

I should never have fed Cynthia smoked salmon. There is a knock at my door, and when I reluctantly get up I see it is Tom.

“You still working on that story?”

“Yes...”(Would you please go away...)

Over a bottle of wine we have a casual conversation but the story keeps entering my mind, like an itch I desperately need to scratch. I stare at the coffee table in the center of the room. It is a large circular log, with a split down the middle, and various books (fiction) scattered on it. After a while I drift away from the conversation. I want this story to live up to its potential; the hazy impression I have of it now. But nothing works like that. It's like watching cars pass by on the highway (in the passenger seat). Before you put your glasses on everything is just one vibrant blur, but with corrected vision everything is solid and mundane.

Over the course of my visitations to the Plastico Mall I noticed a teenage boy dressed in black, with dark painted fingernails and a spiked dog collar around his neck. He went to the mall almost every day, usually to hang out at Touchy Subject (a clothing store where such degenerate youths shopped). Expecting him to return, I went into the bookstore one day and purchased him a collection of Sartre's short works. I ran into him a few days later, and he was startled and confused to be given literature by some strange solitary man, but he promised me that he'd read it. The next time I saw him he was dressed in jeans and a plain white t-shirt.

Once an elderly woman sat down next to me on the bench. She smiled like an idiot, put down her bags and stretched out her arms. “Well helloooooooooooooooooooooo,” she said (the Long Island sound). “I'm in town visiting my daughter, and I just love this mall. And so do my grandkids.” I kept staring at Cynthia, though my thoughts of her were splintered by this garrulous woman. Eventually she realized I wasn't listening to her. She glanced over at me and then her lip curled down, her eyes widened and she hurtled away. 8dju,

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beltlife

Cynthia has an interesting writing style (mostly punctuation). She's more of a poet than I am.

And written

on his belt

“Life!”

If only he knew

If only he knew

-My students complained frequently of my existential rants, and had the manager contacted my reference he could have found this out. I can see it now, Mr. Santos complaining that he couldn't fire me due to my tenure and mentioning the faculty party where I sat alone silently, attempting to turn his wife to stone with my stare.

-Mr. Santos was on to my objectives, and wouldn't employ me because he desired Cynthia all for himself. At closing he always closed the shutters, and I knew that afterwards when no one was looking he would caress Cynthia's face and plot his own ways to take her away from Plastico, to forever confine her to his wretched home.

-I was institutionalized for several months after my wife (who used to lock herself behind a room with a small glass pane in the door for days, leaving me to stare through that small rectangle at her sobbing silhouette) killed herself by tumbling gently out of an ancient attic window.

So I leave my house around eight, and meet some friends for a dinner party. In one on one situations, I can at least keep the conversation going (usually). In larger groups I look around the room and each face seems to steal from me something I would have said, and I just look around and around- and I have nothing to say.

A trace of light peers through the crack under the door, and I have to get up to stuff a towel in the crevice to clog it. With the fan off it's too hot. With it on it's too loud. Am I making myself clear? Can the reader really understand the narrator's absurd obsession? I need to sleep, not worry about this now. But a fly is buzzing around the room, and unless he dies I can't sleep. Maybe I'll dream up an ending to this haughty claptrap

I avoided the Plastico Mall for several days. It was a long weekend and I mainly just lay in bed, though occasionally I watered the forsythias (for Cynthia) in the backyard. Splinters of her appeared to me in everything: the bend of the bonsai's branch, the firewood I decided I could never use, the letters (of the brand) slowly burning, disappearing from my cigarette. On an afternoon walk through the woods I saw a woodpecker sawing into a tree. I attempted to bludgeon him with rocks, but he flew off after my third miss- my second way off target, killing a squirrel.

Maybe I am just wasting my time. Is there any way to have this come out the way I've imagined? There are rats in the backyard that emerge at night from a mound of beer cans speckled with crisp crimson and canary leaves. I can't help but think about the diseases and parasites infesting those rats. If one managed to sneak in the house, Cynthia would batter it back and forth between her claws, toss it up, paw it down, until eventually she'd get bored with it (long after the mouse had shed its life). I decide that to be safe, I'll place several knives in the crack of the door.

Paula calls again, the ring of the phone erasing forever the cusp of an idea. I do my best to mask the annoyance in my tone of voice, but notice it keeps leaking out, like how I can't ignore the light staining my eyes as I try to sleep. It feels like a scene from a play. On the left

side of the stage I sit at my desk, cat in lap, phone pressed against my ear. On the right side of the stage Paula's feet dangle from a radiant bed, or she is sitting on a soft beige couch.

Paula: I'm not catching you at a bad time am I?

Author: I was just...no...

Paula: I haven't heard from you in awhile.

Author: Well I've been...

Paula: Too busy to answer your phone.

Author: Sorry.

Paula: Sometimes I worry about you.

Author: There's no need for that.

Paula: It feels like you're drifting away, and how can I be sure you'll come back?

Author: I'm not sure what you mean by that.

Paula: I suppose you wouldn't.

Author: Well it is rather vague...

Paula: Do you remember coming with me to my grandmother's funeral?

Author: ...Yes, I wrote a poem about it.

Paula: Can I see it?

Author: No.

Paula: Well at least I've pulled you back a bit.

Author: I...need to get going...I'm trying to work on a story

Paula: Is it going well?

Author: I don't know how to end it. All these ideas keep floating by. It's like they're fireflies and they're all so fast, and I keep grasping at them furiously, coming up empty handed.

Paula: ...And you're drifting off again.

black coat disappears, followed by the last part of her I see- the white tip of her tail, slowly vanishing in the distance.