

# *The Primate*

## **Dissonance**

The neon sign was a beacon in the black night, sitting atop a motley set of trees.

A group of men from the lumberyard strolled in with my neighbor following in a slow, rigid manner. He was placed in between two men built like bulldogs off their leashes.

Larry. I think that was his name. It had been a week since he moved in on the other side of the split house. After a quick introduction, he didn't seem interested in any further exploration of my life or telling of his own. He was hauled into a derelict truck in the early morning by the other workers who always made sure to scuff the lawn next to our molden picket fence. Now he sat idle, in dissonance from the chaos of the conversation his friends screamed about.

I like to let them settle down for a minute before I hand out the menus. Usually one or two will look at me when I turn around, their eyes deviating from what they were so focused on a second earlier.

"Can I get you guys anything to drink?"

"Coffee would be great," one declared. The other two behind him agreed.

"Milkshake please," Larry said in dubiety. It was no question that he recognized me. I had paused for too long, staring at his ruffled hair and emerging bald spot, which he didn't bother to hide like the other men in their woolen caps.

"Sounds good. I'll be right back," I awkwardly resumed.

To get to the kitchen I had to walk under a tarp held down by buckets of solidified concrete. The blue sandbags were damp with last week's rain. A single bulb was strung above, falling off of the rotten wood of what used to be the outhouse. The ice cream had condensed too much in the fridge. I threw it in the blender with some of the chocolate syrup.

"Do you need the fryer on?" Marge asked.

"Only four customers in there. I should be able to handle it."

"It's okay. Let me handle the cooking, you go get them their drinks," Marge replied, stumbling over to give me an embrace on the head with her large forearm.

I met Larry's eyes for a moment as I walked back into the diner. My hair was windswept, causing me to nearly drop the tray when mending my bangs. He quickly turned away and swung his eyes from friend to friend, trying to catch up in the lumbermen's conversation.

"Tim's leaving."

"What's up with him then?"

"Wife is back from her service. He's gonna meet her in Portland."

"Good for that boy. He deserves it. He works hard and'll be a good father."

"His wife is a hell of a woman too. Could probably beat his ass if she wanted."

"He's making the money though. They deserve each other."

"Well," one said, turning to Larry, "We got room for you, if you need somewhere."

"I'm renting part of a house already," Larry replied in an apathetic manner.

"Expensive though. We don't charge, if you ever need a space."

Another one nodded to that. "How long are you gonna be here for? Cause' no one stays here. We all leave eventually."

"Yeah, doesn't make much sense why you're stayin' in town by yourself."

"Comfort ain't all that important in our trade." They all nodded to that.

"I don't have any plans yet," Larry replied. That was his sole, decisive response.

The man across from him leaned over the table, causing the stilts to change angle, hitting the tile floor. He clasped his hands and bit his lower lip, raising his eyebrow. "You wan' know what happens out here?"

Larry averted his gaze to the menu.

"Nothin', God damn it! Nothing!" the old dog yelled, as spit flew off his lip, "So enjoy it before you get sick and tired."

The other men toiled with their menu, bending its laminated cover and letting it flick back and hit the table, like children with new toys. Larry did the same and an odd symphony of paper drums came alive in the secluded diner.

"I got three coffees and a milkshake," I intervened, "Seems like you all are ready to order?"

"Yes ma'am, we are. I'll get-"

The big one with the tattoo hit the old man's shoulder. It was a hard hit, causing the chair to jolt and scrape some of the plaster from in between the cracks of the tile floor. "Let Leno order, Tom. She's next to him."

I looked at Leno. Leno. That was his name; Not Larry. He twisted his neck the wrong way before he realized I was on the other side of him, displaying a reserved smile at the comedic mishap, "I'll have the eggs benedict."

"For dinner? Odd choice." The old man across from him said with soft criticism.

"For Christ's sake, Tom, let the man eat what he wants. I'll get the biscuits and gravy please."

I was unsure of when I should try to re-introduce myself to Leno. I assumed he had rather forgotten that I was his neighbor or that... or that... I'm not sure. I don't know why anyone would ignore me. It was merely human decency to acknowledge that you've seen someone before— and it became awkward if you didn't.

Marge was in a thick plume of smoke as I traveled back to the kitchen, "Some eggs are ready, if needed."

"Any biscuits?"

"Still rising. Get the eggs out there, I don't want the men grumpy when they have to tip you."

"It'll be fine. We'll serve it all at once."

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Mill City is not anywhere close to being a city. It is nestled within a cluster of forests that converge in a river valley. A single, dilapidated highway runs along what is more like a stream during the summer, though now it flows swiftly, not like a rapid, but at a consistent speed that never slows or hastens. The houses are all spread far apart. Each local has an abundance of grass that is broken up by faded concrete paths intertwined with the roots of emerging trees. Pinecones are always blocking the gutter and the runoff often builds natural dams itself. It luckily hasn't rained for the past couple days, but the mist still sinks during dawn into a thick condensation.

I grow a couple plants in the house's sole conservatory. There are some gaps in the windows, so the vapor seeps through and drags some of the purple tulips down with its hefty weight. The glass room is the newest extension made by the owner. It has two doors, one for each unit, and is placed in perfect symmetry with the axis of the house, providing equal access for both renters. Until this morning, I had never seen Leno in that room; though, after all, he had only been here for a week so far. He sat in the plastic chair that I habitually avoided because it was covered with cobwebs. I slid the sliding door with caution, but loud enough for him to hear me walking in. His head flinched a little bit and slowly turned around. He made the most faint smile I had ever seen, before nodding to greet me.

"Leno?"

"How's it going?"

"Good. Amy, right? I saw you at the diner last night."

"I did too."

I wanted to ask why he didn't say hello, before it became evident that I carelessly did the same; we were equal, in conviction. "I work there day and night."

He didn't respond.

"So you work at the lumberyard, I gather?"

He put a finger in the air and waited, as if he was chewing food or taking a drink that didn't allow him to talk. "Look at the fog, Amy. Look at it dance."

I was anxious to get to know him, though it appeared that he was more interested in the garden. I looked out towards it. What about it? How it danced?

What does that mean? I turned my focus back to him, confused, but he was unfazed.

"And now the part of it below the tree moves up and converges with the rest going the opposite direction," he narrated, "And it gets swooped in the other direction, now part of the crowd. Do you see it? It'll happen again in a second."

His finger was still in the air, arm outstretched over the small, peculiarly ornate table that lay in between the two chairs. I took a seat, warily, of course. The tree in the garden was planted around just a couple years ago, small and supported by an elastic tape. The fog did swirl around it. Some of it got slower and condensed into a white ball under the thickest bristles of the tree, before gently breaking out into a cluster of individual clouds that were illuminated by the early sun. He put his hand down on his lap.

"We should have dinner sometime," I mentioned, hoping he was out of his trance.

"That would be sensible. I think it's important we get to know each other."

My shoulders sunk, relieved to hear he actually cared, even though it was displayed with a peculiar candor. "We are neighbors, after all."

"Of course. I don't have work today," he exhaled with a heavy resistance in his voice, "I could come by the diner tonight, if that's okay, of course."

"I'll be there, as usual."

I thought it was best to let him enjoy the view of the shabby garden alone, so I gathered my apron and set off for the diner. I would be arriving late to work, but Marge was always beautifully lenient and customers nearly never arrived earlier than six anyways— although there would occasionally be a weary traveler worn out from walking through the endless valley we lay in.

A couple of boys consistently came into the diner each afternoon during the weekdays. They would always grab twigs from the nearby forest and I would see them snap the ends off and make them into small wooden knives. They would clash in a battle that I could only try to sympathize with the intensity of. Usually one would get hurt and they would wrestle on the concrete for a couple minutes before just lying there, soaked and bruised. A thick and muddy puddle formed as they eventually trotted inside, still teasing each other and slapping their necks. I could only try to hide my modest smile when they each asked for a milkshake, one by one, holding their cash up to the register. I used to tell them they could wait to pay until they finished eating, but they would never listen.

Their tired feet would dangle far above the floor, swaying like an artificial wind cast its gust upon them. I kept watch, like a mother. Maybe this is what Leno sees in the fog. When I became a spectator alike, with nothing to do but lean on the cherry red counter, the miniscule events of the idle world became large.

Night quickly settled and the children left while the day could guide them back, but the downpour was stubborn. I was worried Leno would be subdued by the rain, as if he wasn't already withdrawn from this world enough. A customer tipped me a respectable ten bucks, but soon after the diner grew vacant. I became weary and fell into a subconscious drift, before a black figure appeared within the dramatic frame of the window that wrapped the length of the diner. He stood still, around thirty feet out, in the middle of the desolate parking lot. I waved, but I couldn't remember if the windows were tinted or not. After a minute, I got up from my slumber and walked towards the door; he did the same as we converged at the entrance. He opened it before me, meeting my gaze one to one, and saying a calm greeting.

"You didn't have to wait out there."

"I know... I was just admiring the scene."

"Could you see me wave? I couldn't remember if the window was tinted or not."

"Come outside then," Leno held the door open and moved out of the walkway.

"I don't have a coat."

"Then take mine."

He took it off in the pouring rain, with his shirt slowly becoming a translucent purple as more water soaked his shoulders. I took it and held it above my hair.

"Hmm— it is tinted."

"Mostly tinted. Do you see how it reflects the light? It's partially bent. The street lamp illuminates a half-triangle dull yellow, contrasted by the darkness of the night. Each panel is bent slightly different. Look all the way down there. That one is almost completely yellow from the streetlamp. Here... stay here." He walked inside and put his face up to the glass slowly. The closer he got, the more his breath created a thick bubble of condensation. We laughed in symmetry. Then he started doing a dance, which I could just barely see through the black tint. He peeked his head up into the yellow half of the window, breaking out into a joyous smile before swaying to his left and throwing his arms

up in the air. The dance was half of a jumping jack with the legs moving side to side in tandem; so bizarre, yet beautifully gleeful. I had forgotten about the rain and my legs were sprayed with mist when the wind changed direction.

"Come inside, come," he eventually said, waving his hands towards the door.

"It's my restaurant," I laughed, "I should be the one saying that."

He kept motioning to come inside regardless, murmuring the words, 'I know,' in admittance. I already prepared biscuits and gravy for the two of us.

"I thought you could use something different from yesterday."

"I appreciate that."

He wouldn't initiate any conversation. The only break he would take from eating would be to sip his milkshake— which I, too, prepared early.

"Tell me about yourself," I finally said, in a regrettably brash manner. My smile dissipated as he chewed a big bite of the biscuit.

"This is really good by the way."

"Why else would I make it?"

"Okay," he said, settling down after wiping his face with a napkin, "I'm from Salem. You are too, right?"

"How'd you know that?"

"The owner of the house told me."

It dawned on me that the owner told me the same about him, but I forgot. "Sorry, so from Salem? What else?"

"There isn't much more than that."

"That's a lie. Everyone has some story to tell."

"I went to community college before coming here, so I have an okay-ish education."

"That's good. Which one?"

"Chemeketa."

"Oh, my brother works around there."

"Where specifically?"

"Goldie's, the restaurant. He's a chef."

"So cooking's in the family."

"Well, sort of," I shrugged.

"What do you mean?"

"It's complicated."

His eyes lit up as my secrecy seeped through my blushed cheeks. "I'm interested now. What do you mean by, 'it's complicated.'"

"I was adopted alongside my brother; we aren't directly related, but we grew up together. I homeschooled him as well."

"So you have an education and are qualified at teaching?"

"Just because I homeschooled my brother does not mean I'm anywhere near qualified. And no... I don't have an education. I'm trying to get one, actually."

"A bit hard to do that out here."

"Not right now. Soon, I meant. I'm only out here for a couple more days before I head back to Salem."

I could see his cheeks fall slightly when I said that. I was worried that he was disappointed, possibly in himself for not trying to learn about me while we were blessed with time. Now all that was left was the weekend once this night had ended.

"You'll see your family again, at least. You miss them, I suppose?"

"I'd argue that I miss them more than most people."

"That's a hard one to prove."

I shrugged, still without a doubt that I was right.

"So why'd you leave them to come all the way out here?"

"Marge is my dad's friend. She's here a couple days of the week, gone right now though. Does most of the cooking when I'm not here. She wanted me to help."

"That's all?" he smirked.

"That's all," I put on a poker face, unsure of what sacred thought I was hiding behind it. The midst of the question sat with me before he interrupted.

"You came out here to think," he nodded, "I'm sure of that."

"Did I?"

"Yeah... you did. The city is chaotic, sometimes dull. So many people, but not much really ever happens. You wanted to equalize the pressure for a bit. Get a bit of clarity."

"That's not really right, but you could say I'm on a little vacation."

"From what then, if not the city."

The pressure from the conversation led me to eat quicker than expected— my plate was nearly gone. He had done the same, spreading a thick chunk of butter on the top of the biscuit mush his plate now held. He wasn't the one getting dissected by the conversation though. Maybe he just ate fast.

"My brother moved out, so it was just me and my dad. I felt a bit lonely, and as you said— I needed somewhere quiet."

"To match your own somber thoughts."

I nodded gently, as if he knew me better than I did myself. It was never awkward when we didn't speak because each of us could be entertained by our own thoughts, or at the least, occupied by them. In the silence, I learnt more about him than I would asking him questions, but I couldn't wrap my head around what I was learning; it was more just becoming akin to his feeling, viewing his nature, like that of a deer standing motionless in a forest, fifty yards away. I was placid to not wake it from its peace.

A car pulled into the lot. I could see Leno was startled. He had shoved the last quarter of the biscuit into his mouth and held it bulging in his bloated cheek.

"I have to clean up the kitchen before I transfer the shift to Marge."

"Let me help."

"No, it's fine; it'll only be a minute."

Marge walked in the door, folding up her umbrella. "Hello! Amy, I'm here," she yelled, letting the sound become muffled against the low stucco ceiling, before murmuring a curse or two at the puddle of mud the kids had made.

"She's cleaning up the kitchen right now," Leno said, sitting up straight and satisfied.

"Oh, of course. I always tell her she doesn't need to but I always find her back there when I arrive anyways."

I walked back through the tent that now echoed the pattering rain. Splinters of wood started to peel off on the door frame as water leaked and flooded the depression next to the masonry step. Leno was now standing, greeting Marge with a distant wave while he fiddled with his coat zipper.

"It's all yours." I handed over the set of eight different keys, some stubby, some thin, and some curved in peculiar shapes, like they could unlock a treasure chest buried under a fierce storm.

"You two have a great weekend and thank you for the work, Amy. And you don't have to clean the kitchen before I arrive, it's on my li..." her voice began to trail off as I grabbed Leno's hand and swung open half the double door.

"Don't you need a coat?" He asked, trying to amplify his voice to stand out amongst the downpour.

"It's fine. I'll throw on the heater when I get back. Come on, let's go."

He scuttled in a hurried manner, splashing the oily water from the tarmac all upon my boots. It seeped into my socks, but was not to bother, for my mind was busy with every other thought possible. We ran to the tree line where only a few drops of water would hit my slick hair that sagged on my shoulders. A path ran by the river which I had never discovered, hidden among three layers of thick shrubbery intertwined with tall fir trees and a singular but gargantuan willow.

I started to become worried. We moved swiftly and quietly on the path and I had long forgotten the direction in which we traveled. I never assumed that he would be dangerous, but my doubts soon became distressing.

"We're headed home, right?"

"We are home." He forcefully bent back a branch that led to a tunnel shrouded in wilted leaves like a fantasmic dungeon. He was telling the truth, for the conservatory was floating on a cloud of mist in the gateway he held open. The flowers inside were dim, desaturated from the tint of the large glass windows. He looked at me as I just watched, mesmerized by the composition. I stood there for a minute—he never let the branch go nor changed his posture.

"A new path to work?" he asked.

"Possibly," I said, finally walking through the tunnel into the thick, wild grass of the unmowed garden.

"No better feeling than when your boots are already wet and you don't care where you step anymore. Bog or not. You feel like part of the natural world; no separate entity governing the body life gifted you."

"It's a lovely feeling, just not one to want forever. I'm really looking forward to the heater now."

We trotted through what looked like the Garden of Eden, taking our boots off at the sliding glass door, where a row of large, empty clay pots sat. My consciousness was now sure his quiet was not in derivation of harm. I confused innocence with hostility. Two opposites, but oddly difficult to decipher in our modern world. I opened my door in the conservatory, but it felt awkward to let us part ways when I still had so much to learn about him, both past and future.

"Come in," I ushered, "Let me show you my side of the house."

"You make wood carvings?" He picked one of my tiniest ones up from the shelf above my bed, closing one eye and bringing it as close to his pupil as possible.

"Just a hobby."

"This one's really good. I like the detail."

"Thanks."

He looked at the solemn picture at the center of the shelf, set like an altarpiece above all the rustic figurines I had made.

"My brother," I preemptively said, worried he might assume another scenario.

He winced, holding the picture so close that his nose touched the glass, all with gentle care, understanding the forsaken value every memory holds. "You never mentioned he had down syndrome."

"It's not important to who he is."

"Of course it is."

"What?"

"He's a professional chef. That's a major accomplishment for someone with a disability like that. And it changes how I view you, too."

"You have an odd way of complimenting people." I leaned back on my counter, trying to seem relaxed during this interrogation I put upon myself.

"It's not odd, just straightforward; what I wish more of this world was."

I laughed. "I feel wrong if I tell people about his disability."

"Because it seems like you're bragging about being caring to someone disabled? About exploiting his issues to serve your social status?"

"I guess so."

"It's not bragging," he assured me, "You're too humble, if anything."

"Okay, too many compliments. This night wasn't just about me, let me see your side of the house; it wouldn't be fair if I didn't."

He frowned, as if he was struck with a halting memory. I became frightful again, wondering what he could be hiding in such a newly settled room.

"Alright," he answered eventually. We walked through the conservatory into his room. It was quite empty. I first noticed the upside down bike next to the heater. It seemed to be in repair, covered in mud and grass, with a helmet dangling from the handlebar. Little ribbons were tied to an upper vent that blew when the wind sailed through. On the wall above his bed was one picture. Not framed like the one of my brother, but just printed on a piece of plain letter paper with the

margins of the white safe zone slightly covered by blue masking tape. I walked closer as he sat on the bed, as if he was waiting for a judgment of whether he was worthy to live here; his hands clasped, eyes following me intently.

It was a young girl and a boy— presumably him. It must've been at least fifteen years ago, early 2000s probably. Each looked around the age of five, maybe the girl was a little bit older. He had a big chip out of his bottom tooth in the photo. I looked back at him, expecting a response like I gave him, but he said nothing. His eyes were no longer focused on me, but to the damp green carpet. His breath began to elevate.

"Is this you and your sister?"

He nodded languidly.

I was too frightful to say a word, worried that it could invoke a rage or an action similar.

"I have more pictures. Here, over here." He got up in a rush to open the bedside drawer, where a pristine stack of letter paper sat. It had to be over a thousand sheets, like a whole package you could buy from a department store. "There's more in here." He took a paper out and handed it to me.

"It's blank?"

"I know. Only I can see it."

He balled his fists up and swung it downwards, almost slamming the bedside table before gently easing out and resting his palm flat on the surface with his eyes closed. "I can't look at these anymore."

He closed the drawer and looked up, as if he realized that I was still in his room. "I'm sorry. I... I don't mean harm."

I thought of what I would do with my brother during his tantrums and a sense of disgust blew over my body that I even made the connection. My mind was impeded on by this memory, becoming fogged in trying to create any response. I wanted to know more, but the time was bleak. He sat on the bed next to me and opened his palm; I gave him the paper I had the honor to hold for just a few seconds, before he crumpled it up and threw it at the trash can, barely missing.

I put my arm on his shoulder, tempted to rest my head as well, before hearing a croak in his breath. His shoulder slumped and my hand slipped off of it.

"I'll be out in the conservatory tomorrow," I stuttered, feeling as if my mouth would not let me say any more.

"Goodnight," he said, eyes looking at the ground. Still. Nothing moved afterwards.

I shut his door softly to avoid the click of the latch. The conservatory never seemed so still. A raccoon wandered through the scene in silence, only casting a momentary shadow on the thick weeds. I made my bed after forgetting to do so in the morning, ensuring to tuck it tight, leaving no crease in the sheets. It hugged me, giving me warmth as the temperature dropped into the midnight freeze.

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It was now the weekend. I felt satisfied for a lone moment, believing that last night was a mere nightmare, before the imminent dawn of the sun said otherwise. A silhouette pierced the stained glass oculus in the door to the conservatory.

I needed some coffee to pull me out of the slumber that came in tandem with a shift in the mental routine. I was playing hopscotch on one leg now, and Leno was too, if not always.

He was sitting still, as ever. I put the coffee down on the middle table and sat beside him. We were symmetrical with the house and conservatory. I now noticed the hole in the bushes where we entered last night. The small dimples of occluded light were tangled in the branch that Leno had to put his body weight into to pull back.

I felt obliged to let him know that his way of looking at the world — which I found surprising, yet fresh and beautiful — had played its game on me. Now I could no longer help but see what he had shown me; the fog swirling under our newborn tree, the hidden bush, the curve in the glass that ever so slightly created a diagonal gradient of light on what lays behind it. "I see the tunnel we walked through last night."

"Hmm," he paused, "What else?"

I looked back at the garden. "The table in the way back with the rotten wooden stick that held the umbrella. Now it's all slanted. Looks damp and heavy."

"What about the raindrops on the window? Or not just the raindrops, but just a single raindrop. If you look closely, you can make out the purple, blue, and

green of the stained glass behind you." He slowly lifted himself up from the chair, bending his back with his legs still locked in the same sitting position, ever so slightly adjusting them so he didn't fall forward. His face was now a couple inches from the window with his mouth habitually cusped to not fog up the view. Eventually he closed his eyes, barely staying balanced in the awkward pose.

"I can't see as clearly as I could yesterday," he uttered.

"It seems like you see clearer than most people I know anyways. What's the—"

"That's not true though."

"What do you see then, if you can't see the reflection in the raindrops?"

He paused. I gave him his time. "I..."

"Something's in front of it, isn't it? An image blocking your vision?"

He lifted his hands upwards, flexing the fingers in the outward position, like a wave but motionless. "It's a long story," he gasped for air in an instant and sat back down.

"About what?"

"My childhood."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because I'm afraid you won't understand," he put it bluntly.

"I think out of most people I'd be the one to."

"Why do you *even* want to, though? You're leaving tomorrow either way."

"That doesn't mean I shouldn't care."

"But you'll forget about it soon enough. A whisper in the wind— that's what my story will be to you."

"Well I say that's a bold assumption."

He hung his head in his lap, frustrated with my stubbornness to learn. "You know how to cook, right? Let's make some breakfast. I have some eggs in my fridge."

"Are you really trying to change the subject? I'm not that innocent, you know. I've had a *fairly* difficult life."

"I'm not sure; either way, I'm hungry," he replied, getting up swiftly and swinging open the door to his room.

He must have viewed me as a saint when growing up. I went through hardships that I overcame. I took care of a brother I was supposed to be just a sister too. I should've been getting mad at him, calling him names, but there I was, cleaning his shit off the floor because his parents never cared to help him themselves, and I fullwell know the workers at the Cairney adoption center didn't have time for even the basic needs of any type of child.

I was in a long spell of thought, staring off through the glass while he scavenged his fridge.

"Here," he held out a box of a dozen eggs from the local market, "Want to cook on your side or mine?"

I wonder how long he was watching me in trance.

"I have a mini-stove on mine," I nodded, opening the door and finally exiting that damn conservatory.

We prepared the meal in silence. The sound of the egg cracking on the side of the pan. The bubble popping on the tender sausages. It all sounded so loud when there was nothing else to focus on. Eventually it became too loud, but I had nothing to say, nothing to silence it.

Luckily, he heard likewise, interrupting the lack of noise on his own behalf, "I would always tell people my sister is still going to college, the one where I went, Chemeketa, back in Salem." He paused, still moving the sausage pan in a circular motion, not paying attention to the eggs becoming crisp and charred beside him. "But occasionally I would crack, because everybody has shit that happens to them. I'm no special in that, and you aren't either. So if I wouldn't lie to them, I would just say she died. Usually after that, they'll change the topic or just wait out the silence in between."

"So that's what I wouldn't have understood?" I leaned with an arm on the table, wrapping my right leg around the left.

"No. You would have understood that part— probably, at least. But what you won't understand... what you will never understand... is that I saw her dead on the couch for seven years. Everyday. And some days, I'd even give her a gentle 'hello,' hoping for maybe just a little movement of the eye."

I rushed over to turn the eggs off as the yolk thickened.

"Near the end of those years," he continued, "she wouldn't even move unless my parents dropped her on the floor when taking her out of the wheelchair, letting her scream in pain, invoking just enough adrenaline to give her an ounce of life."

The eggs were saved, only partially burnt on the bottom.

"Oh, shoot. I wasn't paying attention," he said quickly. I looked across to him, oddly seeing a smile on his face, or more of a grin, wide, revealing a chipped tooth above his lower lip.

"I'll get some bread out," I exclaimed, seeing if he was really in a mood to enjoy the morning or if it was just a spontaneous burst of energy.

To my delight, he replied, "Excellent. Eggs-scellent."

The smoke buried itself into the ceiling. He opened the front window wide and sat by it for a few minutes while I slapped the eggs on the toast.

"Now this... this feels classic, you know," he said with vigor, "A breakfast I would have back in Salem."

We sat down. We ate. He loved it. In excitement, he stood up and almost spit out his food on me. I flinched in fear of getting my cardigan dirty, but he reached out and started tapping my shoulder, not resting his hand on it, but tapping it. His mouth was still full as I drank some of the orange juice next to me to clear the egg that I started choking on out of laughter. Now it was even worse, both of our mouths loaded with eggs, toast, ketchup, and juice. He bounced on his chair now pointing at me, trying to make me spit out my food while retaining the mash he had in his own mouth. I tried to look away, but kept looking back up to see his pinched eyes, before fortunately taking a big gulp and rubbing a tear from my left eye.

I wondered what this would look like from outside. Two figures dancing at a table, frolicking on a gray, cloudy morning that should usually be quite somber, filled with regrets of the past and fear for an imminent future. I bet that passerby would be excited. Maybe they would smile too, and bring that momentary joy with them for a few minutes on their walk, until it tired out as the smog of a semi-truck from the highway clouded their vision.

I wanted to know more, to know about his sister, and his parents. I wanted his past, regardless of how attractive and uplifting the reinvention of himself was that he created in this two-person house. This new man, it was not Leno. I could tell. It was a costume on an animal who sought to not be in mind but in heart.

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I didn't feel satisfied that night. I couldn't see him steady anymore, either; his hand would shake if he held it out flat, I was sure.

Now that I had seen the clock, it was evident I was no longer going to fall back asleep. The blinds shut most of the light out, but within the darkness that they created, a few colors remained that were almost nothing to the tired eye. It was vivid. A dark pile of purple and green grain with a blotch of blue spattered in the top right of the canvas. It followed my eyes, like it was attached to them. The grain became thick and rough, my imagination filling the space before I... before... I didn't turn. I just sat there, transcending to a two dimensional plane. My sight was a painter's canvas. If I were to stick my hand out, nothing would be felt; it was all flat. No impasto or texture this time. Just a solemn plane.

A flutter of leaves in the garden soon woke me from my daze. It must have been the family of sparrows nesting in our gutters.

I concluded that I was not fit for sleep and must entertain myself with something more active. Leno's door was ajar so I knocked gently, assuming it would take him a minute to wake, though to my surprise, he opened it instantly. Little wrinkles formed outwards at the edge of his fatigued eyes.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Couldn't sleep."

I'd only drunk once in my life before, always saving the pack of beer in my fridge for the day when I would get that call; 'Amy... your father, he's in the-.' It could be like the movies, I'd imagine. I romanticized the intensity of sadness, but never wanted to waste that feeling on something temporary.

I sat on the floor across from him, slouched in the light of his dim orange bedside lamp.

"Do you want it?" I whispered, making sure to keep the tranquil ambiance intact.

"I'm not bothered."

"You don't drink, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"You don't want to ever know what it tastes like?"

He looked up and reached his hand out, "Let me give it a look."

"It's classic, or so my dad said. Made in Salem. No big brand nonsense."

"You had this before?"

"Once... only once before."

"What happened?"

"Why should I tell you?"

He cracked it open, smelling it skeptically, before taking a slow sip. He patted his chest as it tensed with the bitter alcohol, "Because I told you my story."

"You barely did."

"I told you enough. As much as I could."

I snapped a hole in the second can, taking a quick swig before a deep breath.

"It was when your brother moved away," he predicted.

I was taken back.

"You want something to fix," he took another sip, "...but I'm not for fixing. And your brother— he's a free man now. It's his turn to fix something else. My turn? I don't know. I'll have to wait until I understand this world better."

"Do you think you're fooling me?"

"I don't need to be drunk to say something reasonable, but beer does taste quite good. We'll see how it feels later though."

"I never came here to fix you."

"Nobody ever goes anywhere. We get taken places by our heart, and the mind suffers the consequences," he changed his posture into a slow, reclining slouch until his eyes faced the ceiling.

"I just want to know what troubles you."

"I've explained part of it already," he said slowly, burping in-between statements, "I'm an animal."

"What the hell are you talking about now?"

He sat up, pointing his fingers in my eyes while nodding side to side, "You don't see what I see."

"What do you see?"

"I see," he stuttered, just like he did when I first met him, "I see nudity... I see my sister on the couch. I see her in the shower," the pace of his voice increased, "I see her falling to the floor when my parents are too tired to hold her up and put her clothes back on. I see... I see raw people. I don't see humans."

A side of me wanted to retort, slap him across his face for even mentioning our hidden skin, but the other wanted to let him keep talking. I was silent.

"It's not your fault though. It's mine. I got fucked up. You don't even understand what I saw— not visioned. What I saw. What comes to me when I look at those blank papers, it was no home television. It was the shit that should stay indoors, behind the curtains, what only 'grown ups' should see. But I was a child, and it took my youth away from me. But not in the classic way, like hearing whispers and rumors at recess, but through my own eyes. My family. I lived in a house of animals and bastards. And now... I carry those memories with me. I'm just trying to let go, find the vision everyone else has. That's all I'm here for. And... and..."

A tear hit my upper lip.

"And when someone I love comes near me now... I don't see a human. I see an animal... a primate."

I sat alone, no wall to lean back on. No man to hug, just an empty room.

"Leno..."

"What is it?" He wouldn't make eye contact with me.

"I have to leave tomorrow."

"I know."

"I've seen you love. I've seen what you can do."

"I could love you."

"You can, Leno, I know you can with my whole damn heart."

"I know. But my body, my body," he reiterated, laying his hand on his heart, "...it can't."

I took a swig from my beer. Oh, it tasted delectable. Almost too luscious for what I just heard. I was an animal, feasting while bare on the ground.

"I need to sleep."

"Alright," I said, finding my footing in the darkness.

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The morning bus arrived at six. Instead of sleeping the rest of the night, I packed. The carvings were wrapped up in old newspaper and grocery bags. As I took all of them off the sill, the picture of my brother lay king of the room, basking in its lonesome glory. I'd see him soon, so there was no need for me to take his memory with me. One duffel bag was packed full of clothing and another only half-full with some of my cooking utensils and electronics. The room was stripped, letting the monotonous gray of the morning sweep a shadow over the mixed genre of furniture.

I left my door in the conservatory unlocked. It would be too difficult to take the little purple tulips I had begun growing a month ago, but I was sure that Leno would water them, even if it took for them to lose a couple petals beforehand.

I remembered every twist, every dangling branch, and every patch of clovers along the river path. The rain had stopped again, bringing a violent gust with its passing. The river soon swelled, leaving me to trudge through a patch of bog at the side of the highway. I left just a couple minutes to let Marge give me a kiss

and wish my father and family well. I returned the favor, hoping that when I visit again, the diner will still have its tall neon sign that glowed almighty colors in the fog.

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## Consonance

The alarm on my clock went off for the first time this year. I drank a glass of water and put on my thick, leather boots and plaid jacket. One of my eyes seemed off, drooping below the other; asymmetrical. I rubbed the cusp of it and felt the firm bone of my skull.

The drawer was left open from the night. My hand held the handle before closing it; she lied on the sofa, gently breathing. Her arms were thin without any muscle, just skin, stretched around her elbows like latex.

My mom opened a jar of a protein drink and poured it into the blender. "Lenny, can you sit her up for me? I'll be over in a second."

I walked to the couch and rested just a finger on my sister's shoulder, before grasping her armpit and hauling her up from an infinite slumber. She still weighed some, even after all the years her body decayed. Her skin was cold, like that of a buried man.

"That's good," my mom said, squeezing my sister's cheeks inwards to open her mouth for the baby cup. She was eighteen now.

Eighteen and sipping from a baby cup.

I closed the drawer and again, rubbed my eyes, trying to align them while blinking and letting the water in their cavities subside.

Tom always started driving before I'd be able to climb into the back of his pickup. He once almost swung me into the crooked stop sign at the highway intersection. This time, a bounty of mud sprayed up on my boots and made it too slick to find a footing to pull myself up. Johnson held out a hand and lifted me up as Tom accelerated down the straight stretch of concrete. The half-awake men in the back all nodded their heads to the hum of the engine at dawn, conserving their energy for the job ahead.

I don't entirely enjoy my job because I move too much during it. It all passes too quickly. When I get home, I spend five minutes thinking about what happened in

the past eight hours before coming to the conclusion that I can only remember the conversation at lunch. I eat quickly, so I have time to sit still and just observe, while the rest talk matter to matter. A lot of the time what they say is unbearable. I'll judge, and my next thought is that I have forgotten their faces during those twenty seconds in reflection. I then refocus and look at Johnson's poorly shaven bristles or Tom's emerging cataracts.

"My uncle stays in the church, down your road, actually, Leno."

"I've never seen a church near me," I replied.

"That's because it's just a house. The congregation room has four chairs in a circle and a small stand from eBay where he speaks."

"You go to his service?" Tom asked.

"It's a church, Tom," Johnson raised his eyebrow, "I'm Jewish, from my mother's side."

"Your uncle disappointed in you?"

"No, not really. I'm not too close with him."

"What about you, Leno? You religious?"

"My parents wanted me to go on Sundays when I was younger."

"And did you?"

"For a while. Didn't pay much attention though."

I worked the saw after lunch while Johnson fed the logs into the clamp. The wood chips would spray up and hit the mask I had on. After a while I became unfazed by the repetition. My arm was a piston controlled by a watch. I looked up for a second to see Johnson grunt when dropping the next log on the table and rolling it to line up with the circular silver blade.

My sister was limp in the shower, my mother holding it up. The kitchen was practically in the same room. My dad would rush to turn off the kettle and pour hot water into some porridge, making a liquid mess. My mother screamed: Damn it, stand up, you need to eat! A scream came from the shower as the door opened and for a second I caught an act of my parents shoving a baby bottle into my sister's mouth as her hair covered an empty face. My dad's shirt was

sprayed with water as he shut the door and walked back over to turn off the stove.

"You got anything to do today?" he asked, stirring more of the putrid mixture and filling up another bottle.

"Log set."

"I'll go outside later," I replied.

"Leno! Log set!"

"You don't want to go out when the sun's here?" He shoved the curtains to the side, illuminating the cracked tiles and the unpainted edges of the cork countertop.

"Leno, darn it! The saw! Push it down!"

I quickly re-adjusted my mask and gripped the handle, watching the blade become a blur of sharpened speed. I put my weight on the machine and snapped the root of a thick spruce.

"Leno! Pay attention! It's boring, but pay attention. It's your job."

"I'm sorry about that."

"It's alright. Help me get this next one on the belt."

---

I never checked if Amy was still here. Her flowers were in the conservatory, but they seemed difficult to travel with anyways. During my time sitting, it was all quiet, no gentle footsteps or whistling of a kettle— I didn't even hear a car drive by. She was gone, I was most sure. The room was split into four colors by the stained glass oculus. Nothing moved inside. I tried the cylindrical door handle, twisting it slowly, surprised that it was unlocked. My feet paused as the photo of her brother came into sight; I feared I was wrong, but all her carvings had been taken off the shelf. Maybe she would come back to get the photo and find me in here without permission. I walked backwards steadily and shut the door, displeased by my own impatience.

It surprised me that Johnson's uncle had a church on this road. I always believed I'd seen everything after the first couple days here. It was now turning

dusk; the day cycled again, and the rays from the sun began terrorizing my eyes and casting a sharp shadow from my head to the ground.

A blank sign was in front of a wrought iron fence. The white paint had been ripped off by the storm, leaving the orange wooden flesh bare with nothing to say. The gate was open and a dirt path dwindled towards the house that stood in a relatively flat plot, covered with just a few trees but many stumps, each one filled with densely packed rings.

A laminated piece of paper was nailed to the door frame that read 'Welcome.' The door creaked as expected, revealing a silhouette in front of a broad window filled with the last sunlight of the day. The figure turned around. He was pudgy and had a long, horizontal mustache that extended past a cheek covered with dermatitis.

"Who's there?"

"Is this the church?"

"*The* church? It's *a* church. I don't know about *the* church.. Who are you, son?"

"Leno."

"How'd you find out about this place?"

"A friend told me about it."

"Oh... great. Who?"

"Your nephew: Johnson."

"Johnson, oh my. Johnson... I haven't talked to him in months. What do you come here for then?"

"I was exploring the area— never realized you were my neighbor until today."

"Oh, well, the sign has been torn to pieces, I'll need to get a new one soon."

I sat down in the plastic chair to his right. The sun was in full view through a row of trees in the backyard. The only visible details not encased in yellow light were the deep wrinkles under his chin and eyes.

He took his glasses off, "What'd you need, son? Because if you were exploring... you wouldn't have sat down with me."

I bit my tongue, shifting my jaw forward, trying to get the answer out of my skull. "I don't know much about religion; all I know is that I've sinned."

"So confession? You are here to confess?"

"If I can."

"Darn, it's just you and me, son," he held the palm of my hand, "May God help you to know your sins."

"I'm afraid that I hurt people, because I can't see them as humans... and sometimes, not as anything."

He nodded patiently.

"I'm afraid that I've hurt them because I only see them as primates."

"What do you mean by 'primate'?"

"It's a mix of nudity and anger, dehumanizing them and pushing them away because my mind, not my body, my mind... feels like they don't belong with itself. I've made people leave..." I said with strife, "they've left me."

His grip tightened, nodding, "Son, you need to tell me what happened, not what you are thinking. What did you do? What was the sin?"

I was quiet. The man must have thought I was conjuring the worst from the depths of my mind, but instead, just the pleasant appeared. I could only think of the memories as scenes, but none of them featured me; only what I observed as a spectator.

The man put a hand under my chin and lifted it up, finally seeing eye with his gaze. "Today marks the sixtieth year I've lived here. I watched my children grow old. Your friend, Johnson, I used to hold him when he was a small boy. My family has settled and spread like a virus. Now, us 'primates,' as you say, have exhibited a great deal of destruction upon this land. But in the end, when we gather with Christ, all this pain we have caused... it will not be viewed with sorrow, because it was still natural. Nothing, in nature, is artificial. Whatever actions you have taken, whatever story you say, it is not some primal disgust to be looked down upon."

I could see the scenes forming in my vision.

"I will not sneer at you, son," he reiterated.

A tear formed under my eye. "My sister bore the pain of a disease we both had an equal chance of getting. I thought I was lucky, but now I see that I was wrong, because I carry with me the images of her suffering."

"What disease did she have?"

"Sanfilippo."

"And this... disease, made her an animal?"

"Both of us."

"Is that all?"

"Does that not hurt? I watched her die for years! I saw her raw body naked just trying to survive. Is that all? What do you mean? I have cursed the people I interact with along with myself!" I pleaded.

He leaned in close to my face, "You have not sinned." His eyes bulbous under his glasses. "I'm not even sure why you're here."

"I thought you would forgive me? Is this confession or not?"

"This story you told... you were never part of it. There is nothing that you have done to hurt anyone, including God. He has merely chosen you and your sister's paths. You have not done anything but exist in this 'primal' world. You have not excelled, and you have not sinned either."

I just breathed.

"What you are doing, son, is trying to fix something that is not there. Your issue with how you view people is something that has naturally occurred. It does not matter if it was an unfortunate circumstance. If you have not done anything, you can not fix anything; it doesn't matter if you are in pain or not."

I laughed, just a little.

"I thought you were going to confess murder, son," the man hiccuped and chuckled with me, "I am well relieved! Thank you Lord!"

There was no holy radiance dawning upon his cheek as the sun had finally set below the window sill. All that was left was the dull glow of the ornate lights

drilled into the ceiling. I lifted my legs while holding the man's hand. He grasped it tightly, interlacing his fingers, before letting our dry and torn skin rub together as I walked backwards into the dilapidated yard.

A dust settled over the town as a fire roared West. The townsfolk gathered outside and murmured horrors of what was to come. Some began to cover their faces with rags and shut their windows. Though, I stood with an unyielding posture; nor was I choking or coughing, as my lungs were already filled with its dense gray soot.

Out in the dead middle of the road a boy played with his sister. His knees were scraped, bleeding that good blood that would cause a scab he'd pick at with dirty fingernails. His sister picked the weeds from the large dimple in the concrete, placing it upon his wound with a divine tenderness.

The sky shifted into a red haze. The house's little tree in the garden began to feel the weight of the brown smog laying upon it. I tried to see the minute swirls in its endless layers, however, there were none this time. The dust was not like the fog. It was a brute army, stagnant in its occupation of the garden.

Amy's tulips were beginning to wilt. I reached for the upper window of the conservatory to shut it and brought out my portable fan to ventilate the room. It began to boil, leaving beads of sweat on my forehead. I tried to focus on keeping the plants alive, but I soon retired inside the house and wiped my face with a towel. This was the final voyage.

Amy's flowers died at midnight, shriveling into sticks of dull green paper. I imagined her coming back and seeing the disaster, though I was not the one who started the invincible fire that killed them, and therefore should be immune to blame.

My sister lay quietly on the mess I called my bed. She was barely tucked in and an IV was fed through each of her nostrils. The bag of liquid churned in harmony with her subtle breathing. I sat on the other side, facing away from her in silence, accepting that my vision will forever be blurry. Had I been betrayed by the world any later— I would have just been more disappointed.