

All That's Left

A leaf broke off from the branch, twirled through the air, and landed softly on top of the water. The gentle ripples it created expanded towards me. The air was dark and I was sitting on a bench looking out at the pond in Parc la Fontaine. The wrought iron street lamps illuminated certain things that would have been concealed during the night. A soft breeze made my hair sway like the branches of a weeping willow over my bare shoulders. I could see the silhouette of the billowing fountain at the other end of the pond. The leaf, that had fallen, drifted like an abandoned boat and I watched to see if it would touch the reflection of the crescent moon. It never made it. It was pushed towards the edge of the pond where the gunk, and all that's left, gathers at the parameter.

Behind me, I could hear rustling of plastic bags and tin cans. I could hear hacking.

I took off my shoes and slid my bare feet along the cold grass.

Before this, I had been walking. It was early August, when the streets were filled with the smell of rotisserie chicken and car fumes. When the heat is oppressive. But in the city nobody cares. In the city, people strip down and walk around, dazed, as if it's nothing. I had been walking in the middle of the city to a bar on the corner of Rachel and L'Hôtel-de-Ville. Mark was sitting out front on the wooden bench that ran along the outside of the bar. I had bumped into him the other day and he wanted to meet up. I hadn't seen him for months. Now, he was alone with two pints, looking at his phone.

"Hey lady." He stretched his arm out to hug me. I hugged him back and sat down next to him.

"That one's for you," he said, sliding the dark ale towards me. "You look good. I like those shoes," he pointed to my feet. I had on black tap-dance-like shoes that had a small black strap around the ankle. I bought them after I had graduated. They were impractical and expensive and I never wore them until recently. They made my legs look nicer. I wanted to show I still had something.

"Thanks. You're not looking too bad yourself. You're letting your hair grow."

"Out of laziness," he said. "I look like a homeless person. But I hear that's the new fad."

I took a sip of my beer and eyed him.

"How've you been?" He asked. Mark was a good person. He asked questions that he wanted to be asked.

"I've just been walking around all day. What about you?"

Mark told me how he and his girlfriend broke up. How she never seemed to be interested in him. I remembered meeting Mark for the first time at a house party. He told me a story he had read about a guy who fucked a billboard. Or was it a large bag of meat? I remembered looking down at him, he was shorter than me, and thinking how funny he was. I was ashamed that I hadn't reached out to him lately.

"I'm trying to distract myself I guess. I'm taking a few summer courses. Are you still at that restaurant?"

"Not anymore," I said. "I couldn't handle it."

He took a drink of his red ale. Mark had eyes that begged for love. He was a good person.

"You seem off," he said.

"It's the heat."

"It's getting colder though. Do you want my jacket? You're hardly wearing anything."

"This is a pure silk camisole," I joked, pointing to my shirt. "It's alright, I have a sweater in my bag."

"Really though, your apartment's just around the corner, right?"

I took a sip of beer. "No, I moved out. I'm just staying at a friend's place until I can move again."

"Whose place?"

"They're from the restaurant. You don't know them. I'll be alright." I used my hair to cover my shoulders. "See? Natural fur coat." Mark laughed and asked

if I had a smoke, but before I could respond, the bartender came out to do just that. He waved to us as he put a cigarette to his lips.

“Slow night?” Mark asked.

“Very. But it’s only a Wednesday.” He lit up and inhaled deeply.

“Hey man, do you think I could buy one off you?”

“Just take one my friend. You both enjoying your night?”

Max took the smoke. “Yeah we’re having a good time.”

“You used to come here a lot,” the bartender looked at me. My heart quickened. He was tall with blonde hair. I thought his name was Guillaume, but my memory was hazy.

“I used to,” I nodded. “I lived around the corner.”

“Yeah, you tried to steal beer out of the tap one time. I remember.”

I could feel my face getting red. I tried to say something clever.

“Oh don’t worry about it. You were a sweet drunk.” He tucked his hair behind his ears and blew out a big puff of smoke.

“I’m sorry,” I said as sincerely as possible. “I did a lot of dumb shit. I don’t do that anymore.”

“That’s a shame.”

He was wearing a white T-shirt that displayed his many intricate black line tattoos on his thin arms. I remembered one time, it must have been last summer, talking to him while he was behind the bar. I must have been attempting to flirt because now, whenever I caught his eye, we both looked away. Or maybe something else had happened. It’s never good to look back.

We all talked until someone inside shouted for Guillaume. Mark turned to me and waggled his eyebrows. "He's a cutie," he joked. I found myself smiling for the first time in what felt like a year. I opened my large tote bag to grab my sweater, but ended up tipping it over. My stomach dropped. All I had spilled out.

I looked at Mark. He didn't seem to notice. He looked at me, and then to the ground.

"Did something break?"

"No," I finally said. I reached down and tried to shove everything back in.

"Girls carry so much stuff in their bags. You have an entire wardrobe in there," he laughed. "I've never seen you wear sneakers before. Why are you carrying them around?"

I forced a laugh. "Just in case. You never know when the urge to run will hit you."

It was late. Usually, I loved this time of night. Everything seemed heightened and people looked better, more delicate. A woman in a long flowing skirt walked by with a big bushel of lilac flowers. The fragrance was heady. I wondered what her secret was.

Mark asked if I wanted another one. I had only stayed this long because Guillaume had told me the last two were on the house. But to stay would be a bad idea.

"Lily's coming in a bit," he said. "We can all hang out."

“I think I’ll head home,” I said. “Or just walk around for a bit. It’s a nice evening.”

“Text me,” he said as I walked away. “You never respond.”

“I know. I’m bad at it” I lied. He waved to me. I felt guilty.

I wanted another beer. I was feeling dizzy. It was probably my empty stomach. My eyelids were lazy and I let my hips sway as I walked down the side streets. I kept my distance from the main ones with all the loud cars. It was getting cooler, Mark was right. But it wasn’t bad if I kept walking. All the French townhouses looked so elegant and peaceful and I imagined all the people sleeping in their warm beds.; their arms wrapped around a partner.

I decided to walk to the park.

Parc la Fontaine looked empty, but I wasn’t foolish enough to think I was alone. I walked along the path until I found my spot. The pond looked like a big gaping mouth. The garbage that collects along the sides looked like the residue that forms at the corner of a person’s mouth when they’re dehydrated. When a body is trying to cleanse itself. The moon, reflected in the middle, stuck out like a giant chipped tooth. I found my bench and sat down; my leg muscles were tight and achy. I didn’t know what time it was, but I could hear the rustling of the plastic bags and the tin cans. I heard the hacking. I heard the pissing.

“You’re back,” a gruff voice announced. I turned my head. She was standing there with her large jacket on. It made her look bigger than she was. Her

long gray hair was tangled. She held a clear plastic bag full of empties in one hand and a stuffed shoulder bag in the other.

She handed me a bottle of beer.

“Found a case of it.” She took one for herself and twisted it open. “I saw you here the last few nights. You sleep on the bench.”

I looked down at my beer. I twisted it open and drank. It tasted watered down. “Sometimes. When I get tired.”

She moved closer. I could smell urine.

“Only sometimes?”

“I get tired easily.”

“All that walking around.”

I looked up at her. I had only ever seen her grazing from afar. I knew she had been watching me the other nights. Her face was weather beaten and full of wrinkles, but mostly covered by hair. She had long, long hair.

“Thanks for the beer,” I said, trying to be on my own.

“I sleep in the park too. So do others. Some of them are not as friendly. I can't watch you all the time.”

“Why do you have to watch me?” I pretended not to know.

“Young girl like you,” she trailed off. “Your clothes are nice, but they'll ruin quickly. They're too nice.” She trudged around me and collapsed onto the bench, letting her bags fall in front of her. When she sat down, her jacket puffed up around her shoulders, making them broad.

I could feel her eyes on my shoes.

“Are you staying around for long?”

I saw a duck gliding across the pond, as if nothing was happening. As if his home wasn't rancid with garbage and shit. The only thing that existed for that duck was what was in front of him. What he could immediately see.

"I'll be here for a while." I took a swig of beer.

"Those are pretty."

"What?"

"Your shoes."

I looked down. "Thanks," I said bitterly. I wanted her to leave, but I knew I had no choice. I knew what was happening.

"I'll give you a deal," she said. "Those shoes for the bench. I'll watch your back."

I looked her straight in the eye. From what I could see under her large bushy brows, they were blue. "Why?" I asked

"They're expensive. I can sell them."

"What about something else?"

"What else you got?"

I couldn't say anything.

She shrugged her shoulders. "What's the alternative? Go try your luck at a shelter. I'm sure there's space." She laughed a big, mucus laugh that made my stomach turn. I finished my beer. Maybe it would make it worse, I didn't care. I needed a distraction. She handed me another one. I accepted it.

"I've been here for a long time. I'm not making fun of you. I'm warning you." She chuckled again, "I have a pair that'd suit you better."

I thought about Guillaume, and last year, and the friends I used to have. But it's never good to look back. It's more than that. It didn't start at my mistakes. It started the moment I was born. The moment I became a branch in my family tree. What do you do with a diseased tree? You cut off the branches and accept all that's left.

I thought about Mark. He was a good person, but I couldn't. I had lied.

I opened the new beer and took a drink before undoing the straps. I took them off. I dropped them on the bench in the space between us. She smiled and took off her own. She slid mine onto her feet, and grinned a big fat grin. They didn't fit. She was stretching them. She didn't care.

I slid my bare feet along the cold grass.