, though. He didn't look different from me. He looked... God, he looked...

Like me! It was me! But just so... *perfect*. He had my eyes! Just not so tired, not so lifeless, not so hopeless.

I should have been horrified, but I wasn't! I was amazed, I was grateful! I-

I instantly fell to the ground when a surging, worming feeling reverberated throughout my head. It felt as if a bright light or fire burned its way through my brain, singeing my synapses and prodding my nerve cells with hot, blistering fire poker.

I begged God, what god? I've no idea, any god to make it stop.

And it did.

It just stopped. The burning faded.

I slowly stopped groveling on the cold, tiled floor. I gazed into the mirror once again.

It stared back.

Was I seeing things? Was I insane? I could've sworn to God I saw a more attractive version of *me* in the mirror! What the hell was going on? I didn't know. All I knew is that even if that was a nightmare, even my body morphed into something different, and if that splitting headache caused my will to live to ache itself...

I wished that I looked like that again.

I stared in the mirror as I saw it happen.

My skin began to twist and knot like threads of flesh rearranging strings of itself on my head. My face was cut apart roughly and diagonally into slabs of sinew that wormed themselves to the other side of my wet skull. The red veins and bodily material could be seen under the rearranging of my body, and I even began to bleed dark, oxygenated blood onto the floor. Some

of the liquidated brawn, a reddish, oozy brown, dropped onto my white ceramic sink and stained it thoroughly. The metallic smell of my body's fallen ichor wafted through my nose as the bones of my nasal cavity snapped apart and rebuilt themselves.

When it was done, my face settled into place. It was as if a demon mended my head and pulled the last pull on the thread, fixing the fabric of my flesh.

He was beautiful.

I vomited into my sink.

The headache returned, but it wasn't as bad. Manageable. Maybe my fear made it so much worse? I don't know, I didn't really care.

Others would be concerned, others would be horrified at this new power... but if I'm being completely honest, I was overjoyed.

I spent an hour checking every part of my new self. The smile he had was wide every time I caught a glance of his face. Everything got an upgrade.

Even the things one couldn't see at first glance.

He was a miracle.

A true miracle.

And I loved him.

None of my clothes fit me at all. All of them were both too short and too wide. I found a hoodie that just barely got to the edge of my torso and baggy khaki pants. My shoes were too small, but nothing I couldn't wear.

Well, if I looked good, I had to dress the part.

I drove over to a random mall. I usually wouldn't go shopping there, I just wear the same thing over and over.

I fit myself into a nice button-down shirt and some skinny jeans.

It seems the ability did not give me the ability to dress myself, unfortunately.

Wait-! I knew who could dress!

I gave Linus' door a rapid slurry of excited knocks. He opened the door in his pajama pants and a tank top, sleep still dripping from his eyes.

"...Uh-" He stared, bewildered and confused. "Who are you?"

"Dude- dude-!" I smiled, I really smiled loudly and brightly. "It's me! Ben!"

He stared at me again, silently, not knowing what the hell I was talking about. "...Ben who?"

"Milthrew."

Linus: "But... you're *not* Benjamin Milthrew."

Me: “No, you don’t understand! I am! I just changed!”

Linus: “No you didn’t? Look, man, I don’t know who you are or what kind of game you’re playing-”

Me: “I work at Gensin Software, live at 6667 Lenoway Drive, birthday is June 9th, 1991.”

Linus: “Congratulations, you have his Indeed account and driver’s license. Get the f-”

Me: “I have a crush on Ava Baker.”

Linus stared once more. This time, into my eyes. His verdant innocence waned into mine. As he examined, his hostility faded, but his confusion was all but unapparent.

He did not deny me.

“How- how the hell- **what** the hell-”

I shuffled past him into his apartment. Despite the party last night, it was spotless. “I don’t know, dude. I woke up like this!”

Linus stumbled tiredly behind me. “What? Does it hurt?”

Me: “Kind of?”

Linus: “What kind of *Harry Potter* shapeshifter shit is this?”

I simply shrugged with a smile. “No clue.” Linus didn’t smile back. “Maybe we should go to the doctor or something...” I raised an eyebrow. “Why?” Linus widened his eyes and stomped his foot. “Cause it’s not normal to grow a foot, lose 60 pounds in fat, and gain 30 in muscle!”

Me: “Well, I look good, don’t I?”

Linus: “I mean, yeah, but...”

Me: “What?”

Linus: “You look like a different person.”

“Exactly!” I smiled and ran over to Linus. “I don’t have to feel like an ugly little troll anymore! I can be myself!”

Linus raised an eyebrow. “What was stopping you from doing that before?” I looked at him, stared actually. He wouldn’t get it. He always looked decent. He’s never known what it’s like to look like **it**. “Just... support me, alright?” Linus shook his head and darted his eyes away from mine. “...Okay. Wait- are you good?” I gave him a confused smile. “How do you mean?”

“Your nose is bleeding.”

I touched my face.

So it was.

My head began to spin once again. I transformed back right then and there. You know, even though the slushy sounds of muscle and bone sliding and rebuilding all over my body is sickening, it didn’t hurt much.

Linus saw it and vomited on the ground beside him.

“What the fuck?! That’s fucking disgusting!”

Beauty is pain, I suppose.

“Sorry, it starts to hurt if I hold it for too long.” Linus fell down to the ground. “Hold it? You have to hold it?”

Me: “Yeah.”

Linus: “Well then fucking *don’t*, Benjamin. Don’t do that, it was like a corpse was mutilated and violated right in front of me by the fucking Invisible Man!” I nodded. “It’s pretty gross, but I held it for an hour that time.”

Linus shook his head. “You shouldn’t be messing with whatever this is. I don’t know if you need to see a priest, or a doctor, or what, but you can’t be going around doing that.”

Me: “Why not?”

Linus: “Because it’s demonic?!”

Me: “Didn’t take you for a catholic.”

Linus: “Shit, maybe *now!*”

I sat down on his couch. “Look, I... want a second chance with *her*.” Linus got up from the ground and stepped over his puddle of vomit to get a towel. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“If I talk her up in that form, I can maybe get a date.”

“...A date? You’re worried about a date? Benjamin, your body is capable of decaying and rearranging itself, and you’re worried about some girl?” I nodded. “It’s been a long while since I’ve talked to a girl, alright. Scientists can poke at me later.”

Linus just stared, bewildered. “Okay, well, if you want to do that, just talk to her. You don’t need to *shapeshift* to do that.”

“Yes, I do! That’s the only way she’ll listen to what I have to say!” Linus was over this, I could tell. “Look, I’ll talk you up at the club tonight, and get you to-”

Me: “Club?”

Suddenly, Linus seemed like he was caught in something. “Oh... yeah, we were planning on checking out *Reinvenzione*. That new club on Delmont? Wanna... come?”

Me: “When did you decide this?”

Linus: “Last night.”

I got up from his couch. “So was I just not invited?”

Linus: “Man, it’s not like that, I- just- thought you wouldn’t enjoy it.”

My eyes narrowed, and I glowered at Linus up and down. “Bullshit. You knew that I would have wanted to come if *she* were there!” Linus sighed. “Exactly. You wouldn’t have any fun.”

Me: “What told you that?!”

Linus: “Because you never have any fun! You never enjoy Thursday night drinks or a Friday night shin-dig! You never talk, you never smile, you just walk around looking dejected and miserable. It brings the mood down, man.”

Me: “Well, I’m sorry my social anxiety brings the mood down. I’m sorry I’m not like you!”

Linus: "What social anxiety? You're not anxious! You never give them a chance to make you anxious! You just shut down whenever somebody comes to talk to you, including Ava."

Me: "...So what? This is just a pity invite?"

Linus: "No... man... you're my friend. So is Ava. I wanna help you out. But I don't want you to show up in a freaky demonic costume."

Me: "Oh, I'm your friend now? What about last night? All you ever did was come to take pity on me."

Linus: "Pity this, pity that-! It's not my fault I felt bad that you felt like shit. I've been trying to crack you out of your shell for *months*. I've been trying to get to know you for *months* because I know what it's like to be in your shoes."

Me: "No, you don't! Nobody does! Look at you and look at me!"

Linus just stared. "You know what, dude, do whatever you want. You want to freak her out looking like an Adult Swim promo, go ahead."

I just sighed and turned around. I was done wasting time on this guy. I didn't need him anymore.

...

I ended up just scrolling through the internet for an outfit. I went back to the mall and bought the closest thing to it. Broke the bank. Beauty really is pain. The annoying part was getting the right size.

I combed my hair, brushed my teeth, mouthwash, all that fancy stuff for tonight. I kept accidentally reflecting on Linus' words. How am I going to explain this to *her*?

I came up with the idea. I wouldn't. She wouldn't get it. Maybe I'd slowly, over the months, reveal it? Tell her the truth one day, but not all in one day? Just not on our first date.

...

The neon lights blared their luminescent scarlet red. *Reinvenzione*. As the glare burned throughout the starless, moonless night, I walked in, determined. Not just determined, happy, and excited. I can finally look her in the eyes.

The hoards of women in skimpy clothes and eyeing men jived around to popular pop music detailing some break up or cheating scandal or- whatever. I wasn't really paying attention. I searched around but didn't find her.

"Oh- sorry-!" I didn't notice, but a little stout girl bumped into me. She had wide eyes and a button nose. Terrible skin though, craters dotted her face like a sixth grader drew on it. Her teeth were relatively white, but misaligned, and her outfit was mismatched in fabric *and* color. She grinned at me. "Didn't mean to do that."

I just nodded.

“So, what brings you here on a Saturday night?”

I stared at her, blatantly uninterested. “What brings someone to a club on a Saturday night?” She nodded and chuckled awkwardly. “Stupid question, I know.”

I nodded. Stupid question indeed.

She eventually caught the hint after a few more questions from the social enchiridion went ignored.

I scoured around and there I saw her. She was still dressed modestly, but in such bright colors. My feet moved before my mind could, and before I knew it, I was leaning on the bar, trying and failing not to stare at her. Accidentally, I noticed Linus, Trent, and a few more of the people from the party. Trent leaned just slightly on Linus and babbled about something. Linus seemed entertained. I felt a bit silly considering the man competition yesterday, but I went on.

She twirled a drink in her hand.

I spoke. “Oh, hi!”

I immediately cringed because I said it like a cartoon character.

Nevertheless, she turned to me. Her eyes lit up, and her expression dropped from its calm, lifeless demeanor and began to beam. She stuttered in a way I had never heard her stutter before. The way I stuttered when I spoke to her yesterday.

“O-oh, hi!” She looked me up and down, but not judgmentally. “What’s up?” I nod. “You look familiar,” I said. Technically, it wasn't a lie. “Wait, do you work at Gensin?” I asked. “I do!” She cheers with a crooked smile and twirls over to Linus. “Linus, Linus! You know this guy?”

Linus’ light faded and flickered away from his eyes as he intently narrowed his glare at me. The disdain and apathy he felt for me could be read on his face. There, I did not see a friend, nor an adversary.

“Nope.”

She shrugged. “Are you new?” I nodded. Wow, she came up with the perfect lie *for* me. “Yeah! I am. I came here to celebrate my new hire. I didn't expect to see a coworker!”

She smiled. “What’s your name?”

Me: “Mike.”

She extended her hand: “Mike! I’m Ava.”

She told me her name, and this time it solidified. In the brawn of my brain, her title stuck simply because this time she said it to me directly and into my eyes.

She smiled. “So, how come?”

I furrowed my brow in understandable confusion. “What?”

“How come you work for a gaming company? What’s your favorite game?”

Well, I obviously can’t give her the same game and answers from yesterday, so-
“Soccer.”

...

“Okay! That’s a bold choice... not into video games?”

I smile zero-heartedly. "Yeah, I don't play games, I'm more interested in active stuff." Ava shrugged. "I can definitely tell you're an active guy." She winked.

She flirted with me.

It was amazing.

But I felt...

Maybe it's because I'm nervous.

"I'm partial to a round of volleyball myself."

I smile. "I thought your favorite game was Kindred Darkness."

I'm actually an idiot.

"What? I never told you that! Is it that obvious?"

Phew.

"Yeah, you're wearing Reysto's colors. Blue and yellow." She giggled. "Really? I didn't notice! I guess even subconsciously I'm a nerd." I chuckle, and she leans in. "I guess you like video games a little!"

"My little brother's really into them."

I chuckled a little, a tad more confused. "Also, you're not a nerd." She giggled again and rolled her eyes. "Oh, thanks for the sympathy, but trust me, I am!"

Me: "My brother's way nerdier. Loves cartoons and anime."

"Making it a competition?" She snickered.

"He'd win." I smiled.

Suddenly, I felt a stern tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see Linus, a fake, lightless smile on his face. "Yo, buddy, can I talk to you?"

"Eh, sure."

"Alone."

Ava pivoted her eyes between us, confused. "Linus? What's up?" Linus ignored her. For the sake of what used to be, I followed Linus anyhow. He doesn't look too determined to stop my ideas.

The young man took me aside into a dark, lightless corner of the club and gave me a cold yet concerned glare. Perhaps concern for her or vestiges of concern for me. "What are you doing? I told you not to come here with that."

"I'm a grown man, Linus," I said. "I'm allotted to make my own choices."

He rolled his eyes at my vernacular and did not face me. "This isn't right. You are lying to her."

Me: "How am I lying? If I look like this, it's what I look like!"

Linus: "Not that! Not the shapeshifting anime reference. I mean this *person* you are making up! If you're gonna do this shady stuff, at least come correct! Tell her who you are."

Me: "I will eventually!"

Linus: "Eventually isn't good enough!"

Me: "Get off my back! Why do you hate this so much? Why aren't you on my side?!"

Linus: "Because it's horrifying! It's disgusting, it's distasteful, and a million other words for wrong! People aren't supposed to do this! This isn't how you get Ava! By turning into a half-cute soccer boy!"

Me: "Girls go for the soccer boy."

Linus: "Does Ava?"

I didn't have a quick response. A retort never left my tongue. I didn't have anything to say. I felt as if he was right. I knew that this was unnatural. I knew that a being from the deepest lake of darkness, from the most godless of an abyss, of the most human Hell, clawed and crept up to give me this... power. But I didn't care. Not really. This was my chance for the light. And I'm not going to snuff it out.

Me: "I'll tell her. Eventually. I promise."

Linus: "This isn't going to work, Benjamin. It never does."

And with that, Linus walked away from me. Angry, and half forlorn, and entirely determined to prove him wrong, I went back to her.

She nursed her drink before she saw me. "What was that about? I've never seen Linus without a smile on his face."

Me: "He was just a bit worried about me, I got chewed out the other day by a manager, so he was just checking in."

She snickered. "A bad boy, I see." I shrugged and put on a playful smile. "Perhaps."

We stared into each other's eyes before... a song. I didn't remember the name of it, but the fire of absolute excitement that sparked in her the second she heard the first note was blazing. It was older, definitely either 70s or 80s. Roses? ABBA? Beatles? I listened to video game music and show tunes, so I had absolutely no idea who they were, but it sounded fun enough.

She started dancing right then and there, around crowds of people. "Facing..." she mouthed to me with a smile while... facing me.

She sang along with the lyrics and gyrated around. Eventually, people began staring at her. No, not staring. Watching. *Seeing* her. Her dance moves were awkward, sporadic, and had no discipline, but it didn't matter because of the big wide smile on her face as she danced. Utter joy glimmered and radiated off her. Soon enough, a girl or two joined. "Lonely..." She sang at me. I felt attacked, but she wasn't wrong... yet.

When the song calmed for a moment, she spun around to me. "What's wrong, Mike? Don't like to dance?"

I don't.

"I do actually! You... look like you're having fun."

She beamed and shrugged. "Sometimes things really *are* what they seem." I nodded and slowly started... jiving? I had no idea what I was doing. I was just doing something. She fake-pouted. "That's not really *dancing*, Mike."

Me: "Well, who are you to judge? Is what you're doing dancing?"

Her: "It's not dancing because you're not having fun!"

Me: "Well.. all those people are watching."

Her: "Well, give them a show!"

I shivered and shook there, in place. I couldn't look her in the eyes, I couldn't. "I... can't."

She laughed. "Didn't take you for a shy one, Mike-"

She saw my eyes looking down at the ground. The shadows of the gyrating bodies blocked the neon lights from the floor.

She changed her tone. "Hey, come on, it's alright! They're here to dance, and so are you!" I shook my head, fury furrowing from underneath this bloody, hot mask I wore. "No! I can't!"

She widened her eyes. "Mike. It's okay," she said with a chuckle in her breath. "You can do this."

The song calmed down and transitioned to a slow one. With this, she outstretched her arms. She held them over my shoulder and stared into my eyes. The question glimmered in her gaze. I stared back and nodded.

...

We danced like this for a while, our forms colliding, warming each other. "Where?" I said, not expecting myself to speak, really.

Her: "Where what?"

Me: "Where did you get this ability?"

Her chuckle reverberated into my chest. "What ability?"

Me: "To be so... fearless?"

Her: "I'm not fearless."

Me: "You know what I mean."

She paused and sighed.

Her: "When I was younger... I struggled a lot with my body. I was a bigger girl with back acne and bad teeth."

Me: "Wait, really?"

Her: "Yeah! High School was hard."

Me: "Were you bullied?"

Her: "Not really, just... excluded. I swore to myself I was ugly and that no one wanted to talk to me cause I'm fat and ugly. It got so bad that by the time I graduated and went to my freshman year of college, I developed..."

She paused, possibly from not wanting to seem too grim to a stranger.

Her: "It felt good to have control. To have that ability. I was the one who made choices over my body,, and while to this day that isn't untrue, after it was all over, I didn't feel in control. I put my health, my well-being, and my self-image up to the *world*. And while I *chose* to do that,

is it really a choice if I choose to let the world decide? It got to a point where I broke. My best friend found me strewn out on our couch, not having eaten anything for days. I cried every day in the hospital... my 'control' almost killed me."

Me: "...What changed?"

Ava: "...Not much at first. I went to therapy and learned that over-controlling myself and trying to control what everybody thinks of me doesn't work. It took months, years even to convince myself that I'm worthy of love no matter what I look like, no matter what I take joy from."

Me: "But sometimes the world... no matter how you feel... won't give you love."

Ava: "That's why you love yourself."

Me: "...And what do you do if you don't love yourself?"

Ava: "It's hard. Loving yourself is really fucking hard but I did it anyway. I feel like... if I can love myself, then I can do anything. I can dance in front of people, I can smile, laugh, I can be happy because I've done- no, I **do** the hardest thing in the world every day."

Then why can't I?

When the song ended, she turned around and smiled. A tear went down her cheek, but in an instant it changed back to a familiar concern. "Mike, you okay?"

Me: "...Yeah."

Her: "You sure? Your nose is bleeding."

Again? God damn it.

Me: "Excuse me-"

She had forlorn face as I sped away.

The bathroom had one of those weird walls that were all mirrors. A large reflection of the room and myself was projected largely. I saw him walk in there, a misguided handsome young man with blood dripping off his face and onto his nice white shirt. I stared at him in the mirror. This didn't feel right. Why didn't it feel right? This was my dream! This is all I've wanted since I met her, yet something feels off- WHY?!

My head began to whirl once again. But I didn't change. Not here, not when I was so close!

I wiped the blood off my face. Nothing I could do about my shirt. I walked out of the bathroom and she was right there.

"Mike, you sure you're okay?"

Pity.

"It's just you look so lost and nervous, and-"

Pity.

"I don't know, did I overwhelm you with that story?"

Pity, pity, pity! Self-love, knowing yourself, my life is all about me! That crap- that bullshit, none of it works! None of it changes who I am! What I am! I've always been an

unlovable goddamn monster and it's only starting to change because I look better. She's only talking to me cause I look better. No one cares who I am, what I do, what my name is; they don't care if I feel better, only if I look better, and some speech isn't going to fix that! "I DON'T NEED YOUR GODDAMN PITY!"

She backed away. She just stared. Not a response. Just a stare. Of disbelief? Fear? I don't know. Whatever it was, it made her turn away and walk out the door.

I rushed after her, the music muting as I flew out through the revolving door. "Wait! Wait! I'm sorry-" She didn't turn around at first, but I caught up with her. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry-! I didn't mean to-"

"Stop." She turned around, finally, and stared me down. "Just stop, dude. It's fine." I sighed. "Okay, thank you- I didn't mean to yell."

"It's cool." She said, but her tone didn't match her words. She didn't sound mad or even disappointed. She just... sounded forlorn.

Me: "You don't sound like it's 'cool.'"

Her: "I mean, cause it's not. You screamed at me for being concerned."

Me: "I said I'm sorry!"

Her: "And I forgive you." She gave me a cold, polite smile. "Anyways, I've been here for a while, I think I'm just gonna get my stuff and go home for the night. Maybe I'll see you at the office on Monday-"

Me: "Wait- so it's over? Just like that?"

She clicked her heels and turned back around. "*What's over?*"

Me: "This night? Us?"

Her: "There is no 'us'. I just met you."

Me: "Yeah! But we had something. We *have* something."

Her: "Yeah, we *did*."

Me: "So one mistake and it all comes crashing down?"

Her: "What the hell are you talking about?"

Me: "I worked so hard for this, for YOU, and you just leave?!"

Her: "Yeah! I'm leaving! Now step out of my way."

Me: "No! I did everything I was supposed to do! I'm supposed to get you!"

Her: "I'm not something to *get*. I'm a goddamn human being, Michael. God, I can't believe-"

Me: "What?"

Her: "That I fell for your whole 'shy guy' act."

Me: "It's not an act-! Look, I'm sorry."

Her: "You've made that clear."

Me: "I... just wanted a second chance."

Her: "Not even done with your first."

Me: "No, no. It's me."

Her: "...What?"

Me: "Benjamin. I'm Benjamin Milthrew."

Her: "What are you talking about?"

"Look closely."

She looked into my eyes with confusion and disbelief. She stepped closer to me and looked. Truly looked. For the last time.

"Oh- oh- my God, how did you-" She looked me up and down once again. "God, I said you were familiar- Benjamin?!" She screamed in confused horror.

"I know, I know it's weird-"

"*That's* how you knew my favorite game-! What the hell did you do to yourself?"

Me: "To look good?"

Her: "You look like a completely different person! You grew half a goddamn foot-! What's going on?!" She stepped away from me, staring at me like frightened prey ready to strike. I stuttered and held up my hands defensively, trying to calm her down. "It's okay! I'm okay with this! I'm okay with doing this for you if this is what you need!" She breathed heavily with fear escaping her lungs. "What I need?!" I sighed, recuperating my approach as I stepped forward. Once again, she stepped back. I rolled my eyes. "If you need me to look like this for you to consider-"

Her: "Consider what? I don't understand this, I don't understand!"

Me: "What do you mean you don't understand? Earlier, you said you were at least *used* to!"

She stepped back again, this time onto the brick wall of the club. "I don't know what you want from me!"

Me: "I want what you have! I want you!"

She didn't face me, she gasped in fear. My face furrowed, and I stomped my foot. "Why?"

Her: "Why, what?"

Me: "Why don't you want me too?"

Her: "Look, Mike. Despite all this, I think you're... a nice guy."

Me: "Tell me the truth."

Her: "Please-"

I shouted. "Tell me the TRUTH!"

Her: "You want the goddamn truth?! You're boring! You're shallow. You offer nothing to a goddamn conversation! All you do is hang off my every word! It's unremarkably male! It's like I'm talking to a lump of young clay! Well I don't want something molded in my image, I want a goddamn human being! I could smell your obsession yesterday, and I'm smelling it now!"

I shook my head violently and clenched my fist. "Bullshit! All people like you want is someone who's just like you!"

Her: "I'm not 'people'! I'm a nerd who works for a game company who likes kimchi and Korean graphic novels!"

Me: "...You didn't even get to fully know me before throwing me away."

She narrowed her eyes. "You didn't even give me the chance to get to know you. Well, whatever, now I know."

Me: "You **don't** know!"

She faced away again, desperation starting to pour from her eyes. Again, again, her eyes wandered away from mine. Her attention eluded me once again. This wasn't fair. How was this fair? What is she looking for?!

I turned around to see Linus walking towards us. I raised an eyebrow in confusion before she darted over to the man and stood beside him. She clung to his arm like the damsel I **knew** her to be. "What's your problem, Linus?" I said, staring him down.

Linus: "I think you should leave Ava alone."

Me: "...Why?"

Linus: "That's not for you to ask."

I glared at her.

She's beautiful. Truly beautiful.

Had I known her more, it would be easy to say I loved her. It'd be so easy to fall for her. Get used to her. Dance with her, smile with her. How for months, I longed for her embrace, for the comforting flicker of life inside of me that she gave. How when she was around for a moment, just a moment, the world didn't seem so lifeless.

But... again.

She eluded me. She skipped off back into the club, forever to leave me in the dark again.

I broke once more.

Perhaps it was this form, this borrowed body that I walked in, that gave me back the ability, but I cried. My throat choked, and I felt my scarlet sorrow climb out of my throat and come out as a single wail.

"What..." I asked the wind... but Linus inquired.

"Huh?"

"What does she want from me? What does anyone want from me? What does the world want from me?!"

Linus: "Benjamin-"

"I peeled every inch of my skin off, cell by cell.

I rearranged my bones, siphoned and synthesized my blood and mucus.

I restructured every hair, finger nail, and scar for **them**!

What else could they want from me? What do I have to do to play their games?

What lines do I have to say?

What part of myself must I hate?

What strand of DNA must I purge?
What god must I pray to or refuse to acknowledge?
What?
What?
WHAT?
WHAT?!
TELL ME WHAT I MUST DO FOR THEM TO SEE ME?!"

Linus never did respond.

...

An hour later, I found myself four shots in, back in the club, gyrating and dancing around to some modern rap song that I never cared to listen to, truly. With a glass in my hand, I whipped my head around to see.

A girl.

She had a wide, perfect smile with white teeth. Her blue eyes, speckled with the violet glow of the neon lights, gleamed into my soul. Her blonde hair ran down her shoulders and curled beautifully against her back. She grinned when she saw me. A real big grin too. Her tan skin was smooth and effortless, and her soft hands were demure as she touched my face.

"Heya..." She said, a devious smirk on her face.

"Wow, you're pretty-" I said with a burp.

"Eh, you're even prettier than me, honestly." She said with a shrug. "My name's Penelope."

Me: "Mike."

I smirked back.

She searched into me deeply, into the windows of my soul, and she searched for something. I wish I had the time to tell her that she wouldn't find anything. Still,

We danced.

We talked.

We kissed.

All of it tasted of alcohol and absurdity. It meant nothing, but the illusion of this woman's company was more comforting than the reality of my solemnity.

She faced me, then that familiar look of weirded-out concern stretched across her face. "Is it my nose?" I asked. She shook her head. "No, it's your... scalp? It's bleeding, are you okay?"

My glare widened with concern as I excused myself.

I burst into the bathroom, leaving blood mixed with desperation and depression in my tracks. I dashed up to a sink and stared at him.

He was nervous and wracked with sweat dripping down his face. His eyes darted around with a fervor to check what's wrong when he finally found it.

A small piece of skin on the right side of his face sagged and stunk like rotten meat, half cut against the cut of his face. The smell was inordinately and profoundly debilitating, and I gagged on scarleting saliva. My nose itself made an audible *cric* as it snapped out of place.

A knock on the door irritated my decaying ears. "Mike, you alright?" The woman asked, half-hearted worry vibrating in her voice.

The history books, huh?

"I'm fine!" I lied.

"You sure?"

"I'll be out in a minute, okay?"

"Alright then, don't keep me waiting, handsome."

My body began to ache in every facet and every form. Sharp and dull pain squeezed and tightened my nerves and then let them go as if to wring out every pain receptor in my body. My brain banged against the walls of my skull, clawing and leaving scars against my membrane in insanity. It howled a desolate hope for freedom from the paralyzing and penetrating pain.

I fell to the ground, my legs feeling as if they were twisting into each other like shoelaces of flesh.

But I pressed on. I didn't let go. Why in God's name would I let go? What's the point of letting go of this form? All my life I have felt the hatred of a world that only cares about how tall I am, or how white my smile is, and how I seem. To live in this world without the mandatory appearance is a sin to the fraternity of man and the sorority of socialization.

To be human was to connect to one another, feel one another, and see one another. Despite the horridness of my ugliness and how it should've caused all to grossly gaze and gawk, it paradoxically made me invisible to the listless human eye. To be cognizant of another is the ultimate expression of one's humanity, but to me, the people have proven themselves to be monsters again and again. In my life, I had lamented being cast out so much that my voice hardly sang. But! I had joined their unholy choir in this devilish attempt and sung their shallow songs... still, they never heard my voice.

As I gazed into the large mirror, I saw my body collapse against the opposite tile wall. I saw my form begin to seize and shake in a violent seizure. I could not move, but move was all I did. Up and down, scratching and cutting my back against the sharp, rusty tile.

My teeth began to twist and shake out of my head or shatter, still hanging on to my bleeding gums. My lips leaked scarlet as I choked on my own blood, not being able to control my breathing or my throat. My hands, outstretched without my will, shivered like the rest of my rotting body. The bones in my arm broke with a deep, baritone *crack* and pulled themselves out of their socket... then put themselves back in and tore themselves apart to lie lifeless on the floor.

Stretched but still attached. My hair began to leak a substance of blood and grease, pouring out from the top of my head, crawling into my nose, and into a still coagulating mouth. My face was no longer cut into perfect strips of brawn; no, it was ripped, like looseleaf, off my face, and the slabs crawled around, arranging themselves into a confused spaghetti of cheek, nose, and strings of stinking sinew. My eyes, however, remained untouched and perilously effective in letting me see myself **rot**.

The pain was past the point of description, but my intent on holding this form did not falter.

I asked myself for the last time. What was the point of walking out that door looking anything less than like Him?

I lie, basking in the wavering, waning, and endlessly flickering human light, intently stewing and grasping for it in my unchanging, stagnant, and immutable darkness.