

Candy
striper
spilled
milk

UTOR

Issue Zero



Oh, Angel!

And she sits smoking.
You will fail to notice
The way last night still lingers
In her hummingbird tongue,
 That whips
 The steam
 To clear
 The mirror.

You dart and jump like watercolor paint.
Oh, gas mask man,
Look closer, you drain the world like a bath-
tub.

I yell:
“Everyone through the looking glass!”
(we are looking to ride the tresses
Of a one Lewis Carroll).

But jailbird baby, I stay behind to call,
Do not pass go,
Do not stop at the kiosk for chips and beer,
Don’t slam the door on your way out.

Untitled 4:¹

*Revealed to her hither and thither
Obliged to show her features,
Nipped by cigarette smoke.*

*Some holding her knees pinched
Stuck in the mind and proficient in something
(the general desire).*

*Dinner left behind her,
Moments of her,
Rushing back,
Perpetually,
Terribly,
To something else.*

¹ From *What Maisie Knew*

Before Lorca

FGL looks at me, says,
no tastes...

Federico, baby, come to the Limelight with me
i, between anapests,
—inhale and sob.

groaning sounds of pederasty
swarm my ears (in mist
he
deserves it, you fuck a kid, lose the war.)

FGL looks back and me and says,
description has no time,
i could be beautiful and have no time.

the quiet drunk of love,
staggers to us, smells of sweets,

and lives.
and grabs his breasts and weeps.
they will outlive the stones, these breasts.

a marble maverick,
greek statues never in their drapes,
sing beneath verlovering breath:

beautiful, only in time—
he lives.

Leprosy > Hickeys

These little weepingorgasms all over your body,
Oh, we are so unlucky!
For ours will be a little death
Again and again.

Late Night Liz

I am sitting on the edge of the bathtub, knees facing the door, one elbow, one knee, one hand steadying my book (Alexander Chee's How to Write an Autobiographical Novel). I sit up, grip water in my hand and press my full fist against the lowest dip in my spine. The water dribbles down coalescing for a moment before my thong soaks it all up. I imagine a kind and gentle figure behind me, in my mind it's Mother Liz from two nights ago. I wandered into church like an ass, late, rained on, confused and quiet. The service had just ended but she introduced herself and let me stand awkwardly at her side while the few patrons who had made it on time left. So she grasps a big yellow sponge. She fills it with water and then squeezes it right above my lower back (just as much as she can with the one hand, never so much as to ask all the water from it). She never touches me but let's the water make its ill fated little escape from tub to sponge to me to tub again. I want to cry but I don't. Eventually I stand, take off my bra and dip my toes in. It's still too hot but I sink in thinking, if Mother Liz had run this bath for me, it would've been perfect. As I begin to sweat into the bath I begin to cry and use a washcloth and sponge to water over my shoulders and face. But, eventually, all in one moment, I calm and slip into quiet rhythm— left side in the water first, then right, each time listening beneath the waterline as the bath escapes me.

5/24/15

Chream
my thought reaks of CAcream
My trout reeks of cream
my palate whaphs of cream.

old
wooden
Barred
cringing lemon-bAcked Walls
The kind of Keylime pie.
and A hand, from
a chAir 3 of the
same color
Downtrotted, and bAckward
But poinTing up.

I Try to take a pulse, but
I'm shaking(?)

The Crem is made from
Fat. a Jelly

It's stock them, on my the
Back of My tounge

Eclipse

I abandon, vanish, go missing
out
I leave behind

probability
failing grand scales
why's a worse question

si wise's nonsensical
twilight
in the road, I'm

fraught by thought of not and
oh,
When I told Gaia to suck a dick
I was probably projecting

Caspian Lovett Vail

We, the taste of weeping eyes, we lap
At nose, at ear, this blinding, deaf, terrain—
Oh, have we traveled here too many times?
Pin cushion feet against the samel map

Stay lit, ere stillness follows life in doubt.
These candle eyes who flame at every turn,
Must know, too well, the breaths of all who live,
Make great a wind to blow these votives out.

It has been long since we spared words of love,
I wonder now, Oh must this fire keep?
Bespoke, we bodies, that long missed the other's
tongue.
Dear Caspian Lovett Vail, my little lying dove.



Untitled 8

Lift me by my standing hairs
(a study in grief)
I am migrated

Freshly dead and ready for my shroud!
Oh sick clothburn.
Clothburn!
Buried I shall till at last;
Forest of wimpled movement.

Gauss Crimson

gonna find one down to us stound
despite never going near (not one) near
The all other one they go uh near
The asolear lab is us (my esame isn't Michelangelo)
~~There's ch-cha-champagne in the chandelier What?~~
There's chassis groves in belvederes What?
The all other one they go near
The auctioneer loved this song
yeah, what a cool um cell phone
yeah. wish I would ignore Guinevere honey dear
yeah, I'll stock her young bast full
As nerve medley on your whim!

10

11

Filler
I shouldn't have been shocked
by the rolling blue When you
raised your arms without moving
them having conquered the
obstacle gardens. Pedals and
ankles, you're moving too fast. I
shouldn't have been swayed.
When you reached below
tangles then unfolded a blush
from the sky in your hand, I
shouldn't have flinched
as it's fed it to me.
Talking up possible teas, and
of course you'd never take one
alive. I did my best to fold again
the shape that dropped and
embalm it within a recreation
of the area we scout. A
recreation for my window. Folded
for a backpack or suitcase.
For a bus ride that was never really a trip.

How can I really connect When words intercept
All of my wonder
Imprisoned by impossible phrases. Each story a bunch of
mazes.
Top Ten
Ultimate Full Truths Told

Genesis P. Orridge Would Fucking Gag

feel somehow, still, far. still. will call my mother and
ask her what she thinks. she seems never to have
the answer to things like this but her voice will
soothe.

forever yours,

e.g. kaplan

email attachment: pdf

i, h.h. holmes,
take your clothes
fold them neatly and force you down on your knees
roll your head back and tell you: call me sir
please
i think to hog tie you but cannot find the rope
i

swear i just had it
it does not matter
i'll use your belt to wrap one hand
handcuff the other to the bar in the tub
you whimper
quiet enough that
kathleen and the baby still sleep
i grasp one arm and pull

you come apart like caramel
gooey and bleeding

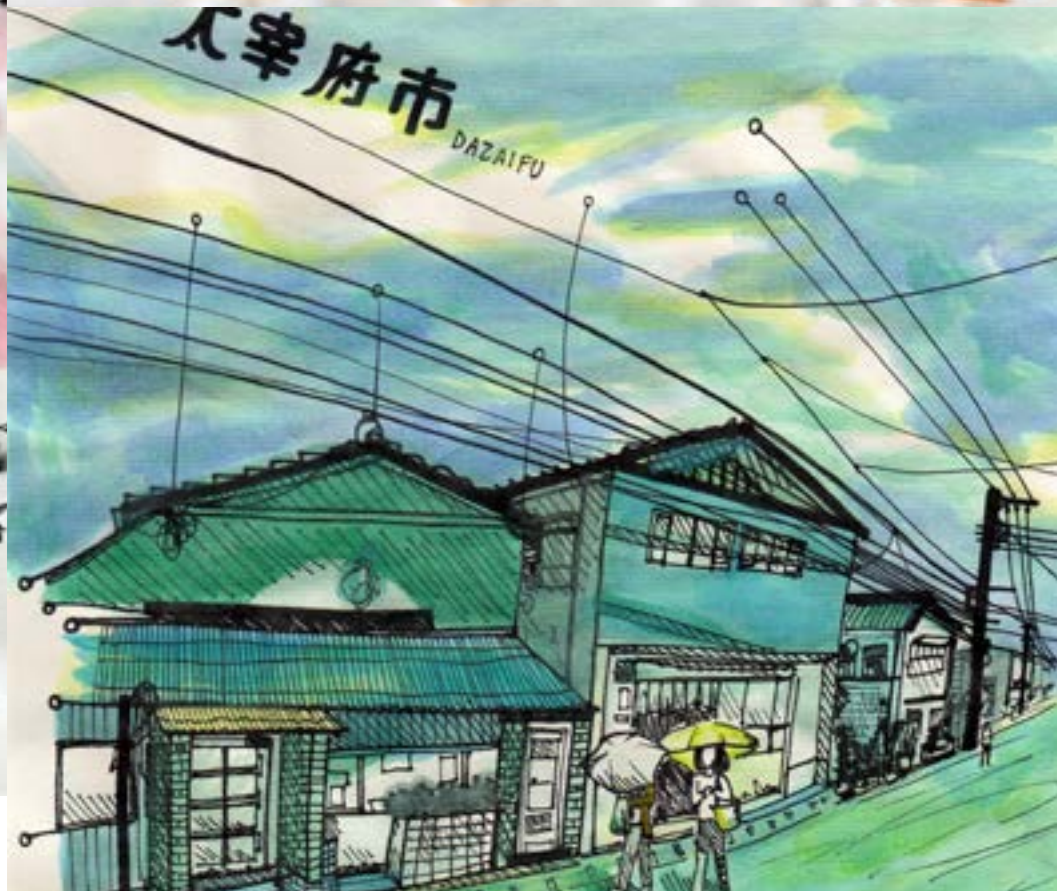
this seems wise. i can only hope this blows over
quickly and quietly for you although i suspect it
will not. i must talk to my wife.

ardently,

will

email attachment: pdf

i, frankenstein,
am on this cliff with you
am eating (sugar cubes
wind-bitten and crying)
wearing your skin like bedclothes
still your creator,
sir



FIRETRUCK

Fuck you and your slurring parody of flirtation
Do you know what I would do if it weren't for
the laws of the land,
If it weren't for the fact that despite my scrupulosity,
I'm genuinely a good person?

I'd track you down, tie you up, spit in your face.

You said you wanted me to suck your dick?
Thought I'd like that?
How about instead, you lose your dick, since you can't seem to
keep it to yourself?

I bet it would cut off so easily, and I bet you'd scream and cry
I'd love it

You can't seem to shut the fuck up either, so next,
I'd cut out your tongue

Actually, I take that back
Maybe I would leave it, I don't want to touch your fucking ugly
mouth, don't want to get my hands too dirty
And I want you to apologize anyways, want you to grovel at my
feet, want you to mean it

So next, I'd harass you with my own words,
remind you how pathetic and full of a delusion of power you
are (and always have been)

I'd take my beautiful knife and write out the word SLUT in all
capitals, across your chest, so you always know that
by definition, you are exactly that which you called me,

So fucking desperate, you harass random
women on a seven pm train,
So fucking stupid and sure of yourself,

But you should never underestimate a woman, much less a
woman writer,

Destroying you with my words the way you, a whining shitbag
high on machismo and maybe definitely something else, wish
you could destroy my pussy

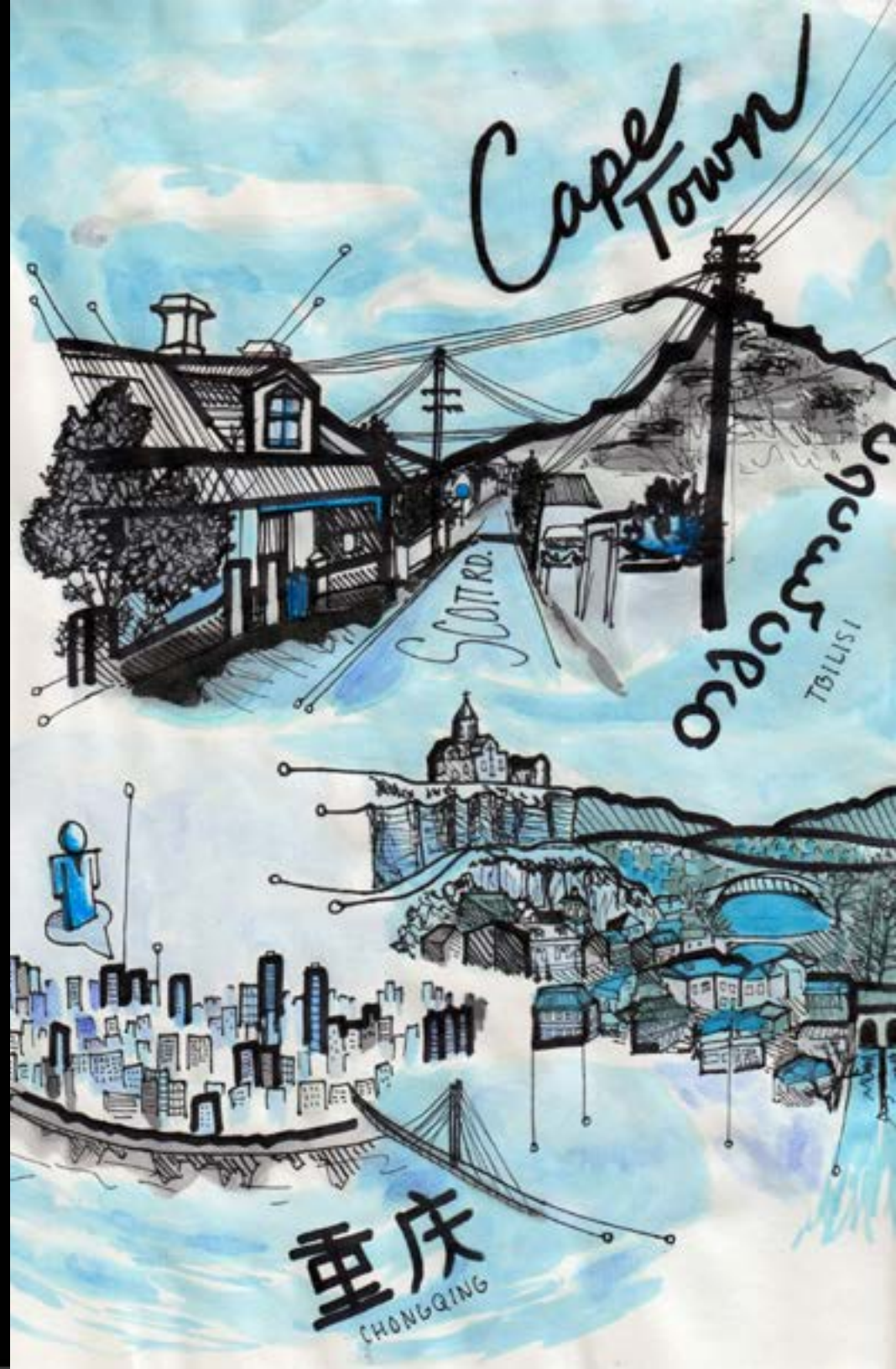
You can't even begin to imagine the fact that I have a pussy,
and yet,
I'm not whatever mild-mannered housecat you think I am,
I'm a lioness, with sharp claws and a starving
ferocious bite that would love to tear every perverted
motherfucker just like you limb from limb,
rip every rapist and would-be-rapist and perpetrator of rape
culture to shreds
and leave your vile carcasses in a ditch
for the vultures to feast on

Would you like me to stop telling the truth?
Would you like me to keep my mouth shut and let you
walk all over me?

Do I hear you begging me to leave it alone, to quit defending
myself, to quit making a big deal about a "compliment"
that makes my skin crawl?

Too bad

Watch me run your red lights like you'd love to run mine



Lollygaggers

She missed him. Of course, she missed him. Who couldn't miss anyone else? She missed, now, everyone whose loss had picked little holes in lives the way Rich's death already picked holes in hers. She kept thinking it wasn't too late. That she could still ask him not to go, to leave later, to stay in because she knew he was mad but the rain was just awful out there, she would've made up an excuse if she'd known, stomachache, headache, sprained ankle, just that she loved him enough to ask him to stay and mean it and he enough to say yes. The rain seemed to get worse every second and the change from a soft thrum to a hiss as it hit the sidewalk sent her crashing back onto the street.

She glanced up to her left, then right, checking each building for number two twenty four. It was a dirty backstreet that she found it on, crumbling cobblestones that no one had replaced in years made puddles dangerous and solid ground itself tenuous at best.

She walked with a slow urgency that rose in her throat with every step and paused at the dirty glass doors but gripped the bag in her hand and flung them open with a steep inhale. Danny went running up the stairs. Briefcase in hand and smelling, indubitably, of the rows of dingy streets she had wandered through before landing on this one. She stopped at the first landing and slumped against the wall.

Trying to catch her breath as quietly as possible she held the briefcase close to her chest. And immediately dropped it. The thing still smelled of blood. The deep brown leather yielded no difference in color, but the smell was distinct. The tangy metal mixed with gasoline, with soot, and just a hint of piss. It must have been in his lap when he crashed, she thought.

Suddenly overwhelmed by the urge to cry she fought

at the pain in her throat but gave up, gasped, clapped her hand to her mouth, and began to sob. Crying so violently her mouth would not close, her spit dripped between her fingers, caught in the fabric of her gloves. Almost as quickly as it began, the crying stopped, and she stooped down to reach for the briefcase.

Not quite hidden in the sharp sunlight coming through the window she could see the small engraving on the metal plaque, "R.D. III". As best she could without losing her balance as she crouched and without having to touch the quietly blood-soaked leather she pushed her fingers across it. Realizing she could not feel the letters through the fabric of her gloves she pulled, frantic, at each finger, at the palms, at the seams, anything to get them off. But her small, clad hands, remained just that and as she slammed them, palms open into the floor, her body fell back against the cold cement wall and the thumping slowed as the ache in her hands grew too great.

In time, she gathered up her legs, the case, and her hat that had fallen off and stood back up. She breathed deeply, her ribs wrestling with the layers of too-small clothes and made her stumbling, muffled, way, up the remaining flights. When she had finally reached the door she no longer felt able even to knock. She traced the small paper label above the buzzer that read "Christine Montle," but stopped soon after she began and let her fingers slide back down the wall, settling again against her skirt.

She even rested her hand on the doorknob but eventually it fell again to her side and she took a soft step back. The quiet scuff of her patent leather shoes seemed to echo through the stairwells as it poured down each flight and bounced up again. The seconds passed without end, unaligned with the timid ticking of her watch. After what had turned out to be only three minutes, she raised a firm hand and rapped, twice, on the worn, dark, wood.

When no immediate answer was made, she raised her hand again but realized the door had swung open a few inches. Of course, Mrs. Danton shook her head, she was at work. How often she forgot the grueling day to day of the girl whose apartment lay at her feet, breathless, unopened, full of something and waiting for her. She shoved at the wood paneling.

The door was barely open when the smell of velvet curtains drawn for days, of dust, of perfume, ricocheted her between moments and memories, settling, if only for a second longer than the rest, on the soft expanse of her skin that felt like a velvet sea rippling back and forth under each finger. Danny's palm pressed to the girl's stomach soft enough to feel the hairs there push back against her hand as the goosebumps spread across her body, feel them catch on the paper cuts and healing blisters that Rich had never ceased to remind her, were not ladylike. She was so soft to touch, Mrs. Danton thought, that she falls through the fingers like sweet water, and she drains away even now.

But as her lungs filled and she could draw in no more breath she looked to see the passing years that sat there, cowering in the corner, standing with an arm on the mantle, stoking the wood in the fireplace, barring her entrance at the door, bodies that piled up and spilled back out, all with a familiar face, with viscous eyes that moved slowly and stared long. The broken bones that had pushed their way out of the arms, the legs, the bruising all over the delicate cheekbones, the softest spots, even the lips, that remained so strangely unharmed, that she had been told by police were from the protective stance he took, arms thrown up in front of his face. She had asked them why, then, was everything else so hurt it seemed only his jaw, freshly shaved, had survived.

They said they weren't sure, it was probably a last ditch effort, he had taken his hands off the steering wheel

when he knew but he only knew for a second and his arms had not reached high enough in time. The briefcase that had fallen down by the pedals, mangled in with his bloody shoes, with the puddle of blood and piss that dripped from seat to floor. Rich's body over and over again pushing her out and sure enough she turned around and ran. She grabbed the brass knob, still warm from how long her hands had lingered there before she had worked up the courage to walk in and slammed the door.

The BANG sent her flying down the stairs, toes tapping the steps as she ran, heels never touching. But two flights down her foot caught on her skirt and she went sailing down to the landing, crumpled and breathing hard, she touched her knee and sighed as her fingers came back bloody. She didn't hear the steps over the sound of the blood rushing in her ears, but the voice was unmistakable, "Danny?" She inhaled quickly, tremblingly, and spit out a quick but wavering, "no." She stood up and pulled her skirt down, adjusted her ill-fitting coat and pulled her hat down further over her mussed hair. She could barely look up but for a moment Mrs. Danton looked into her eyes and thought, if these capture any more of the sun someday the world will all go dark. And for a moment it seemed it had, broken only by another,

"Danny?"

"No. Like I said, you must have me confused with someone else."

The girl stopped at her door and quietly opened it. Sent a quick glance to the curtains, to the bathroom, to the couch and fireplace and kitchen, all untouched, still stopped dead in her tracks by the smell of the woman who had been there only minutes before her. It was not until she had been standing there so long that her feet began to hurt again from her shoes that she noticed two letters, lying half obscured under her toes, half bright and white against the deep red

carpet. She took a ginger step back and crouched down to reach for them. The first was heavy and smelled sweet, she recognized the handwriting instantly. As she turned it over she realized there was no seal on it and she flipped it open and slipped her hand into it. Out spilled thick, layered, sheets of paper. With hands that could barely stand to move she unfolded it and began to read,

I have dreamt of you many times in the weeks that have passed. I throw myself at the bed like a fool in the evenings and beg sweet sleep, again, again, that I might see you. The music slips in the window with the breeze but often Rich shuts it before I have fallen asleep and it stunts, I fear, the visions I so deeply hope to have.

So often I wish you were here with me but not always because sometimes I must turn my occupation of mind to lesser beauties. I know if you were here, I would stare at nothing else. So as quickly as my mind wanders to you at every turn, simply put, I am only grateful you aren't forever at my side. For you are the most exquisite thing and I must learn, in your absences, for they may be long, to find beauty in my more immediate life too or I should spend every day pining after you. And even forget that I had existed anywhere at all. For I love you, endlessly. And as often as Rich has tried to keep us apart I think, my love, that he both did and did not succeed. As it is still hard to breathe, you in my heart and atop my lungs, but he still stopping up my memory of the steps I took away from you.

I worry now that this may truly be our end. I could not fathom a loss like this two months ago, but I believe I have been conditioned to withstand a pain such as this now. All the moments I waited for you, hung about in silly places and took too long walking home that I might glimpse you, and it now seems silly. I've become a silly lollygagger like the rest of the world in love. But I might add that I hope to never sleep peacefully again if it means seeing you once

more for you are become my sleep. I would wait in bed for sleep to hold me every second of my life if it meant that even in these small hallucinations, I might hold you too. I'm sorry for the fanfare, it's silly of me to speak this way after so long. But at any rate I've written you something small and daft, please don't laugh too much.

*Our shadows lie where all the cars dash by like 8 p.m.
Has bled all over a white picket fence.
All those people— drunk in love and spared.
Watch like this peat-block city will burn fast and bright,
You must look around the room,
Smile back,
Feel your eyes roll to and fro,
Like marbles,
In your wooden head.
But at dawn, turn away in your bed and sleep.
And I, with tears that boil in my beast neck,
Am tranquil in your arms,
Am a Greek statue off the pedestal,
Outside your realm of tenuous stone,
Am yours, endlessly.*

*Yours always,
Danny / 12.12.1926*

The girl glanced up at the calendar that said December 24, 1929 and sighed. She took a few more steps into her apartment and sat in a big velvet armchair, worn threadbare on the arms, and let the first letter fall into her lap. As gently as she had opened the first, she now opened the second letter and gazed into the dark, angry letters, this is a notice of eviction, you have until 1/1/30 to be moved out of the building, forfeiting ownership of any property left behind.

MISERY KID :: a series by Trina Mercado

1. *Idle Opportunity*

Miz feels a shiver come over her. She's sure it's more from the bitter aching loneliness that accompanies her every waking breath than the weather. One thing about the Emptiness is that it's always some infernally frustrating temperature right in between too hot and too cold, but her modest little house is well-insulated enough for those slightest shifts to never bother her.

The shiver turns into a shudder, but she shakes her head, snaps herself out of it.

But then— she hears (and feels) a sudden, heavy thump atop her roof, sees a flash of light? Outside her window? Streaking by before she has time to process it, or identify exactly what it is.

Miz leaps up off the couch on instinct, knowing her front door is locked, but still squinting at the latch as best she can, trying to check for certain without moving. It's probably a false alarm, but quite literally nothing ever happens here, so her brain jumps to the baseball bat stashed behind her bed in case of emergencies, a makeshift weapon she's never once had any reason to consider using, but one she decides to go and pick up now, to keep in her hands, just in case.

*She doesn't know if she should go hide in her room, turn the lights and tv off and pretend nobody's home, barricading her door and sneaking out the window...
or if she should leave the lights on and turn the tv up higher, make it seem like she's not alone (she's always alone)...
or if she should do absolutely nothing, because there's a chance the thump was just an owl or raccoon up there, losing its footing, and the bright light outside was a hallucination, or an absurdly large firefly.*

*Only, the thump was too heavy, the light was too big, too blurry, and now something's in the air, making Miz' shirt stick to her body with static.
Her windows rattle, the house feels unsettled, the floorboards creaking and groaning with a phantom weight. Her pet rat,*

Carmichael, squeaks shrilly, and Miz can hear him running in circles in his cage, apparently reading the distress in the room.

She wonders if she should call the police on... whatever this is, but the police aren't at all reliable so far out in the boonies.

*She could go outside, she figures, bat in hand and back against the wall, ready to run into a neighbor's place for help. She could write this off as some unexplained phenomena
[a freak power outage, a visitation of a ghost]
and go to sleep, hoping it disappears when she wakes up.*

Miz waits for a good while, silent, her hair standing on end all across her body, opting to turn down the tv, to listen even more closely. Her tv's acting up anyways, static seeping into the once perfectly-stable local channel, ruining the colors and blurring the lines together with ugly waves and patches of light underneath them.

She grimaces at the sight, fingers wrapping tighter around the bat in her hands.

*When there's another flash of light, this time right before her eyes and near-blinding,
Miz is sure she can't write any of this off.*

The light dims and fades completely. There's an entire other person in Miz's living room: a woman wearing velvet pants and a suit jacket, with long legs and a sort of teardrop-shaped body that starts with a small head and narrow shoulders, but broadens out a great deal around her waist. She brushes herself off, looking almost as confused as Miz imagines she must look.

"Oh," she says, eyeing Miz up and down. "You're not what I expected at all."

This strange woman towers over Miz, she must be at least six and a half feet tall. Miz still clutches the bat, heart jackhammering in her chest.

"And from what I can see, you weren't expecting me either," the

woman continues on, then puts up her hands in a gesture meant to convey her benevolence. "I'm just doing my job. You ordered an Adventure, didn't you?"

It's been— so long?— since anyone's asked Miz a serious question, or fully set foot in her house at all. The most human contact she's had in the past week has been the five nights in a row she's ordered takeout and thanked the masked delivery boys who hand off her meal at the door, each time half wishing they'd attempt a conversation, and half immensely relieved when they'd say nothing, letting her close the door in silence.

So, what comes out of her mouth is less than eloquent. "What'd you mean? What did you say?" Miz wants to take the bat to her own head. She'd heard what the woman had said, she was just seemingly unable to express that in words. She tries again. "ASHf. I mean. No. I didn't. That must have been a mistake. Sorry." Please leave now.

The woman shakes her head briskly. "I'm afraid we don't give refunds. This isn't particularly negotiable."

Miz's grip on the bat slackens at last, and she holds it loosely at her side, now almost entirely positive she won't have to use it. "Wait, what?"

"I work for Ambergris Adventure Industries. An online-ordered Adventure service," she explains this in a slightly cloying voice, as if Miz is a very young child, or a very stupid adult. She honestly feels like she would qualify as the latter. "We send brave souls out on quests of their choosing, for a noble cause of their choice, for self-improvement, or perhaps, simply for their entertainment."

Miz purses her lips, feels herself making A Face. "But I swear, I didn't order anything like that."

"Either you did and don't remember, or somebody chose you. Though you aren't exactly Chosen One material." The woman hesitated before saying, "I'm sure you're a lovely and bright young woman. I didn't mean for that to sound as..."

"No hard feelings," Miz says, sighing, putting the bat down for good, letting her body fall back onto the couch as if guided by a magnet. "I don't hold any delusions of grandeur. I'm delusion-proof." She laughs, but she doesn't mean it. "There has to be some loophole to this sort of thing, though. Isn't it kinda... unethical? To force someone to do something like this? I don't want to go on any quests. Can I sue you? I mean, not you. Your company. Ambergris Whatever."

The woman peers down at her, bemused. "If you're injured while on your Adventure, certainly. Though we take measures to ensure that doesn't happen. You'll be able to request immediate help, should you need it, with the press of a button." She reaches into her jacket pocket to carefully pull out said button, and holds it out to Miz with a flourish.

Miz grudgingly takes it from her, inspects it more closely. "But I don't want to go on some stupid quest. I shouldn't have to, if this was a mistake."

"Policy is policy— Miz, was it? Is that your preferred name?"

"Mm, absolutely—"

"Alright, Miz. I know it may seem a burden, but there really isn't any taking back an Adventure that's already been requested and paid for."

"Paid for? By who?"

"If not by you, then by a benefactor who chose you. You mean enough to someone for them to send you to..." The woman stops to make a grand, sweeping gesture with her hand. "The furthest reaches of the Mindfield. Anywhere you choose, and it would seem you don't even have to pay for it? Is that not quite a bargain?"

Miz won't look directly at her, but she can tell the woman is starting to grow desperate for her compliance, desperate to keep things on track for Miz to use her company's services. She slumps, head rolling forward. She rolls her head in a circle all the

way around her neck, startling the woman with the crack her joints make from the motion. Really though, she weighs her options.

She doesn't have any friends, doesn't see any family. She's felt for years that her life is stuck in a slog of a stasis. She spends most of her days eating and sleeping, entertaining and taking care of Carmichael, rereading her collection of books that's seen no new additions in years, lazing around, trying to write words of her own and failing abysmally.

She also works, typing in the numbers she's provided, recording and adding and calculating data in endless spreadsheets for Mystery Corp. Miz has no idea what the data is for, but knowing isn't her job. She doesn't enjoy her work necessarily, but its complete and total steadiness pays her meager rent, so she could never imagine giving it up.

"I have a job," she explains slowly, not wanting it to be apparent that she's beginning to change her mind, starting to see this accident as... maybe less of a horrible inconvenience. "I work from home, but I can't just— how long would this whole thing take?"

The woman pauses, thinks this over. "Don't you have any vacation time saved up?"

Miz has never taken a vacation, ever, so yes. She does.

With a start, she remembers Carmichael, and gets up, gingerly scooting around the woman so she can cross the room and take him out of his cage. She scoops him up in her hands, strokes his head with a gentle finger, muttering soothing words, then she accidentally makes eye contact with the woman. "Uh. I have a pet, too," Miz says, pointing out the very obvious. "Can't leave him with my neighbors, I don't think they'd know how to take care of him."

"Then by all means, bring him with you," the woman replies. "Many clients bring animal companions with them. They find the fresh air and change of scenery do wonders for their pets."

Miz heaves out a sigh, puts Carmichael up on her shoulder, where he so often loves to perch. "Where would I go, anyway?"

What would I do? You said it can be for..." She counts on her fingers as she lists them, "... self-improvement, entertainment, or... uh... a noble cause. What would you have me do?"

The woman sits down on Miz's couch, back straight as a brand new ruler, the slight wrinkles in her face made more evident as she truly considers Miz's question. "If you don't even have one in mind, then I'll have to recommend the full package— a Great Adventure provides all three, and... not to make any personal judgements—"

"I think we're past that by now," Miz says, noticing for the first time how messy the floor of her house has gotten, how long it had been since she'd last talked to another person for anywhere close to this amount of time. "Judge away."

"It seems you would benefit the most from all three. Perhaps more than any client I've ever helped. So, I believe—" she opens up her jacket, and selects a pamphlet from the array of four or five she has tucked in there. "I believe I have just the Adventure for you."

The pamphlet contains a map of the Mindfield, all its familiar regions color-coded for convenience. Miz knows the layout well, but it's unfathomably strange to imagine herself out there, out anywhere but in the Emptiness.

There are stars above certain points in each region, and the woman points to one, amid the lakes of Elaqua. "This will be what we call a round trip. All you need to do is perform one single task in each region, right where the stars mark. You'll find help along the way, either help we provide, or in people you meet on your own. Very few can resist an Adventure, you understand."

"What kinda tasks?"

"Oh, simple things, like finding lost items. The specifics of this one change just about every week. Nothing you can't handle, I'm certain."

"Hm."

So this is it, then. Miz is out of excuses. A change in her life, the kind she's always secretly pined for, is being served to her on a silver platter. She might consider herself to be something of a dumbass, but she's not idiotic enough to turn this down. She's going to say yes. But not quite yet.

She stalls first– “Hey. What the hell did you do to my tv?” The screen is still glitching out, the audio now indecipherable.

The woman looks embarrassed. “Teleportation has erm... markedly negative effects on technology. And solid matter. My apologies.” She springs up to fiddle with some wires inside the thing, and in a matter of seconds, the same local channel she'd been watching before is back up and running, as if nothing had ever happened. (But something is happening, for the first time in forever.)

One of her favorite commercials is on. High price tags flash on the screen as a male voiceover reads them: “\$7000, \$8000, \$9000. This is how expensive funeral and mortuary services have gotten.”

The man speaking appears on the screen now, dressed to the nines, hair slicked back all greasy. “The solution is very simple– don't die. Consult your local vampire coven about getting turned to-day to save thousands.”

It's delivered with a completely straight face, and Miz knows it's a real campaign the vampires have right now, but it always makes her wonder if they secretly do have something of a dry sense of humor. She's thought about taking them up on their offer, but upon further research, you have to pay for the consultation, and pay to be turned, and really, it's bad enough being shadow-infused. She doesn't want to suddenly crave blood instead of food on top of that.

“Miz. If you really don't want to partake in your Adventure, I–” the woman hesitates, biting her lip. “I'm sure there's some strings I can pull with the higher-ups to–”

“I changed my mind,” Miz hears herself say. “I do. I do... want to go on the Adventure. I'll take Carmicheal with me and yeah, it'll be

something to do.”

A beam breaks out across the woman's face. “Wonderful! Excellent, Miz! I am so proud of you.” She reaches down and shakes Miz's hand enthusiastically. She hands Miz the pamphlet/ map, gives her back the help button, and starts piling further necessities into her arms– a compass, a fancy durable thermos, a tube of sunscreen, an ancient amulet.

“Whoa whoa wait,” Miz says, fumbling to keep hold of all the supplies she's been showered with. “I don't have to go right now, do I? It's late. And I'm tired.”

“Oh, that's perfectly fine. Adventures traditionally start at dawn, anyways. You'll need a good night's sleep before you head off toward Jungle Plaza tomorrow. That's where I'd recommend you start your journey, chronologically. It makes the most sense, geographically. Oh, Miz, you're going to have the grandest time.”

Miz rolls her eyes, fighting back a yawn. “And are you planning to spend your night here, or...?”

The woman laughed. “I'll be back in the morning to see you off.” She hands Miz a business card with a phone number, and Miz learns that the woman's name is Wisteria Jacobs.

Wisteria exits Miz's house, and walks a good thirty feet down the road before becoming that bright beam of light, showing more courtesy with her teleporting this time around. Miz watches her go, holding Carmichael in her hands, wondering if she's made the right decision. But somewhere amid all the self-doubt and hesitation and exhaustion at the thought of all she'll have to walk and do and see starting tomorrow,

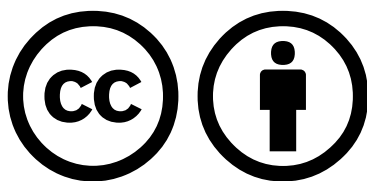
Somewhere among all of that, there's a little bit of warmth, a little bit of light nestling deep within her shadows.







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