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SLACK LIME

Her chin juts. The knife pulls through the lime, and the handle knocks the marble. Again. Steady. She slices through lime after lime after lime. Arranged on a plate. She slides on a cutting smile and pulls her shoulders back, collarbones out. A long neck. Chin stretches forward. Her mother's hand presses invisibly between her shoulder blades. Be taller. "Don't slouch." Was that out loud? Her mother's voice, colored with vodka, would have smeared with a bitter red. Her hair awkwardly starched. Mashed flat in some places. Couches aren't beds. Armrests make bad pillows. Her mother and her annihilation of affection and trust. Love, the scarred backdrop of a war long lost. A swishing door.



"I can't believe I forgot the citrus. The dish is completely incomplete without the acid." Her voice tightens against everyone around the table. The clinking silverware pauses and restarts, losing its friendly rhythm, replacing the sounds of the dinner party with sparking across plates. It is unfortunate that the music at that instant stops. "Tom. Please do something with the music." She offers the limes to their friends without any other physical acknowledgment of him. She refills glasses and waves away concerns over the tablecloth, spills, and dishes. "No reason to worry. It will all come out." Scarlett, her trusted friend of many years, chooses that moment to offer her thanks to Tom and Leona for such a lovely evening. Her husband, with a little too much of his handsome intention, inflects heavily the praise toward his wife without even glancing at his latest indiscretion. In the stalling moment of downcast eyes competing with smiles that are just a bit too forced, Leona clumsily understands that the entire room is in on this vicious charade. Always the good hostess — and wife — she picks up a glass of sauvignon and tilts the sloshing graciousness in her favor without a word. Later, she blots at a few spots absently in the dark while she stares toward the painful shadows of her shoes, kicked off. Sounds of him thud and creak around upstairs. Her fingers burst a bulb of juice on a used sliver of lime. Slack and destroyed.



OBSESSION TEA

The steeping of cardamom in the sleepy afternoon. Jasmine degrees. So bitter if left too long. Aren't we all? The spring-like passion of green and citrus. The winter memories of mint and joy poured in the candle-lit porcelain of translucent pasts. Influential liquid that encourages more work and further acceptance. The pleasures of warmth and conversation. The pleating of the flavors. A pluck of honey. Constant changing of role between hostess and guest. Enjoyment at its most plausible. Such a pleasantry to be made of water and intimate leaves.



HARMONIES OF SISTERHOOD

How shockingly unacceptable it always feels to sing into the midnight sky with her sisters. The rum and cola still warms their voices and numbs their feet in those heels. The discovery of their shoulders in the darkness strengthens the songs in their hearts and the muscles in their legs. The sloshes within the heavy pours from the always-smiling Riley diminishes in their memories as their laughter stumbles and dress tails flicker along their knees when they stop to jig a few steps. Bouncing along dirt roads, the four sisters harmonize in a seamless rendition of a church song. Bar songs mix well with and comfortable hymns. The women gloriously ignore the faces peering at them from darkened cottages. The pounding drum of youth flushes into their cheeks and skips against their jovial evening. Until. The stature of their father in the shadows of the road in front of them crushes the syllable of song into flat and dusty silence. The quiet punishment of disappointment flares in his eyes and jaw, also stout with whisky. They disband the chain of linked elbows and wither into themselves with heads down and sly smiles dimpling into what will be hell in the sober fog of morning. They dare not relax or glance at each other for the possibility of a giggle. The graveled rhythm of nearby footsteps and accusation accompanies them the rest of the way home as father follows behind.



SWIMMING IN IT

A sloshing rinse of her foot. A sparkle of toenail polish in the water. Out of the water. In the water. Out of the water. Clear and chlorinated. The burn of sun fastens itself to the tops of her feet. Salty taste of freedom on her lips. She floats in a flamingo inner tube. Apartment pool. Tuesday morning. Hangover throbbing behind gritty eyes. The shallows of cement make her feel safer. The roommates had taken her out to celebrate her dismissal. Her bosses had denied her defense against their blame and her inability to smilingly carry the load of six people for the past two and a half years. Who needs any assistance, or assistants, anyway? Despite glaring profits. She must have made it look so easy that they took her work for granted. Mistake noted. Now she slogs through the tiring work of paddling herself over to the side to pour some more gin and ginger into her floating cup. She and the roommates chuckle about their fractured antics. Contemplations of lunch and more alcohol. Happy hour indeed. Music splashes through a portable speaker. Smell of sunscreen, slick against floating. Deliciously warm. Bright and light. Free from more years of never-ending responsibility that spirals ever tighter toward a cycle of doing what she alone could not do. Weeks of severance to lounge in her failure before reality will force her to hide again in the shadows of corporate life.



SENTIMENTAL FABRICS

She wears men's shirts. The buttons pull at curves. Confused with the complicated situation of softness in stature. If she thinks about it, she might understand that they reflect a certain quality similar to the shirts her father would wear. His mechanic mentality. Oil and fluids. Split knuckles and metallic rags. If she hears what others say about her, she might consider wearing something more girlish and contemporary. Makeup even. Too much hairspray. Perm perhaps. She chooses not to, however, and people don't understand. They throw out harmful titles, and her daughter's middle school classmates tease with words her mind can't yet fully fathom. Questions arise, but the conversations never fully answer what the words and adult ideas might mean. As a mom, she stands fairly small in measured height and usually chooses to not shy away from being hazardly honest to those whose faces won't show a flinching gasp of hurt feelings at the breakfast table. Sleeves with buttons roll up nicely and settle just below her creative elbows. Show a thin wrist, delicate and freckled. She ends up being the sweetest person if you find the time to chat with her about making cornbread or riding horses. Edges of flannel worn thin but forgiven. The warmth of these shirts helps spiral her through the claustrophobic reception desk within her brother-in-law's shop of broken televisions.



Ceiling to wall and floor to door slap full of withering electronics on the list to one day find repair. Next door, the Z-man shines and repairs the shoes while the quiet daughter stares with curiosity after school has cracked open her seedling beliefs of how the world works. The daughter, too, often swoops into a flannel shirt, unbuttoned, though over a T-shirt covered in an abstract band name and musical imagery. A comfort of her own paternal inspiration. She hears what the girls in her class say about her, though, so she secretly searches the gloss of the magazines to figure out how to hide behind the lip gloss and impossible lashes. She steals any opportunity to pinch her cheeks for a quick blush of enhancement. She will be lovely someday: stunning in her ability to make anyone around her feel a roaming velocity of calm — like a breeze of sentimental contradiction against the impatience of every single day. These flannel shirts will always speak to her, in their plaid complication and dark hues. Memories of her maternal roots, saturated with mystery and gossip. The buttons will of course pull at her eventual and inherited curves and fold and click onto some friction of the glistening star within her soul.



SAME SONG, DIFFERENT DAY

The slide of geometry toward the swirl of where he wants the cue ball to settle. Lines spin and make more sense in his head than the blues that seep and soak the walls. That old man is really crowding those strings tonight. Chords melt into notes that melt into sounds his mind can't understand so he pops a few balls into the pockets and strolls through the mixing sounds and smells. Stale beer. Smoky ribs on the pit happening outside. College football on the TV over the bar. Screeching stools. Wooden footsteps. Creaking stairs. Musty ceiling. A flush of the commode. The old man could play all night, but his daughter asks at some point, in the nicest way possible, for folks to stop handing him shots. He's in his 90s, after all. Someone stole his guitar last summer. The whole community bought him another. Story is that when he was young, he and a friend would go play blues in the mines, but the Klan caught 'em one night and messed up his hands. Why he crowds those strings now. He's got his own rhythm, for sure. Trouble just as easily runs on nights like tonight. The team wins: crazy appears. His friend botches a shot. Fool. But a damn lucky fool. Warm beer makes the blur a bit worse. College kids will roll in after the final score. A solid roll across thin felt. He can get some money off them. Scrub of worn chalk pieces. Is this still the same song?



GOUGING HONESTY

Hem was pissed.

Perhaps it was the absinthe, but Hal was almost positive that she said she had told Hem she and Hal were toying with love.

"Why would you tell him?" He sat up and swung toward the edge of the bed so his back was all she could see. His muscles oozed something like aches and brambles found among the remnants of his ride on a bull's head. The hotel towel had won over the crowd, and Hem's anger had been the reddest thing the group of friends could swing to avoid. Horns ready to gouge.

"I wanted him to know that he couldn't just grab any piece of me he wanted at that moment," she said as she slid an outstretched arm toward the curve of his spine.

That spun the conversation. "Did he try something with you?" He flailed a glance toward her over his right shoulder. A tender change of manner in his voice.

A soft no sighed between them.



With that one word, the glow around the edges of the late afternoon melted into something more dense. More useful. He relaxed backward, and the back of his head rested snugly against the inside of her thigh.

She pulled together a twirl of hair along his forehead and forced a curl where no curl would ever stay. She counted a familiar yet unnameable rhythm as she ran a finger along his jawline and matched her breathing to his. She slid her palm flat against his chest and let

it rest there. "I apologize. I should have warned you that he would try to kill you."

He flinched away from the bruised truth that darkened her voice. "There's no way you could have known he'd actually try." He focused his eyes on a freckle she had on her little toe and tried not to worry about the repercussions of mixing absinthe and truth on a Sunday afternoon.



SUCH A CHARMING STORM

I can't wait to be caught up in the sodden calm of another rainy Sunday. I think of an afternoon storm as charming, so short-lived and heavy. Downpours can snap the heat of the day and color the world with a depth of grayness that backdrops tired leaves. How can one not be charmed when living in the fiction of a rainy day, lounging in a lavish velvet of attention? The wide and broken rain of the summer is warm enough to play in. Open a window, just enough, and the sound of the rumbling of thunder will compose the only music in the room (disregarding, of course, your own melodic heartbeat). An ever-patient book waits as quiet company while rain drenches your senses.

PHOTO ASYLUM

She draws
the camera to her eye.
Her eyelashes, thick with black
mascara, flutter
against the viewfinder and
wrinkle and
bend in harsh shadows like
spider legs flailing. Her eyes
flicker to focus
as she forces the camera to search the
blurs for the sharpest edges
of the instant.

She finds his shirt. The edge of the collar cuts
at the neck.
The whole scene swims closer
in orange tones spilling
from the tungsten lamp
swinging above him.

Flashes of wind
from the rain-soaked evening
push through the open window with
an electricity that
sparks against the acoustic
venue.

If she could
only separate the
sounds
of that moment into
splinters of disruptions,
she might be able
to isolate the truth
developing
in the image.



The spattering of the rain
onto the sidewalk
colors the backdrop of sound
with clarity and wetness.

Voices clinking together
in chemical conversations,
amplified by raised glasses
of chilled wine.



Blending and grinding
of dark caffeine and vanilla flavors,
chilled,
chopped,
poured,
topped with
airy sweetness, and
swirled decoratively with
chocolate
syrup.

(He likes how she says syrup.)

Silverware scraping through
sugared desserts,
thick with delight and
gentle deliciousness.

An old woman's delicate
steps
as she weaves
her way
through the crowded
chairs
and tables.



Laughter.
Red.
Delicious.
Laughter.

And hiding behind all that:
an elixir of a song.

She had read whole stories —
but never lived inside one —
that unfolded within seconds,
or thousandths of a second
in her case.
She starves to hold
open the velvet
curtain of a narrative
that is happening around her
during that click
of a shutter.

Her past.
Her present.
Her future.

Her involvement with these
strangers who
crowd her.
Her place
in these musical
circumstances.

Movies have been built around
less.

She
exhales, and
the camera weighs
heavy and cold
against her cheek.

Quick blinks interrupt her
thoughts, and
the vibration of the strings playing
the
last
note
disappears into clapping.



COLLISIONS

And just like that, my entire life becomes a forgotten pronunciation of a language I've never spoken. Reset. To something simpler perhaps. Blunted awareness of consciousness that might be beyond. I see obedience as a preposition, as a genre. A reflection of a girl stares back at me. Sculptural and oblivious to a world that no longer exists for us. She reaches out a speculative hand, palm upward, and I sense a distinction of what might be muscle movement in some phase of an instinctual reaction. No suspicion — or any regard for emotion, for that matter. Occasion under construction. No love. No loss. No memory of what I never understood would be something I could possibly forget. The absence of my reality and my fixed form radicalizes a normative theory that I am not able to grasp the things that would keep me in a world where my body can no longer construct a logical place to inhabit. Endless encores reconfigure into new memories that will continue to disappear and fold into the dough of tomorrow. My next life.