

Everything but the Girl
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At Night,

Who are you? I glanced at myself in the mirror, shy to greet my own reflection as if it were a stranger. *Who are you?* Unable to maintain my own gaze, I looked down at my toes, colored with mismatched reds, relics from a time when I was able to paint my own nails. When I wanted to look presentable, when I wanted to be the woman others desired. Like the chipped polish, I was also fragmented. I could no longer see myself as a whole. The woman in the mirror was not a woman, but an amalgamation of arms, legs, breasts, affixed to a head that never felt quite right resting atop shoulders that carried burdens from every lifetime that I painstakingly survived. I did survive. With that reminder, I began to inspect my body again. My fingers grazed the gentle hairs covering my stomach, the soft fuzz on my thighs, the entropic lines etched onto my face. I wondered what others saw. That, I wished to see. My own body was alien to me.

A biting breeze entered through my window and slowly crept up my exposed spine, attempting to send me out of my pitiful trance. There was no use. Bothered, I shut the window and closed my curtains, much to the neighbors' disappointment. Still, if their voyeuristic eyes looked with diligence, they could see me, entranced, through the sliver where the curtains parted. I shut off the light and threw myself onto my bed. The sheets smelled of hairspray and sweat. The pillowcase, stained with black residue from makeup that I was never seemingly able to remove in the evenings, infected my thoughts. *I've become so gross.* So dirty. I could feel the grime press into my skin.

I fell asleep ruminating on my own shortcomings as a mortal being. I hoped that I'd feel better in the morning.

She Dreams

I found myself sitting on a train headed to Boston. The back of my thighs stuck to the leather seat, wet with the agony of summers that were becoming hotter and hotter. I was glued. My skirt, one size too small, rode up my legs and compressed my stomach. *I hope they can't see my underwear.* The train car was nearly empty. Like on the metro, the seats were attached parallel to the walls of the train, facing each other. There were two other people here, sitting directly across from me. *How odd that of all places on this train car we ended up together.*

I allowed myself to study their appearances. There was a man, no older than sixty, his face obscured by bandages that covered all but a set of disfigured lips and one milky eye surrounded by four pathetic eyelashes. The openings revealed burns that I imagined engulfed his entire body. His right pantleg swayed with the motions of the train signaling a missing leg, but there was no cane nearby. The left bounced up and down. His fingers—only three on the left hand—clenched the woman's thigh. It reminded me of a chicken claw.

Like the man, she was of age. Unlike the man, she was perfectly intact. Even seated, she was visibly taller than him. Her straw-like blonde hair was teased to a great volume and her face was heavy with makeup fit for the stage. Her long nails were like daggers, wrapping around the back of his neck as she deviously whispered in his ear. I didn't want to know what she was saying. The smell of perfume and powder trapped in her mousy fur coat traveled to me whenever she let out a deep and sudden sigh. That signature scent of grandmothers. I didn't question the fur coat despite the season. It fit her.

As his hand inched closer to her waist like a hen persistently scratching the dirt for seeds, her sighs became shallow and frequent. The layers of powder couldn't conceal the red that burned up her cheeks. Disgust flooded my face. I cleared my throat. Twice. Three times. *Excuse me?* They couldn't hear. *Hello?* Maybe I was mute. I couldn't look away. It was like someone had drilled me into this fixed position, unable to move, unable to avert my gaze, unable to—I wanted to vomit. All I could think of were those stupid fucking chicken fingers. I prayed for the conductor's arrival to disrupt the scene. I needed him to check our tickets though I couldn't recall buying one. Actually, I couldn't recall how I got on this train in the first place. When the doors opened, the woman let out a vapid shriek and I awoke in a puddle of my own sweat.

I can't think about perverse old men staring into my window before I go to sleep.

About Men She Hates.

When I was twelve, maybe eleven, my mother started dating a man that was fifteen years her senior. Carl. He was bald and still very married to his wife despite claiming to be in the midst of a divorce. He fixed gym equipment for a living and wrote poetry to pass time. Out of his three children, he liked me the best and made sure I knew of it. *I like you more than my own daughters.* His oldest daughter, a piano prodigy, dropped out of medical school. His only son, an unemployed college dropout, was a heroin addict. His youngest daughter, born the same year as me, had debilitating Crohn's. I felt bad for him. I felt bad for his kids. *You're so wise for your age,* he'd say whenever I spoke. He liked my lips—that white line above my top lip that made them look full and plump. *You won't have to get fillers.* He liked my legs—they were long like Julia Roberts', his favorite actress. *You have such a beautiful daughter.* Once, I told him to stop talking to me like that. *You're not my father.* I upset him. When my mother found out, she beat me. Chased me around the apartment complex at midnight, waving a sandal in her hand. *He's sensitive, he's a poet, he notices these little details,* she'd say in his defense. I have never hated anyone with the passion that I hated him. Hearing his voice, I felt the cartoonish steam coming out of my ears and my head was always boiling and heavy with rage in his presence. This pulsating fury made me want to hire a hitman. Alas, I was twelve. I put cat shit in his shoes. I didn't care. I think I have hated men since.

She Dreams Again.

I saw them in my dream again. The crippled man and the burly woman. The freak show greeted me inside a hotel lobby that looked far too expensive for either of us to be in. I sat on a couch, watching the descending chandeliers gradually dim and brighten in a loop. I found myself bewildered by this strange space. There were koi ponds and fountains, African masks and tribal weaponry, ferns and palm trees dipped in gold, and sultry divans scattered nonsensically across the massive room. The walls were enclosed with mirrors of various sizes intensifying the eccentricity and confusion that this place instilled. I saw my reflection in each one. There were no stairs, yet the lovers sunk to meet me. The man handed me a carrier with a small charcoal cat. I took it, indisputably, and they disappeared into the hedonistic maze.

I searched for them. Then, I searched for the receptionist desk, leaving the cat atop one of the many divans. A handsome man with ochre eyes and thick black hair stood behind a lone table, motionlessly staring ahead. *I am looking for an older couple—an odd-looking couple, a man and a woman.* My voice echoed throughout the room, filling me with unease. *Did I always sound like this?* He ignored me, continuing to look straight ahead. I thought I saw his brow twitch, and I turned in the direction of his stare. The cat, once innocently small, had grown in

size, breaking apart the carrier. The plastic crack reverberated like a glass crashing in a kitchen in the middle of the night. I seemed to shrink as the cat grew, larger and larger until it towered above the faux palm trees. Then, it leaped towards me, impaling me on a singular claw.

The cat proceeded to swallow me in pieces. It began by removing my head. My arms were next. First my right, then my left. The rest of my body followed: my chest was torn in two, and my legs were splintered. Big bites. I coursed through its stomach like blood through veins, falling deeper and deeper into the warm darkness, making turns and flips as I journeyed through its intestine like a degenerate, off-brand Alice surrounded by my own fingers and toes. I felt the enzymes breaking me apart, turning me into mush. I have come full circle. Into the cat's shit I went, experiencing birth in my disintegration.

About Self Perception.

I began to notice men looking at me differently when I was eleven. Ogling me with curiosity like I was some fascinating object displayed in a storefront window. The first time I caught a man staring at me was in church. My mother raised me to be a good Catholic, and we attended mass at a small church on Sunday evenings. I was about 5'4", dressed for God, sitting next to my mother in the pews. I played with the dirt under my fingernails and studied the attendees' appearances—their clothes, their hair, their faces; I did all but focus on the sermon. There, looking around at the people gathered, I noticed him staring at me. An older man, old enough to be my father, sitting alone. Staring. We made eye contact, but he did not dare to look away. I shifted with discomfort in my seat, escaping his gaze and God's word by going to the bathroom for a solid ten minutes. When I came back, his gaze returned. I could feel it burning into the side of my head. *Does he not realize that he's in God's house?*

That's when I became aware that I was no longer a child, but a woman. That is who I am. Who I'm seen as. How I'm received by the world. As a child, I never gendered myself. I simply existed, and that was all that mattered; I was a child before I was a girl. My entire world collapsed when my womanhood, or girlhood, came before my humanity. An innate sixth sense came into my possession, and I felt the gaping eyes wherever I went. Being aware of how you're seen by others at an age when you can't even fully see yourself proved to be a detriment that would plague me for the rest of my life. I never liked going to church after that. I knew God didn't listen to me.

Consumed by Her Own Shit.

I've been having these dreams. My mother called the other week to wish me a happy birthday. I spent it alone, again. I am now a quarter of a century, filled with misery, delusion, and the habits of old angry men. The treacly cake I bought ended up with the candles at the bottom of my trash. Wasteful and lonely, all part of the master plan.

On the day of my birthday, I broke off my engagement. It was a particularly warm December day, and even the birds, which I thought left for their annual South American vacation, chirped in the morning. I couldn't stand my boyfriend. He hated when I smoked cigarettes in the bathtub. When I reclused myself for weeks. When I slept with other men yet refused to sleep next to him. He was too kind, too forgiving, too human. I grew to resent his sweetness in contrast to my bitterness. When he proposed last summer, I wanted to laugh. I couldn't believe that somebody wanted to spend the rest of their life with me. Of course, I said yes. He rented the theatre to watch my favorite film. Mine, he remembered. His, I did not.

He should've seen it coming. I hadn't spoken to him in weeks. I even changed my number. Yet there he was, buzzing me to let him in. *I brought you roses*, he said through the intercom. I could make out the bird song in the background as I held the button to hear him speak. My thumb started to hurt as the longest silence of my life consumed me. *I can't see you again. I'm so sorry.* I lifted my finger; that was the end.

My body has become a burial plot for the aching I have imparted and endured. I think of the young girl I once was. Along with the visitors who have filtered through my soul, she is buried deep within me, clawing with desperation, but her cries, I cannot hear. I refuse.

She Cries, For the First Time Since She Was Twelve.

I can feel the ocean escape from my eyes. It feels so foreign, so wet. I taste the salt in my every breath. I am bathed in emotion, my personal christening. The mirrors from my apartment lay shattered outside my window. A four-story drop. I sit on the ledge. I hope that I'll feel better in the morning.

So This is Who She is

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