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Cafe Girls

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Cafe Girls

The radio clicked on, the way her mother had set it to every Sunday morning.

--and you must remember that the modern world brings us closer and closer to worldly things. And those who do not practice self-denial will grow closer to Satan himself. Eternal hellfire consumes like--

Like this heat. Like this miserable, simmering Los Angeles heat, Mary added carefully in her head as she clicked the radio back off with her big toe. The light filtered in through the window, illuminating dust particles floating in the air. They settled on a bare back of a naked stranger, throwing the tiniest scintillating shadows onto their hunched-over figure.

So much brightness, she thought. But the kind that makes you not want to live.

"It's so bright out," said the figure in her bed as if prompted by the dust that settled on their glowing shoulders.

She promptly stirred, pretending to awaken in that moment, pretending she hadn't heard the tail-end of a sermon on Revelations in bed with a naked stranger.

"Can you please leave now. Parents are going to be here soon," she added to hasten their disappearance. The figure began to shift here and there, shrugging on shirt and then pants, finally taking a simple silver ring from the bedside table and slipping it back on as they left.

The radio was a housewarming gift, which her parents had brought to her with smiles that slipped on and off their faces as they helped her move into the apartment.

Her mother had not just been worried, but downright scared for her soul when she had moved to the city.

She had said the radio was for remembering--remembering God's light, his presence in our lives, our duty to work and play with Him in mind.

And it did make her remember home: a badly done painting that came to life, nothing awe-inspiring but everything planned out perfectly. Churches in the South really did look as if they had been placed on the rolling hills of scorched yellow grass by God. Hers had been a funny-looking Chinese church, a building standing a little short, a little squat, in the middle of a row of pretty white buildings stretching themselves into the sky.

Remember, her mother had said with confidence and a shaking hand.

But she did not remember any of this. She only remembered saying to herself: the act of remembering is a farce. If you are trying to remember, you are acknowledging that the dominant

force inside of you is pulling towards something else. And the harder you have to try to make yourself remember, the more you know that the lost thing is no longer important to you.

She readied herself for her parents' arrival, taking no longer than a minute to slip into new clothing and leave the house for a morning meditation of sorts.

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Even though it had already been a year since she had moved here, she still wasn't used to the light. Every morning, she exhumed herself from the dingy apartment to stop for a cup of coffee at the cafe a block away, and every time, the sunlight dried her up.

It was not a pure, enduring sunlight, like the kind from back home, but a dirty one amplified by the skyscrapers, leaving her self-conscious about the smelly stickiness of sweat on her body as she walked between the jam-packed crowds of people.

A large group of men dressed in their work clothes passed her, confident and solid in their step, and she dropped her gaze to her feet. Her own clothes were not as crisp, and the skirt felt a little too short ever since she had gained weight while living here. As the men walked past her, creating just the slightest bit of wind between their bodies, she clasped one side of her skirt with the hand that was not holding her black handbag. As she pressed her hand down on her thigh, smoothing the fabric down to her knee, she thought of her mother, who would be sitting next to her father as they dutifully entered the freeway on their monthly visit.

She probably won't like the skirt, Mary thought as she shrugged into the cafe. The *For Sale* sign, which had sat in the window for almost a year now but had never been acknowledged by a buyer, stared at her from the other side of the glassy barrier. She could hear her mother Clicking her tongue at fat girls like her who dressed so that their clothing revealed the lines of their bodies, sex bulging distastefully over their waistlines. Her shoulders stiffened, heart racing as she thought to an hour ahead, when she would meet her parents.

Before you meet your parents, you must unwind yourself completely before the first embrace, the first conversation. Then, when you are wound more and more tightly as you fuss over conversation at dinner, you will not break.

And with that ritual of her patience, of her endurance, she awaited her order, eyes brightly looking at the counter as she anticipated the first sip of her drink, always made to taste expensive. She smoked, pulling smooth white cylinders from a box and taking the smoke into her lungs until her head felt dizzily light.

Today, the owner of the coffee shop, a trim young woman who wore glasses and spoke softly, was not there. Though Mary always came in anticipating her presence, she also breathed a sigh of relief realizing that she did not have to put on any pretenses of being busy or important today. Scrolling aimlessly through social media and acting as if you had something to do took all the relaxation out of her morning ritual. In the end, anyways, she probably saw through the whole thing: people like that, people like the manager and people like her mother, claimed so often to know more about her than she did herself that it seemed true.

It's all an exercise of patience, she thought to herself as she gathered her belongings sitting idly on the table and left to meet her mother and father. She lit one last cigarette as she anticipated her apartment, her parents.

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The first time Mary ran out of patience was when she realized she had a huge lesbian crush on the manager. It was an urgent feeling, one that came unexpectedly but nevertheless lodged itself into her eyes and her chest and her thighs, and devoured the patience she had built up diligently since girlhood. Which seemed funny now because the first time they went on a date, she hadn't been sure if it was a date or not.

Surely that can't be it, she had thought. The manager hadn't explicitly said it was a date, nor did she ever express interest towards her. All she had said was that they were going to have a great night out just us two, and no one else is coming.

Date. She had said the word to herself too many times while waiting outside contemplating how she was going to approach that night. The word tasted funny in her mouth, the way words do after your tongue and lips contemplate them too much. She couldn't help it, though: the whole thing where girls ask other girls out was so new. Who pays for dinner, who picks the girl up from her house when there's two girls, who initiates sex if a man doesn't grab your ass, take your hands from you, and smash your face into his?

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She stepped on her last cigarette, only half-smoked, pushing it with her shoe into the sidewalk until it broke in the middle and stopped sending curlicues of smoke into the air. She always made sure that the smooth white roll of paper and dried-up leaves would never light again, just in case it might want to avenge its death, flare up, and set the whole place ablaze.

She heard her father's giant knife making a clopping sound onto the plastic cutting board.

They had let themselves in with the key she had given them, which was part of the bargain when she convinced them to let her move to the city. Her mother's voice interjected between the sounds of each descent of the knife, speaking broken English with that unmistakable accent. Mary noted the flare of irritation that quaked in her chest. It didn't anger her that her mother's English was bad--but why did she speak English when the three of them were around? It was so childish, the way it seemed she was showing off a skill she didn't have.

Her mother and father owned a small Chinese restaurant in her hometown, and had come to Los Angeles looking to start a new restaurant near their daughter's home. This was the last thing that she wanted in the world. She did not want to go to Chinese church with her parents every weekend, she did not want her mother worrying and scolding over her work as she did from childhood until she finally moved away for her job.

"Look at me! Honey, look at me," her mother said taking her face into her hands, as if she were still a little girl. "Honey, look at her! She looks so pretty, she does, almost as pretty, no, prettier, than all the tall white girls who live here."

It was all a performance, and it started with overly exuberant comments, hugs and kisses that Asian people don't really like to give or receive. She couldn't tell if the greetings were genuine anymore, all the crooning and crowing of *I missed you so much*. It was like a show without a stage: if it were like all the stages that she'd set up in the short time she worked as a set dresser, it would start with an empty room barely full of blank-faced furniture. She imagined a team of set dressers, walking back and forth like dead men, placing things in sides and corners to make it look like they had been placed there unintentionally.

And as if prompted by a script, her mother asked her about her life.

"Are you eating well," she asked, "are you praying every day?"

"Yes. I'm doing fine," she said in return, exercising patience and virtue so she didn't say something streaked with tiredness, something that would offend her.

"But you put on so much weight."

"I'm perfectly healthy, mom, and I'm just getting used to all the different kinds of food here."

"Yes, but you can't be healthy if you're this fat now. You wore them fine at home, but now you've got so much extra skin that your clothes make it look like you're out here to sell your body, is that what you want to do now?" Her mother laughed to make the mean comment a

joke, and her father laughed even louder.

“Finding a job here is hard,” her father said. “That’s why she doesn’t really have a job yet, and still depends on us to come and take care of her. If we find work here, do you want to work for us, instead of working a bunch of different fake jobs at a time?” he said, and broke out into laughter again.

The laughter made her snap. “I’m already having a hard time. You don’t need to tell me that you can’t stand looking at me,” she said quietly.

Silence, this particular silence between the banter and the quarrel, also felt scripted.

“Why do you disrespect us like that?” her mother said. Then she broke out into tears, sniffing quietly and angrily, then sobbing distastefully all over her clean clothes and the dinner table.

“You’re always making me the bad guy,” her mother said between sobs, and the fight ensued, ended, started again, until everyone was too cried out to keep shouting hoarsely.

“I am trying to be closer to you, I am trying to stay close to you, why are you pushing me away?” her mother said as she went to sleep.

“I know, I know. I also want to be close to you,” Mary said genuinely and tiredly.

...

She finally decided the day she and the manager broke up: that the first night they went out in the city *was* a date because they went on dates many times after that. After every date, after every giggling accusation that the baristas at the cafe would make the mornings after when they walked into the cafe together, she would replay the date in her head over and over again until it felt platonic. At the same time, though, it hadn’t felt like one because there was no dinner at a restaurant, no secret slipping of a male hand into her own across from the table into hers asking if she wanted to go back to his place.

Instead, she had entered the car, ready to utter niceties about work as soon as the engine started, but the manager asked her unceremoniously if she liked smoking weed.

“I do,” she had said, and watched in horror as a joint was produced from the glove compartment because she had never even seen marijuana in her entire life.

She continued to watch in horror as she tried to breathe in the smoke correctly, coughed desperately out the window, collected herself and tried not to cry from smoke getting in her eyes as the manager laughed at her. The manager probably knew--no, definitely knew, she now

realized, that she hadn't the slightest knowledge about how to smoke weed. She didn't decide to drop her off at home even after watching her consume gas station food as if she would never eat again, chewing and eating and swallowing until she felt like throwing up. She hadn't left even after they had driven up to the scenic spot and in the passenger seat, she had started crying, snot obstructing her voice as she tried to talk about the wordless dissatisfaction that was lodged up in her throat.

"I don't like living here," she said dumbly, and immediately wanted to take it back. It was a meaningless complaint to those who lived here.

But the manager had agreed quietly, and she shifted her gaze to begin talking, the pair of eyes across from her locked into place and stayed there.

In Los Angeles, the sun always shines too brightly, the manager said calmly. That's why people never move enough; the world always feels tired and static, as if the sun were constantly drying it up. Prompted by her friends' and family's advice, she had taken on diet and exercise, meditation, exotic religions taken from other peoples' cultures, and all of the other rich people remedies for ennui, but this feeling is something she just can't shake off.

In the end, the manager decided that dancing was the only restorative activity that made sense. She craves the kind of dancing that channels movement violently through your body. She craves the late nights when people come and dance in her home with the lights off; her home is her favorite place to be when it's dark, air-conditioned, and filled with exciting music. It's there that she dances wildly, almost menacingly on some nights, her choppy brown hair flapping in rhythm to a resounding bass, long limbs knocking things over. Some leave entertained, and some leave feeling slightly shocked, but she feels a deep sense of pride in that most people leave knowing they had fun.

...

After every fight, she bought her mother coffee. She knew this would repair her ego, building it up again with the prospect of having a daughter who had finally succeeded enough to spend many dollars a day on a morning cup of coffee. Starbucks drinks were like cups of liquefied gold in cities like Beijing, where her parents were born. More of a status symbol for the eye than a treat for the taste buds.

Her mother sipped on the expensive latte. Why did she always order the most expensive drink, even though she didn't actually know the difference between artisan coffee and a cheap

McDonalds drink you could get for a dollar, as her parents so often did in the dark of early mornings before work?

“Who’s that *dyke* behind the counter?”

She even said *dyke* in English, as if it didn’t clamber off of her untrained tongue the way that kids in grade school pronounce their swear words for the first time.

“I can’t stand it. The way that they come all the way down from San Francisco to do their gay marches. I see rainbow flags and I wonder if we can even consider it a sign of God anymore.”

“It was a sign of holiness, of the promise of God after the flood, and now, nothing,” her father added.

She continued to smile, feeling disconnected from herself as her parents, precious as they were to her, spoke about the world.

The manager came to the table.

“Hello! I’ve been waiting to meet you, I’ve heard about your house and your restaurant back at home all the time. I can’t wait to hear more, it all sounds so homey out there. I’m a little busy right now, but we’ll talk more very soon, about Texas, and about business,” she said politely. Why did she want to say hello to her parents now? Was it to spite her? She knew exactly what her parents were like. It felt like a betrayal-- she talked it as if they were still connected, as if it even mattered, as if she were trying to subtly out her to her parents.

“Nice to meet you,” her mother faltered in an irritating accent, trying to pronounce the words correctly and to not look perturbed by touching a hand that belonged to a woman who looked at and touched and got in bed with other women.

Her father just grunted.

The manager smiled a bit too sweetly, said the drinks were on the house, and walked away as politely as she possibly could.

...

“What’s wrong?” the manager had said after Mary had halfheartedly broken up with her.

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“You didn’t actually want to be with me, did you?”

“I really did. I just have to figure things out for myself.”

“You have to figure out if you actually like me or not.”

She felt an unparalleled romantic affection for the manager. She was completely sure of it; there had never been a feeling more natural, more excessive, than this. It was just that she was just not sure if she liked girls or not, and did not know how to relay this important piece of information to the girl that she liked.

...

When she thought about what the big moments in her life looked like, big announcements that broke a longtime routine into pieces that she would have to rearrange and then relearn, she imagined something big. Big tears, big voices, big announcements. Something, an event or another that she could point to and say to anyone who would listen: yes, and then this happened, and it felt like my world was falling. This is why I'm not feeling good.

Instead, it was just a few words on the dusty chalkboard sign that usually had the special drinks on it. Big, bubbly letters that looked like they were probably written by the dumb blonde barista she didn't like. *Sold (sad face). Moving to Portland--See You There (happy face)!*

As she sulked in, she looked up at the counter. Who could it be but that particular barista herself? She did not feel a sense of loss. She did not feel like asking with a pout and a sympathetic smile, "You guys are leaving us?", as all the other regulars were. She just felt incredibly irritated by that barista. *Damn her bouncy ponytail and her gummy smile!*

The manager stepped out of the back room and did not change her expression upon seeing Mary. It had been over a week since they had seen each other, even in passing.

"Hey," she said.

Mary opened her mouth and closed it, not sure how she would manage to express her shock without revealing her disappointment. "Why didn't you tell me about--? What's going on?"

The manager shrugged. "You never asked. There's a sign outside."

She stated it simply, without bitterness, but her nonchalance was somehow agitating. Mary felt her blood flow to her temples and felt words rising up out of her stomach.

"I didn't know things were *that* bad. What the hell happened to you guys?"

"Hey, what's up? Why're you mad?"

"I'm not. It was just so sudden. I'm surprised, that's all."

Mary knew the other employees could hear, but felt a burning urge to provoke some sort of explanation, some other response, some other apology, than this self-assured, coldly confident

voice that was not like the manager.

“Alright. Fine. You go ahead and act like I’m nothing.” It was an inane statement, said only in search of a response, and she said it confident in its emptiness. Much to her delight, the manager took her arm, grabbing her arm not harshly, but not tenderly as she was used to. The touch was impersonal, hand on arm, and she did not feel the warmth of her skin.

“Look, I got a good offer from this couple who wants to run a restaurant here. They wanted to be living closer to their kid. I want to make more money and I’m sick of LA. Everyone who lives here is sick of it but they’re too pampered to adapt to other cities.”

Why did she say it so matter-of-fact? And with that dumb fucking self-satisfied smile?

Mary thought of all the bad things that would happen to the manager once she realized she, too, wasn’t suited for another life. For Christ’s sake, she’d always get so nervous when the LA drivers tailgated her, and her feelings hurt when the LA drivers cut her off. She wasn’t made for whatever other city she might want to escape to.

“Why the fuck do you care? You don’t care about kids. And you never stop talking about how much better LA is than everywhere else.”

“It’s not a *kid* kid. It’s their daughter who works here and they want to make sure she’s adjusting well. They’re going to try to get a place near her, and take care of her when she’s sick. And they’re super religious or something and they don’t want her to get in trouble. It’s nice, they want to be close to her.”

“What? Isn’t she an adult? What kind of fucking adult needs their mommy and daddy to come--” And there it was, the sinking feeling. The feeling you get when you are struck by a realization that does not bestow information onto your mind like light, like when you find out someone you love loves you back, but instead, a dull darkness that makes it feel like everything is closed up. This is the end; no, this is a shitty beginning to something she didn’t want to deal with.

There was no anger. She was just incredibly tired, and could not speak the words that she wished that she did not need to speak. But the manager flared up, as if she were absorbing her energy.

“Now that I’ve explained as you insisted, I want to let you know something.”

She picked up her gaze, which was weighed down heavily and stuck completely to the ground, and looked up.

“You’re a bitch. You’re always sulking and playing victim. Don’t ask me all these questions about why I’ve decided to leave. I could’ve just stayed. The cafe wasn’t doing *well*, but I was doing fine, and I liked my life. I just can’t stand you coming every day, sitting there sighing and pretending to be depressed and smoking cigarette after cigarette. I mean, come on. You demand an explanation for who I sold the place to, and why, and what not, but you just cut me off like it was nothing. And then you glower at me from that table in the corner every afternoon. I’m sick and tired of it.”

Even after she came back home, late from throwing words back and forth with the manager, all she saw in her head was the orange gloom of the sunset melted through the smoggy sky, and the silhouette of the manager in her light spring coat. She always wore coats, too warm for the weather; she had always jokingly reprimanded the manager about her choice of clothing, but now, there was only a soundless cry from the back of her throat, ineffectual and ineffective in the openness of the thick atmosphere.

...

She walked home with the manager’s voice ringing and rattling in her ears. Nothing in her vision seemed clear; it all seemed as if it could be blown away by the warm, dry wind, dissolving like wispy white smoke in the air. Even the overwhelming presence of giant steel skyscrapers, planted firmly on the ever-present concrete, was not grounding because she could not feel it under her feet. That optimistic, percussive sound of heels on concrete was missing. Since moving to the city, those constant, continuous clicks reminded her of her will, the drive to get somewhere. Even if it meant having nowhere to go and looking around desperately anyways, sliding into the one bar among many similar-looking ones that seemed somehow more promising than the others.

When she asked with a blank face and a quiet voice that she was awfully surprised that they had bought the space that once housed her favorite cafe, she watched as her uninviting, unwilling words kindled her mother’s anger and her father’s tired indifference. She thought about how she felt sorry for her father because he never dared speak over her mother’s relentless grievances with her daughter, her husband, and the business. She felt sorry for her mother because she married her father quickly, trying to leave an ultra-conservative household and try on independence to see if it fit her.

Was it worth it? she thought. *There was nothing interesting where she grew up, and no*

drugs in East Asia back then, what kind of new and exciting experiences did she do this for?

You never pay attention to me anymore!

I wonder if I was an accident, she thought. Her birthday was awfully close to nine months after her parents' marriage.

You only call once a week, and every time you call, you sound distracted.

She wondered if it mattered, in terms of her right to exist, if she was an "accident" or not. Being part of this family is not something I chose, she thought. She did not choose to live in two places at the same time, her past life colliding with her current. Though she didn't have such a tragic past, anyways; her parents didn't hit her as a child very much, not more than the average first-generation immigrant child usually. She grew up clothed and fed, with encouragement to pursue a good future. She observed that in spite of all this, she was not able to muster up the patience required to maintain peace in the family.

Do you think you're better than us? Do you think because your parents work day and night serving people that you can also treat us like shit?

She felt an overwhelming, inexplicable urge to take her mother in her arms, she was so small and so much thinner than her, she would probably fit into her arms. She imagined her mother crying, as she used to after making red marks the back of her legs, all vaguely parallel to each other, with a small stick.

You're not the person I raised you to be.

It used to be so enigmatic to her, the way her mother would get so upset she would make a scene and try to leave the house. Then she would start bawling, end up with a red puffy face that forgave, said optimistic things about the future, and then settle serenely as she went to sleep. But now she did not find that kind of arrangement at all out of place.

I'm sick and tired of your bullshit. This time we leave and we don't come back.

As her mother packed up her things, Mary thought about how the manager had said the exact same thing to her while she had left. She thought of kissing her as she angrily, earnestly, had told her everything that was wrong with her. Like in the movies when the man kisses the woman who is trying to tell him he doesn't care enough, to get her to shut up and prove, yes, he does care. And then she thought about the first time they kissed. It was anticlimactic, in one of those loud clubs with dark lights and seizure-inducing LED lights. It felt like one of those movies where the college boys egg the two girl friends on to kiss, and the girls drunkenly giggle and

scream and then their lips meet and the boys chortle and spit and

She had not gone forward with it because she could not stop thinking about whether this thought had been born from longing or lust, and what really is the difference between the two. How an opportunity so perfect could possibly be real. The air around the manager had seemed partitioned off by an invisible but impenetrable barrier, crystallizing the moment and rendering it untouchable. Then she heard the keys turn, and the engine moving them away from the moment on the hill. When she heard her parents' car pull away, a growl that was barely audible within the distant noise of the nightlife, she felt empty. When she looked around the room, she saw her mother's home-cooked food that had been meant for dinner, masked under the reflective shine of saran wrap and sitting uselessly on the table.

Her mother would come back. She often said that she would never come back. Once, she had even disowned her daughter. And while she did, deep down, want her parents to keep coming back, she wondered about the day that they would not return no matter how much she begged on the phone. And she also wondered--if they actually never came back, would she cry, or would she celebrate?