

A Wildness of the Heart

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Madison Scott-Clary

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Qoheleth + Gallery Exhibition

ally

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A Wildness of the Heart

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Gigs

Well, shit.

Winter trudged heavily through the piles of dead leaves lining the gutter, the lynx's broad paws crunching through them. There was a sidewalk, but this wasn't a mood for sidewalks. This wasn't a mood for keeping clean, staying out of the way. This was a proper sulk.

She pulled her phone out for the umpteenth time and thumbed at the screen, tapping out yet another message to Katrin that she wouldn't send. Deleted message. Put phone away.

A low growl started in her chest, rose, crescendoed, and she let out a brief yell. No words, just a vent of frustration. Birds startled from the tree beside her.

It didn't help.

"Making a damn fool of yourself," she grumbled. "Twice over."

She hesitated on the corner of Linden and 18th, stopping mid-stride and staring down the street. She should turn. She should turn left and walk the next two blocks. She should head up the stairs. She should open the door, set her phone down, change out of her clothes — clothes she'd now have to return to the market — clean up, start

cooking.

She should tell Katrin what happened. She should look for a new job.

“Shit,” she repeated, this time aloud, and kept walking straight. Five blocks to the plaza. She’d grab a coffee, sit on one of the benches. Watch the early afternoon crowds putter along the mall.

Or maybe she shouldn’t grab a coffee she could no longer afford. Maybe she should be saving her money.

She kept walking.

She got her coffee.

She sat, and she watched.

Katrin and Winter stood still, heads bowed, both searching through their thoughts.

Winter couldn’t guess at her wife’s thoughts. The fox was always so inscrutable. Winter would sometimes watch her face while the vixen worked, the blank mask of pure white, punctuated with only the pitch-black nose, those darkest-brown eyes, and try to decide if the inscrutable part was the all-white fur or some sort of Scandinavian magic.

Today, she couldn’t tell. Katrin’s matte-white fur reflected light so well that there were no shadows left to reflect her emotions. And yet, there was still something foreign to those features. The almond-shaped eyes, the blunt muzzle, the ears almost hidden in thick fur.

Perhaps another Swede would be able to read that face, to say what Katrin was feeling, but not Winter. Not right now.

“And they didn’t give any recourse?” The fox looked up to Winter. “Just *come pick up your last paycheck and drop off your shirts?*”

The lynx nodded. “Just that. Mr. Stevenson just said he couldn’t keep both managers on board, and, well, Kayla’s his daughter.”

Katrin nodded and slid her paw across the counter top to twine her fingers with the lynx’s. “I understand. I’m sorry, love.”

“It’s okay.” Winter sighed and gave those fingers a squeeze in her own. Even with the flour still clinging clinging to her wife’s fur, even with the coarseness of her pads, worn from so much kneading of dough, they seemed so delicate in her thick-furred mitts. “I’ll start looking tomorrow.”

“Okay. Let me know if you need any help, I’ll do what I can.”

The lynx nodded.

“It’ll be okay, love. I promise.” Her smile was tired.

Gone were the days of sitting up at the kitchen table, circling help-wanted ads in the newspaper. Hell, gone were the days of the newspaper.

Instead, Winter grew addicted to job posting boards, both local to her town and some that ran on a wider scale. Once she got her résumé all fixed up, she began flooding local stores with it, starting with all of the local grocers — as Stevenson’s had been — and then broadening her search to related retail outlets.

And then unrelated.

Then non-retail positions.

She would work in shifts, spending an hour prowling through postings, then spending five minutes making sure her files were in order, then another two hours applying. The act of uploading a résumé to a site that promised to read all it could from it, then re-

quired her to fill in all that information again in form fields became rote, numbing.

There were a few calls back, but more often than not, silence. It was starting to feel futile. It was starting to feel like hollering into the void. She would click submit on yet another application, and it would just...go away. It would go nowhere.

Even an outright rejection would feel better.

She had set herself a week to exhaust all of the usual application channels. On the third or fourth day, she started driving around to stores and dropping off paper copies of her applications as well.

It was on one of those outings towards the end of her time-boxed week that she first noticed the ride share sticker in someone's window.

"Winter? For Malina?"

"Yep, that's me," the lynx replied cheerfully.

"Great!" The badger hauled a few sacks of groceries into the back seat and slid in after them. "Thanks so much for the ride. Car's in the shop and all."

"Oh, no worries." Winter waited for Malina to get herself buckled in before tapping at the GetThere app on her phone to set the satnav to direct her to the badger's destination. "Hopefully nothing expensive?"

Malina laughed. "Shouldn't be. One of those warranty things. A part recall or something. I'm out a car for a day or two, but at least I don't have to pay for it."

"No loaner, then? Do they even still do that?"

“I’m not sure, honestly. They might. But either way, I’m within walking distance from work, so I figured it wouldn’t be that big of a deal.” With a wry smile, she added, “I just wasn’t counting on having to do a grocery run for work. Starts getting cold out, and we start mowing through milk.”

Winter slid the car back into traffic — mercifully light today — and started down the road back toward 13th. “Fair enough. Where do you work, that you go through milk so fast?”

“A coffee shop. The Book and the Bean, on the plaza. There’s a few shops within walking distance that sell dairy, but none of them sell the more exotic milks, so I have to head further out. Easy enough to walk there, but I’m not hauling all of this back.”

“Oh, yeah! I know the one. My wife’s restaurant, Middagsbord, is just down the block.” She grinned. “I doubt those bags are light, though, yeah.”

Malina laughed and shook her head. “Not at all.”

There were a few moments of silence as Winter negotiated a left turn and the badger in the back seat thumbed through her phone.

“How about you?” came a distracted voice from the back. “Is this your full-time thing? Driving?”

Winter shook her head. “Not exactly. I just started this not too long ago. This and random gigs on Simpletask.”

“What’s that?”

“Just random things people want done but don’t want to do themselves. I’ve done filing, transcription, cataloging...boring stuff, really.”

Malina nodded. “Sounds like driving’s the more interesting of the two.”

“Wasn’t really my first choice, but it’s turning out to be way more fun than I thought it would be.”

“Oh yeah? What about it do you like? Setting your own hours?”

“I try to work pretty standard hours, though for me that means working morning rush hour driving, doing some tasks, driving during lunch, more tasks, and then evening rush hour.” Winter thought for a moment, then continued, “No, I think the thing I like about it is that it gets me a lot of the best things I liked about retail without the standing all day or dragging boxes around.”

In the rear-view mirror, Malina grinned. “Yeah, that makes sense. Just the meeting people sort of thing?”

“Mmhm. Meeting people, being helpful. People are generally kinder here than they are in stores, too. Most folks are grateful for the rides, and those that aren’t having a good day are usually pretty quiet. I don’t get many people hollering at me.”

Malina laughed. “Oh, I know that one. I used to work in finance, but got sick of it. I figured moving to where I saw people instead of numbers would be easier on the soul. I was mostly right.”

“Mostly?”

“Yeah. A lot of people are grateful for coffee, but like you said, those who aren’t tend to holler.”

It was Winter’s turn to laugh. “Yep, that’s the type. I guess that’s what I mean, though. I got good at the sort of happy retail mask that one puts on around them, but I haven’t needed it here. Not as much, at least.”

As expected, the drive was a short one. Once they made it to the loading zone at the end of the 13th Street Plaza, Winter helped Malina unload the bags of milk and other sundries from the back of her car.

“Thanks again, Winter,” the badger said, loading herself up once again. “Stop in any time.”

The lynx nodded and waved before hopping back in her car and turning off the hazard lights.

While the biggest benefit to this new form of employment was the free-form nature of it, that very benefit worked against it. It was up to Winter to schedule her day around the best times for driving, and the best times for working on projects on Simpletask.

However, when Sawtoothians needed rides was unsteady. Sure, there were times when rides were more likely: rush hour, some time over lunch, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. She started keeping track of sporting events, concerts, and conferences.

Some days, Winter would be flooded with rides, and the lynx would dart all over town, picking up passengers of all stripes and driving them to some concert venue or the UI-Sawtooth campus stadium.

And some days, she would be stuck on her laptop at The Book and the Bean — Malina having convinced her to become a regular — waiting for either a ride to crop up or a task she was qualified for. Warm days were usually slow, as folks would be more willing to walk or bike. Some days, she’d make seventy percent of the income for the week, and some days, she wouldn’t make a thing.

And then there were the customers.

Her experience of folks being grateful for rides held true, as did her experience of folks having a bad day generally simply being quiet. Those types were both easy enough to deal with, if not outright enjoyable. Over time, though, she began to see a wider variety.

Around Thanksgiving, she started making trips too and from the airport and bus station, and families getting off longer trips were rarely happy. She got snapped at more than once by upset fathers trying to wrangle children or mothers coping with family through stony silence. On one occasion, played therapist along with a coyote to a frightened weasel having a panic attack, in town to visit her family and have some complicated-sounding interaction with her ex-husband.

The worst of all were the drunk folks. When she first started driving folks home from bars, it felt good. She was doing a sort of service by keeping tipsy bar-hoppers or plastered sports fans off the road. The first time someone vomited in the back seat, however, her opinion of the task began to sour. It may be nice to keep drunks from driving, but cleaning vomit out of the foot-wells — thankfully, the dog had managed to miss the seat — was hardly a pleasant task.

Football games became a source of dread. She wasn't even safe before they began, as she'd haul thoroughly pregamed fans from parties to stadium, groups of students hollering painfully loud, nigh unintelligible, whether from drink or simple in-joke camaraderie.

The tasks from Simpletask, while a break from the enforced social interaction that was an integral part of driving, were riddled with their own problems. People generally expected that someone driving for GetThere knew what they were doing enough to leave them alone.

Not so with someone performing data entry from scanned documents or making brochures for events. She discovered a particular brand of cruelty that seemed unique to the role of small business owners, which they held in reserve for menial labor.

The lynx lost track of how many times she was called an idiot.

She lost track of the number of times she was lured in by a sizeable tip, only to have it withdrawn after she had completed the project during the three-day grace period. She lost track of how often she was brought on to be the small one, to make someone feel bigger.

Still, she had to pay the bills, didn't she?

Winter don't know how long she sat in the car, forehead resting against the steering wheel, before there was a soft knock at the driver's side window.

"Love?" Katrin's voice was muffled through the glass.

Winter looked dully out the window at the vixen, unseeing. Some part of her knew that she should get out of the car and head inside, should at the very least lift her head from the steering wheel, and yet she lacked the executive function required to even do that.

"Winter, can you come inside?"

The lynx took a deep breath. Perhaps it was the lack of something that was keeping her trapped here rather than some unwanted presence. The lack of oxygen. The lack of air. The lack of motivation.

When the breath did not bring any further energy, she let it out in a rush and, through force of will, sat up straighter and unlocked the door. She might have sat there longer, but Katrin didn't give her the chance; the door she was leaning against angled smoothly away from her.

No helping it now.

Winter unbuckled her seatbelt and accepted her wife's paw to help lever herself out of the driver's seat. Together, they shut and locked the car and made their way inside.

Only once she was settled at the kitchen table with a small plate of dill-heavy dumplings — some new recipe Katrin was testing out — was she able to loosen up.

“I’m sorry, Katrin. I just...long day.”

The fox nodded, frowning. Never able to completely cease working, she seemed to be dissecting one of the dumplings she had made and was poking at the insides of it with the tip of a knife. “You’ve been having rather a lot of those lately, sötnos.”

Winter frowned. “I suppose. I know it’s not exactly ideal.”

“It’s okay, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad to see that you’re out and about doing work. I just worry.”

“Yeah...”

Katrin, apparently satisfied with the internal texture of the dumpling, popped half of it in her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. When she had finished enough to do so, she continued. “Tell me about your long day, love. I want to hear, because it sounds like it was more than simply the length.”

“I suppose.” Winter stalled for time by eating a few of the dumplings. They were quite good, though perhaps saltier than she would have liked. “Just had a really gross ride partway through and never quite recovered.”

“‘Gross’ how?”

“He was just really adamant about sitting up in the front seat with me.”

Some inner part of her smiled, despite the competing emotions. She knew she had Katrin’s full attention when the fox finally put down her silverware. “I...see. Are you okay?” she asked.

Winter nodded. “He didn’t do anything super gross physically, but it was just everything else he did.”

Katrin blinked slowly, ears tilted back. Winter was never quite sure what emotion went along with such an expression, but this time, she was certain it was one of concern or worry. Perhaps anger.

"I'm alright, though, I promise. He just got really pushy about sitting up front and kept saying all these vaguely...uh, sexy things, I guess, and kept staring at me."

"Did you report him?"

"Yeah, I mentioned it on his review."

The vixen nodded.

"It just made the rest of my shift feel extra long, is all. Every time I'd go to accept a ride, I'd get nervous. I drove to the other side of town just to be sure he wouldn't request another from me."

"And did he rate you well?"

Winter winced. "No. He complained that I was unfriendly, and I got a note from the system about unacceptable behavior, like it was somehow my fault."

Katrin reached out a hand to tug one of Winter's over for a squeeze. "I'm sorry, love."

Winter returned that squeeze of the fingers distractedly. She couldn't drop the topic, though. Not now. Not after the dam had burst. "It's just so humiliating. I can't keep myself safe or I risk their ire. I can't look for jobs that pay well because I know they'll just recall the tip after and I'll be out a bunch of cash."

"It's been a month," Katrin said once the flare of anger died out. "Do you think you might look for something more traditional job again?"

"If anyone's even fucking hiring," the lynx growled.

"It's still worth looking, perhaps."

Winter bit her tongue to stay silent. It must have been evident to the fox, whose frown deepened.

“Winter, you know that I love you and won’t push too hard, but this is not healthy. You have been having ‘long day’ after ‘long day’ for the last few weeks. I’m glad you can get paid for stuff like this, but I don’t know if it’s worth it long term, at this rate.”

“You’re right,” she said after a long, deliberate pause. “No, you’re right. I’ll finish these and then start searching again.”

As expected, reference to the food immediately drew the fox’s attention away from the problem at hand. “Do you like them?”

“A bit salty. Maybe more lemon?”

Katrin smiled ruefully. “The salt is high, yes. I think you’re just a sourpuss, though.”

Winter swatted at her wife and laughed. It had been a calculated gesture, getting her to talk food, but one that she knew would distract them both. “Not as salty as you, though.”

“Surprised to see you in today, Winter, and for so long.”

The lynx looked up from her laptop, gratefully accepting hot chocolate number three from Malina. “I suppose I’ve been here for a while, yeah.”

“About two hours.” The badger hastened to add, “No complaints. The busier we look, the busier we get!”

The hot chocolate was good. Malina seemed to have picked up on Winter’s penchant for whipped cream and piled this mug high. Something about the way the cocoa would break through the whipped cream was...not exactly soothing, and yet nonetheless she felt more at peace after.

“As long as I’m not a problem,” she said.

“Not at all. Just surprised you’re not driving today. Figured it’d be lunch hour rush.”

Winter shrugged. “Not really feeling it lately. Had a string of creeps, so I’m mostly doing Simpletasks and looking for something more stable.”

Frowning, Malina looked around The Book and The Bean and, seeing no one in need of drinks, pulled out the other chair at the lynx’s table to sit. “Hopefully nothing too dramatic happened.”

“No, thank goodness. Just a string of bad luck with lewd ass-holes.” She typed at her laptop briefly, pulled up a site, and turned it toward the badger. “Apparently there’s a site for reviewing drivers on a sort of hot-or-not basis, and I guess I made the list.”

Malina’s frown deepened. “I’d say congratulations if that weren’t completely disgusting.”

Winter laughed and shook her head. “Yeah, no congrats needed.”

“There anything that GetThere can do about it?”

“I don’t think so. They don’t seem to care about the drivers all that much, truth be told. Not like I’m the first to bring it up or anything.” Winter gave her hot chocolate a slow swirl, watching the skin that was starting to form on the surface ripple. “They just sent me a canned response of, like, how to stay safe as a driver.”

Malina crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat. “That’s frustrating. Is Simpletask treating you any better, at least?”

Something about the lynx’s expression caused her to look away. They sat in silence.

“Either way.” Winter tried to keep the dejection out of her voice, tried to sound positive. Tried to smile. “If you have any tips on job

openings, I'm all ears."

"Well, do you know anything about coffee?"

"I...well, no. Are you hiring?"

"We've got some shifts that could use some coverage." The badger smiled, shrugged. "It's a coffee shop job. Doesn't pay much and I don't have a full-time work week's worth of shifts open, but if you're willing to learn—"

"Of course!" Winter caught herself short and laughed. "Sorry. Yeah, I'd be up to learn."

Malina's smile widened. "Great. Follow me."

Wrong-footed, the lynx tilted her head. "What, now?"

"Sure. It's fairly slow. I can at least show you around behind the bar."

She looked between the badger and her laptop, then shrugged and closed the lid, slipping it back into her bag. "Well, fuck it. Why not?"

The Book and The Bean was not enough to carry Winter, but it was enough to allow her to be more selective in her jobs. She still drove occasionally when not at the coffee shop, but the added income let her focus more on Simpletask.

What it offered beyond that was something less tangible. It leant a sense of stability that the gigs could not. She could always rely on at least a little bit of money to help supplement Katrin's income from Middagsbord. She could trust that a few shifts would help cover her share of rent, and that anything else would be covered by one-off tasks.

More than that, it eased tensions between her and Katrin.

She hadn't realized how frustrated the lack of security made her wife until she had regained it. The vixen once again became easy to talk to. She laughed more readily. She gushed about new recipes and bitched about customers. All those little things that are part of daily interactions that had been tamped down in the face of trying to make ends meet were suddenly back and in full force. That Winter was now working in food service as well certainly helped her case. They could commiserate in ways that neither had expected.

And they were happy, in their own way. A new kind of happy. A different kind. And really, what more could they ask for?

Sorting Laundry

“You always have to sort your laundry,” her mother always said. “Separate the lights from the darks, at the very least. Try to get all the bright colors in one load, at least for the first few washes, than you can mix them with the dark.”

Yes, ma.

“Remember how daddy got his pink shirt?”

Yes, ma.

“Just remember to sort, and you’ll be fine. And don’t use fabric softener on your towels, they’ll stay softer that way.”

Yes ma, yes ma.

She grinned, stuffing towels, light and dark together, into the machine. A bra clung to one of the towels by the hooks. She chuckled. She slid the bra up, hoping to get it off the towel without problem. She laughed. A thread tugged loose from the towel, insisting on clinging to the bra strap. She laughed harder. Laughed and laughed.

Laughter turned to sobs. Shaking sobs. Great, gasping sobs that left her clutching at the edge of the washing machine for balance. *Yes ma, yes ma. You haven’t talked to me since I needed a bra, ma.* She plucked the thread from the bra and dropped both into the machine.

Your son had died, ma, and you never wanted a daughter. She admonished herself through tears about not sorting laundry.

Yes ma, sorry ma.

Morning Of

Something about the phrase 'ambulatory surgery' left the scent of opposites hanging thick in Alex's nose. It certainly wasn't actually an oxymoron, and yet here he was, sitting in the lobby, trying to pick apart why the sign felt wrong to him.

He had spent the last two days running back and forth between the couch or bed and the bathroom as the surgery prep emptied him all out. He had thought, at first, that he would be incredibly hungry on this strict fluids only diet — and then nothing but a sip of water with his meds this morning — but some combination of the laxatives and nerves made the thought of food abhorrent, and he had to force himself to stay hydrated as the magnesium citrate worked its wonders on him.

Add in the six hour drive to Portland and the complete inability to sleep during the night before, and it was no surprise that words and meaning were crowding uncomfortably inside his head.

"Alex? You ready?"

He shook himself out of his reverie. Liv was standing there, radiant as always, with an efficient-looking nurse. "Yeah."

They led him back to the pre-op room, where the young wolf stripped out of his clothes and into a hospital gown.

They shaved the back of his hand and got the IV line in place.

They gave him a pill to take 'for his nerves'.

They introduced him to the anaesthesiologist, an intense and hulking bear.

They let him shake hands with the surgeon.

And then they left him alone with Liv.

"You okay, Alex?"

He nodded, sitting on the edge of the bed. Was he? Was he anything? He didn't feel okay, but he didn't feel not-okay. "It feels what you say about flying. How you get past security, and then everything is suddenly someone else's responsibility, and all you have to do is let go and go along with what they say?"

Liv nodded.

"It's like that."

"They told me to tell you you have until they come back for you to change your mind." The older wolf's grin was sly. "I told them if you didn't keep going, I'd kick your ass."

Alex laughed. "Why's that?"

"You've been talking about this surgery non-stop for almost a year. If I had to listen to you talk about it anymore, I think I'd go nuts."

"Right." He cupped spindly hands over his breasts beneath the gown. The garment made him feel tiny, young. "I'd probably go nuts, too. It'll be so nice to be rid of 'em."

Liv's grin softened. "I know."

And then they came to take him away.

They came to whisk him down an anonymous hallway.

They came to wheel him into the OR, a room nothing like what he was expecting.

They came to ask him what music he liked.

They came to give him an oxygen mask to hold over his face.

And then he was truly in their hands.

Limerent Object

1

I wrap emotions in the cool embrace of jargon to soften sharp edges and take the sting out of ones I feel too keenly. It's why I got into this field. It's why I studied what I did. Of course I care for my patients, and of course I love what I do, but my reason for being here, for being a psychologist, is a simple insatiable need to explain away my emotions.

I've talked about it with my therapist at length¹. We talk about my need to hide behind words as a way of reducing my vulnerability. They become armor, when taken in this sense.

There's a tension, then, between these two explanations: to put it the way I did at the beginning is to allow words to be a useful tool to define the edges of my emotions and perhaps make them easier to digest and understand in the process.

To hear Jeremy's suggestion, though, my words are a means by which I might reduce my responsibility to actually feel the emotions I try to define.

¹We all have them, therapist-therapists. I would never trust a therapist who does not.

Thus me, sitting here on my lunch break, writing journal entries on the steno pad I use in sessions.

Despite the utility I know there to be within the act of journaling, something which I've recommended to countless patients of mine, it's never quite something that I've picked up for myself. I always felt like maybe I was supposed to do something *more* than just write about what I had done during the day, so I'd go off onto long philosophical tangents like this, and then I'd start to feel guilty for not writing about what I'd done during the day. No matter what, it felt like I was doing something wrong, like I was incorrectly doing the thing I knew how to describe to those who looked to me for instruction.

When I'd brought this fact up to Jeremy, he laughed and called me a "fucking nerd" and then talked me through what we thought my goals should be:

- I should write about the feelings that I have during the day until I've finished a complete thought about them, and then stop.
- If an event comes up, I should feel free to record it, but not feel obligated to.

It sounds almost simplistic, but I get what he's doing. He's giving me permission to write about feelings instead of actions, to not feel bad about, as he put it, "leaning on [my] upbringing and the way [I] think in complete sentences and five paragraph essays". Of course, along with that, he wants me to actually feel things and process them rather than just wrap them up with a label and set them on a shelf. Use the things that are my strong suits to bolster the things that I'm weak at.

So, what am I weak at?

I think I'm weak at processing my emotions in a way that feels like growth. I wrap them up in words and I try to talk my way through processing them, but it's a performative sort of vulnerability that doesn't lead to any growth. As a result, I wind up in one of two situations:

- I feel the same things over and over again with no change in how I process them; or
- I feel new things that I've never felt before, and rather than try to understand them, I shove them off to the side.

The latter is something that I've been making some progress at recently, as I learn to improve my emotional literacy, but the former is a habit that I need to break.

To go along with this task, then, what are my strengths?

I think that Jeremy pinned them down quite neatly. I think that my upbringing, strict as it was, instilled in me a sense of duty - first to my parents, then to my school, then to God and my time in seminary, and now to my patients. Also, he is not wrong in joking about thinking in essays; being so bound up in language is a net positive in that it allows me to take what patients tell me and turn it into something actionable for them, just as it previously allowed me to take the scripture that I read and turn it around through hermeneutics and truly understand it in a way that simply living as a believer would not.

Alright, so how can I build up the weaker portion of myself with my strengths?

I think that the best way to put the goal is to use my language skills to journal about emotions so that I have a record. If I could

study scripture and study psychology, then surely I can study my own notes and from there, learn and grow to handle my emotions in a more deliberate and constructive fashion, right? Basically, write what I feel and how I react so that next time I can react better.

All of this, however many hundreds of words, all because I told Jeremy that I think I have a crush on a girl and didn't know what to do about it.

Ah well, I suppose that this has already been therapeutic, in its own way. I have a task I can set for myself, and, knowing me, all I need to do is let my sense of duty loose on it and we'll see if it bears any fruit in the weeks and months to come.

2

I have noticed over the years that we tend to place benches in the strangest of places. I noticed this at Saint John's, those years ago back in Minnesota. The placement of benches ought to be deliberate. There ought to be some sort of goal in putting them where we do. A bench placed in a part with a careful view across the grass, through the trees, down the street would be ideal. You could look at the kits playing in the grass, the trees moving in the breeze, down the bustling street. Instead, we place them facing buildings along sidewalks.

Or, here at work, we place them facing a parking lot. I know, of course, that this bench is here because it is intended to be a place to wait for someone to come pick you up in our car-ridden town. I *know* this, and yet this bench feels so fantastically pointless. There is one in front of short-term parking which feels far more apt a place for such a thing, but no, perhaps that was not enough: this one is along

the side of the building, facing that overflow portion of the lot that on some days sees no use at all.

There is this occasional fad among certain groups on the Internet, I've been told, of seeking out so-called liminal spaces. I think that the term is ill-fitting. Liminality has a very specific meaning. I do not think that many of the places described as "liminal" that show up on social media and forums on the 'net are liminal so much as abandoned and vaguely spooky. They are not a place between, they are not a place one transits, not a border. They are simply poorly lit or forgotten.

The important thing about liminality, though, is not that a place be forgotten and certainly that it not be in any way scary, but that it should slip and slide beneath your interest. Liminality requires some form of passing through. It needs to be a border that you cross or a place that you enter for the sole purpose of exiting. Abandoned shopping malls are not literal. A barn, canted awkwardly to the side with age, standing alone in a field is not liminal.

A parking lot is liminal. An airport is liminal. A drive-thru is liminal. These are the spaces that exist only to be traversed. They are the spaces where, should you get stuck in them, you will be struck by the unnerving quality of the experience. They are not places that you visit. They are places that, should you visit, you will feel unwelcome because they resist the idea of doing so. They push back at you, in some intangible way, and say: "You are not meant to be here."

I am stalling.

It's perhaps a little strange that I seem to get the most out of journaling during my lunch breaks. To me, it feels as though I ought to be doing something so personal and introspective back at home, rather than sitting out on that awkwardly-placed bench in front of

the office in that liminal parking lot, but there is something about the discomfort of that place combined with me already being in the therapeutic mindset that makes this the ideal situation.

I am stalling, though, because I know that it is easier for me to get caught up in words than to actually do the work at hand. Perhaps I am in the mind of liminality because this idea of liking someone, of wanting to pursue a relationship, is so new to me.

I have long since acknowledged that, despite my ability to listen actively and to guide patients through therapy, I am insufferable. I do not mean to denigrate myself in this. It is a fact and I am comfortable with my role in life. I am autistic and comfortable with all that comes with that (indeed, it works to my advantage in my professional life as I work primarily with other autistic individuals). I have few friends outside of a professional context. I do not enjoy drinking. I am devoutly Catholic. I suspect, for some whom I met at university, even at the private school before that, that I am out of place for being so 'low' a species in such lofty places as those, for such are the places for the cats and dogs of the world, not a coyote who has, in their mind, pried himself up from the blue-collar professions of his ancestors or some imagined poverty.

Along with all of this, however, has come with a necessary distance from romance and relationships. This is another thing that I am comfortable with. The celibacy that was in my future as a priest was not a thing that I was in any way uncomfortable with, and when I moved on from that life I saw no reason to change that. I do not enjoy the word 'single', because that implies something 'less than' in today's society. I am happy alone.

I have, at various points in life, picked up a romantic twinge, and when I do, I cherish it. I will sit with that feeling and enjoy it, and

then I will put it up on some shelf within me to be a part of my life, and yet in some way apart from it.

It is not unlike praying in that sense: God is always a part of my life, and yet is apart from it. I do not subscribe to many of the modern evangelical takes on religion, wherein God is within you and Jesus in your heart, but something far more conservative and old-fashioned. God is beside me, perhaps. Above me. He is with me, but not within me.

Another way to look at this is perhaps that these feelings are embers, or the smoldering of paper that has not yet caught fire into a relationship. You can see the faint tint of red crawling along the fibers of the paper, and yes, I suppose that you could blow on it and coax it into something more, but better, for me, to watch it slowly consume the paper, enjoy the beauty of the ember and the delicacy of the papery ash it leaves behind, and then, once it has gone out, acknowledge that it has left me a new person.

That, however, is not what Kay has done. She has flared into my life as a bright spark. It is not the slow crawl of smolder along paper but the bright flash of magnesium caught fire. Unstoppable. Undousable. Inevitable.

This — this and the fact that that we both have what sound like single letters for names, Kay and Dee — is why I brought her up to Jeremy, this brightly burning light in my life that has suddenly claimed me. This feeling is new. It's novel. I have had what I had assumed 'crushes' were before, but to be smitten is a very new feeling for me, one that I do not quite know how to approach.

Kay and I met during the last year of her undergrad and the first year of my graduate studies at UI Sawtooth. She had taken a job in the campus library to help pay her way through school, working in

the interlibrary loan office, a service that I was starting to use more in earnest.

That's three years gone now, though, and that these feelings were not in place soon after we met clouded my judgement when I started to pick up so intense a set of emotions. When one feels a yearning that saps one's strength, one expects that this is to be fairytale-level pining. Love at first sight. Smitten by looks. Utterly taken with the ways in which one speaks.

But no, when I first met Kay, I had made a mental note that she was a conventionally attractive coyote, no-nonsense and to the point, a fastidious dresser, and almost frighteningly competent. I read in her some of the same facets of autism that I see within myself, and I suspect much of her quiet efficiency stemmed from the fact that she, like me, often found herself feeling insufferable. It has taken me training and practice to soften my voice, to understand expressions, postures, and the vocal tics that make up people. I feel myself to be an empathetic person, a fact which drove me first to ministry and then to psychology, but to actually connect with those around me on an individual basis took effort.

I freely admit that the ILL office was not necessarily the type of place where one focuses on exemplary customer service, but still, this did not seem to be something that Kay was interested in in the slightest. She was there to do her job, do it quickly, and do it well. After a few visits picking up and returning books², I decided that I would try to befriend her and find out how much we had in common.

Was this some early expression of my feelings toward her? I do not know. I do not remember feeling in any way romantic to-

²More than I needed, perhaps. I had access to ILL as long as I was a student, and I took fantastic advantage of it.

ward her at the time, yet for me to deliberately seek friendship from someone was not a thing that I might otherwise have done. I do remember thinking at the time that had I asked her to talk over a coffee, that would have carried such connotations, so instead, the next time I had an order of books to pick up, I simply asked her major.

For some reason, I remember that she had been in the middle of typing something when I had asked, claws clicking on the keys, and that she had stopped and blinked rapidly at the screen, and I imagined thoughts crunching out of gear within her head.

“Music,” she had said. “Music composition, actually. Why do you ask?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just always seem to wind up talking with you here, so I was wondering. You don’t seem like one of the salaried employees.”

Her smile was wry as she replied, “I’m not, no.”

I don’t remember if we talked about anything else that day, and there were not any stand-out conversations over the next however many times I saw her in the office, though we soon started talking every time I came by and the few times I saw her in passing both in the library and on campus. At some point, we simply...became friends. I do not know whether we would have done so without me having acted with the intent to do so. Perhaps we would have. I do not remember thinking about intent-of-friendship much after that first conversation, so perhaps all it took was that opening question.

We slid effortlessly into a routine of weekly lunches. I went to a few concerts with her, though she knew far more about the music being played than I and I often felt in over my head as we listened to the instrumentalists on stage. I was surprised to find on the first concert that she wore earplugs throughout. I did not find the music

to be too loud, some string quartet, perhaps, but she explained to me that it kept her from getting overwhelmed.

At the end of her time at UI Sawtooth, I had the chance to attend her senior recital, where several other students from the various departments performed a few short compositions of hers. The music was cerebral and, to my ears, dissonant, even dark, but it was as fastidious as her in a way that I cannot explain. I applauded heartily and after the show we hugged and she invited me out to drinks with her family, who all proved quite friendly and much like her. Thinking back, I suspect that must have made quite the sight: four coyotes sitting around a table at a fairly nice restaurant, speaking in essays to expound on whatever thesis has come into their heads.

Spending time with other autistic folks was not a strange occurrence to me, as I had known a few in university and had of course met several in my training, but for some reason, that night was the first time I could say that I felt comfortable in that portion of my identity. I felt at home with others, and, strange as it seems to say, rather like a member of their family.

My lunch break is nearing its end, out here in the liminal lot, so I should probably hold off from writing any more, but I should note before I do that it is interesting that much of what I describe here in retrospect bespeaks an early attraction that I had not at the time attributed to budding romance or anything so grand.

Perhaps it was, in the end.

3

I had a sudden memory today, during my final session of the day.

I was seeing a young wolf who was struggling with getting settled in his degree at university and feeling guilty for not taking to it right off the bat, and I had a sudden recollection about leaving Saint John's, all those years ago. It was strange to feel that sudden demanding of attention come over me, that sudden rush that required me to think about the past *right now*, with no recourse to avoid it. It led to an unintended silence between me and my patient.

"So, I don't know," he said after the silence grew uncomfortable. "What do you think?"

I don't remember quite how I came to the decision to share, but I suppose I must have weighed my options and figured it might be worth it to bring the memory into the conversation. Perhaps I thought it would be a piton of shared experience on which to hang some form of step forward for him.

I leaned back in the chair and adopted what I imagine was a thoughtful expression. "You know, back before I decided to go into social work, I went to school in order to become a priest. Catholic priests generally get their masters in divinity, which includes a ton of theology — something I really loved — and psychology, but also the practical aspects of ministry. I was great at the first two, but the third, well..." I trailed off and gestured at myself.

The wolf cocked his head.

"It's difficult to be balance being the leader of a congregation with being an awkward mess in social situations."

He laughed. "Okay, yeah, I can see that."

"So, they were nice about it, and we weighed our options," I continued. "One option was for me to switch from an MDiv degree to getting a degree in theology, which would be all that intellectual research and navel-gazing that I loved without the pastoral care I

was simply not cut out for.”

“But you didn’t,” he hazarded, gesturing at my degree on the wall. *Master of Social Work, University of Idaho, Sawtooth.*

“I didn’t, no. Another option that we discussed was me transferring out of the program and into something else. I opted for that.”

“How, though? Why? Like...why would you choose that over the other option or toughing it out in your divinity stuff?”

I shrugged. “It was complicated.”

“You’re telling me,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“I know you don’t share my faith, but those are the terms I think of that conversation happening in, so you’ll have to forgive me for using them.”

He nodded for me to continue.

“There is a process called discernment in these situations, wherein you do your best to discern God’s plan for you in life. Do you go on to get married? Do you go into monastic life? Ministerial life? Hermitage?”

“And you chose married life?”

My mind flashed to Kay and I held back a wince. I laughed to hide my discomfort. “I chose helping others, which is why I’m here, but God’s plan for me was to do so on an emotional level rather than a spiritual one, one on one rather than in a congregation. It’s easier for me to be genuine one on one with someone than it is for me to relate to a group. It’s easier for me to have a conversation and work out problems together than it is for me to teach and preach. My advisor agreed, and said, *God needs saints more than he needs priests*, which stuck with me.”

He nodded, and I could sense a hint of impatience in the gesture. “I don’t have God to lean on, though. I’m not sure I believe in any

overarching plan for me to reach a goal or whatever.”

I shook my head. “No, I understand, that’s just the language I was using at the time, but the act of discernment is what I’m getting at. It’s not a one-and-done deal. At least, not for most of us normal, imperfect folks. It’s an ongoing conversation we have with ourselves about what’s important to us and how we get where we want to be.”

At that, he relaxed. “Oh, yeah, I get that. Like, I went into school thinking it’d be great to do chemistry and get into, I dunno, materials science or something, and I’m struggling with that. I guess a better way to think of it would be something like, uh...I guess I’m having this conversation—”

“Or you need to,” I interjected. “The discomfort may be a sign that the conversation isn’t over yet.”

“Yeah, I need to continue to work on this process of nailing down what it is I want to do.”

I nodded. “And one thing that falls out of that is that you’re going to learn more from yourself and maybe things change. There’s no harm in them changing, you’re just getting new data from yourself about it.”

He brightened up. “Yeah. Yeah! I like that.”

I like him. I like all of my patients, of course, but he’s a good kid, and far smarter than I was at his age.

I was just so sure of myself, back then. I was positive that I wanted to get my BA, learn Greek, then my MDiv, then head back here to Sawtooth and start right away in the ministry. My parents were also incredibly pleased with this decision, if decision it was. It felt like a decision at the time, but now I’m not so sure.

Did I decide to do something that felt so self-evident? Was it just the path of least resistance? I remember when I began to struggle,

when I decided leave the program, that conversation with God. I remember admitting it to myself, the confession the next morning, the meeting with Father Borenson, my advisor.

But was *that* a decision? Was I giving responsibility to God for an action that I myself took?

These feelings of doubt have been cropping up more and more, recently. I do not doubt in God, but I am beginning to question my relationship with Him. Saying “God knows what is best” is an awfully handy way to absolve oneself from the responsibility for one’s actions.

I know it’s right for me to not be in ministry. I wouldn’t make a good priest. I wouldn’t be happy, and thus my congregation wouldn’t be happy.

But I don’t know if my path here, to this point in my life, has what’s required to be called a decision. I wound up in secular life, but I wasn’t thinking what that would entail. All I was picturing is that I would not be Father Kimana.

Now, here almost in my thirties, all of the decisions seem so much bigger, even if their impacts are smaller. That’s not to say that pursuing Kay would be a small thing. It has the potential to be huge. It just doesn’t have the change-your-life-in-an-instant quality that leaving Saint John’s did. It would be a process. Admitting feelings, dating, marriage, children...all decisions in and of themselves, all with the potential for failure, incomplete success, or mismatches in expectations.

I should go home and eat. I love my patients — nerds, to the last — and they always get me thinking, but lately, all this rumination...

I should go home and eat.

4

It is a Saturday today and I have no clients, so I am attempting to write at home rather than on a bench somewhere or slouched in my office chair, and am actually using my computer for it this time rather than scribbling on a steno pad. I have to admit that I feel very strange writing like this. It feels almost like a violation of a habit, despite having only been at this for a few days.

I have put some further thought into what I wrote about over the last two days, about the fact that there may have been some hints at romance or a crush or what-have-you prior to the time when Kay moved away.

I do not think that, at the time, I was thinking in terms of romance, and I also don't think that it was on Kay's mind either. Her parents may have been of the mind that we might have been going out with each other, but I do not know.

However, I am also not sure that my conscious self was entirely in line with my subconscious at the time. I speak now in retrospect, of course, and at the moment I know very well that they often float closer and further away from each other in terms of agreement, so I do wonder whether or not my subconscious was heading deeper into a desire for more than friendship.

This means that there are two possible scenarios to consider:

- My subconscious mind was starting to, as a client put it the other day, catch feelings, and thus the situation I find myself in now has a longer history than expected
- The history behind this current set of emotions has some later starting point and the way in which Kay and I became friends

has no bearing on the present other than as an interesting story.

If the former is the case, then I think it is worth some introspection as to what about our in-person interactions might have drawn me to her romantically. As I mentioned, she was frightfully smart. She was kind. She was not unattractive, either, and as a coyote, certainly someone who ought to have been in the market for me.³

If the latter is the case, however, then I have to wonder why it is that such feelings did not form until distance became an issue, for less than a month after that dinner with Kay and her parents, she moved away from UI Sawtooth to prepare for her masters at UI Boise and our communication moved almost entirely to email and PostFast messages. I know that we tried to call once or twice, but neither of us is particularly keen on phones.

When I speak with my patients struggling with anxiety disorders, one of the exercises that I have them perform after a panic attack is to walk back to when the panic attack started and write down what they were doing and how they were feeling. Once they have done that a few times, they can look for similarities in the reports, and then they can start walking back further from the starting point of the attack in order to discover potential triggers. Knowing those, they can begin working on coping and avoidance mechanisms.

I know that I am trying to justify to myself my work on this journal so far, but I think that this retrospection is part of what I am doing with the project. I am not sure that I want to cope or avoid these feelings that I'm having, necessarily, but I do want to at least

³I know that many of the more liberal bent are increasingly okay with interspecies relationships, but, liberal as I try to be, my upbringing and my time within the church seem to have set me on the straight and narrow path, here.

better understand when they began, and by understanding the past, better understand the present.

So, in that spirit, I think the first time I noticed this crush on Kay was perhaps six months ago. I remember having spent an evening talking with her about music, about which she has been slowly teaching me, both of us sending each other videos to watch and counting down from three so that we could hit play at the same time and talk about what we were both hearing as it happened.

After the conversation, I had gone to bed thinking that there was something about that particular interaction that felt oddly intimate to me, and when I lay in bed, instead of falling asleep quickly as usual, I spent a while thinking back to her senior recital and that hug that we shared after. In particular, I was thinking about the combination of the feeling of her cheekfur, soft and dry against my own, and her scent.

The room had had more than enough scent mitigation in place, and I know that the sort of non-scent of scent-block had a tendency to cling to fur a while after having been in a room where it had been layered on thick.

However, while the audience had been sitting still and watching the concert, Kay had been up on the stage for much of the performance, conducting, playing the piano, and speaking about the music she had written and I suspect that that combined with any nerves she may have felt prior to and during the performance must have had her a bit worked up, for she smelled more strongly than I'm sure I did.

I remember laying in bed, breathing shallowly as I tried to recall that scent in its most intricate details. My thoughts became fractal in my weariness and I found myself refining and refining my memo-

ries. Did she smell of exertion? Did she smell of cleanliness? Did she smell fresh? She smelled of all three, so what were the percentages of each within her scent as a whole.

I remember feeling a pang in my chest as I realized that I wanted to experience that again. That scent, the feeling of her cheek against mine. I wanted it desperately. I craved that moment, drawn out and extended.

I am no stranger to sexual fantasies. I have had them plenty in my life, and am not ashamed to admit that. Celibacy does not preclude one from having desires, and as long as they do not become covetous, God does not proscribe them. But the thing that sticks with me about this night of fantasizing is that there was nothing sexual about it. I did not fantasize about Kay and I some day having sex, of all the things we might do along those lines. Instead, I fantasized about hugging her, breathing deep, then leaning back and, for some reason, brushing my thumb over her cheek.

I don't know why, but that night, that act picked up a talismanic significance, as though were I to perform the ritual — the hug, the breath, the brush through fur — in precisely the correct way, I might somehow feel a light more intense than the sun wash through me, feel a rush of fulfillment, feel a sense of rightness and completion.

Finally, I remember praying. I remember speaking to God and holding in tension my words to Him and these feelings that I was having. I remember asking Him what this meant. What, O Lord, does it mean to desire fulfillment from another person? I do not want to possess them. I do not want to lay with them. I am not even sure that I love them. I just want to be happy with them, want them to be happy, and yet in such a specific way. What does it mean?

The little voice through which God speaks was silent. I was not

surprised — the domain of God’s works are not the petty interpersonal relationships between individuals but rather whether or not their lives are lived in grace, and whether or not they strive to bring grace to the world around them.

I was not surprised, but I was, admittedly, disappointed. I try not to be disappointed in the ways of the Lord, of course. It’s not His job to solve my problems, and to expect him to do so is silly.

I perhaps just wanted some guidance.

5

If I assume that there is some subconscious root of my rising feelings toward Kay, and if I am to continue working backwards from a known starting point, then let me step back from that first recognition of those feelings.

We have countless hours of conversations over PostFast and email. We have fallen into the habit of at least saying hi to each other once a day. Sometimes, that is all the conversation that we have and the rest of our days will be eaten up by work and study, by reading and hobbies; and sometimes we will spend entire evenings talking, listening to music or watching comfort videos in the background while we engage on a more constant level.

Before we both wound up on PF, though, we had been emailing back and forth. We still do, on occasion, for when thoughts require something less immediate, something more structured than instant messaging⁴. Sending each other essays and bulleted lists and long

⁴I have sometimes considered why this might be the case, and I have two main thoughts on the issue. The first is that email allows for threaded conversations. One can respond to a particular email, perhaps even after the conversation has continued from beyond that point. This also allows one to reply inline, even, interjecting

quotations that we have found interesting.

I had planned to dig back through those conversations for my Saturday afternoon task, hunting for hints of yearning among however many thousands of words we've shared. But, as happens, I got caught up in the business of the day. I wrote that entry earlier full on planning this, and then I remembered I had to vacuum the last remnants of winter coat from the floor. Having vacuumed, I figured I might as well use that momentum to clean the kitchen, and while there, I remembered that I needed to cook for the week.

Not all plans were made to be followed to the T, though.

Instead of sitting down at the computer and digging and rereading and reliving — or attempting to — I set myself to mindless tasks through which I could live in memory, instead. I thought back instead of read back, and I did my best to put words to my feelings at the time.

Kay and I's first lunch together was an accidental affair. During that final semester, I was spending my afternoons sitting in on sessions and, towards the end, holding supervised sessions of my own. I learned early on that a lack of calories in my system would lead to irritability and an increased difficulty in masking for the sake of my patients, so I began leaving my final seminar and heading straight for the student union for lunch before my first sessions began.

The food there was not great. You grow up on a farm in the northwest and you get used to a certain type of food. Sure, there are plenty of steaks and burgers at home, but you also have a healthy se-

thoughts between points one's interlocutor has made. The second is that as a self-advertised "mobile first" application, PF limits the width of the text per message to what might fit on a phone screen, even when using their desktop application, and something about reading a very narrow, very long block of text feels like a misuse of the medium.

lection of homegrown produce and homemade canned goods. There is little enough profit in the industry for family farms, so my parents saved money where they could by growing what they were able to.

The student union, though, had four restaurants. A burger joint, a bagel shop, a soup-and-salad place, and a Mexican restaurant, all of them chains. The soup-and-salad place was my go-to, most days: they were the most likely to have an interesting selection on a day-to-day basis, they were the most likely to have vegetables other than shredded lettuce, and they were the least likely to leave me with an upset stomach later on in the afternoon, even if they were also the most expensive.

I smile to think back on the sheer number of combo meals I ate there. Half salad — usually Caesar — cup of soup, and square of focaccia, all arranged neatly on a tray. Few of the soups were memorable, of course, but almost none of them were bad. I was willing to accept “consistently okay” food.

I was waiting in line, lost in thought, watching the woman on the other side of the counter scoop lettuce and croutons into a bowl where it would be tossed with dressing, when Kay sidled up behind me and said, “Hey, Dee.”

I will admit that the context shift of seeing her outside of the library initially caught me off guard. Always, I had been standing before a counter waiting on one of the employees to fetch my books off the shelf. Always, there had been a barrier between us, a requisite space that kept us apart.

Now, though, she was right behind me, standing closer than any counter would have permitted in the past. I hesitate to say that I didn’t recognize her out of this context, for her voice was still the

same and I could easily put voice to name in my head, but it took a few seconds for it to sink in that, hey, this was Kay. We had talked. We knew each other.

I had known that she was shorter than I, but I hadn't realized just how much. I could see over the top of her head between her ears. I also hadn't noticed her scent before, at least not to this extent. The library was full of the scents of others, despite the open spaces and constant air circulation, so it was far more difficult to pick out an individual's scent over any other's. Now, it was far more distinct, closer, more present.

It was not unpleasant, of course. She smelled of coyote and femininity and slowly fading scent block. There was no scent of stress, either, something I hadn't noticed had always been present in the library until its absence here.⁵

I realized I'd been staring and snapped to attention. "Kay, hey, sorry. Long morning. Lunch break for you, too?"

She nodded. "Yep. Theory classes first thing in the morning, then work, then techniques in the afternoon. I steal lunch when I can."

"I've not seen you come through here before," I said, handing over my card to the cashier. "Don't think I've ever seen you outside the library, come to think of it."

She shrugged. "Forgot my lunch."

I waited for her to pay and pick up her own tray of food. I remember, for some reason, that she had ordered a full salad with strips of chicken on top.

⁵I freely acknowledge that not all have the attraction to libraries that I do, and that the stress-scent I had been experiencing there could just as easily have been something more universally ambient than related to Kay herself.

I also remember that there was no discussion of us sitting at the same table and eating together. This was unusual for me. I struggle to eat around others without feeling hypervigilant over how I must appear to others. Too many frowns for chewing too loud, too many admonitions to slow down. That I would just walk over to a table with someone and share a meal with them without thinking was a strangeness that struck me only after the fact.

We talked a little, though I've largely forgotten about what. I remember asking what techniques classes were, and I remember she asked me what I did for work, but the rest must have been small talk that slipped from our minds.

All I remember is the not-unpleasant sensation of seeing something out of place. Kay belonged in the library. That was the context in which she fit most easily. That she might exist outside, might have a life, might actually be a real person, with real hopes, real dreams, the very real need to eat added depth to her, and while, on thinking back, I'm sure there was no early hint of a crush, there was no small amount of pride in the small success of seemingly made a friend after setting my mind to the matter.

6

I took Sunday off to focus on church, but I have two things of note today:

The first is that I typed up and sent the previous entries that I have written to Jeremy. I will include his full response to me here:

Dee

Good to hear from you, man! I applaud the work that you've done so far here. I know that it can be really hard to buckle down and get to the actual work of parsing your feelings, but this is really great stuff. I like that you are using the journal entries to get out some of your current feelings that don't just surround this crush, though I also like that you call yourself out on stalling. You have talked before about struggling with emotional literacy, and I have to say, I think you're doing a stellar job of improving on your skills. Keep up the good work and try to employ more of that vocabulary where possible.

One thing I do want to mention however, and don't take this as a knock about what you've got down already, is that I think a great next step would be for you to tackle what it is that you're feeling *now*. You've told a really coherent tale of how you got here, and now it's important that you focus on what you're feeling at the moment. Pry at some of those threads and follow them to see where they go. Here are some questions to get you started:

- You mention your feelings on God not providing you the guidance that you wish you had. I hear you, and I know that can be frustrating. Perhaps one thing you could look into is your own response to your feelings on Kay within the context of your spirituality. Do your beliefs influence your thoughts on her? Do you feel that being a spiritual person has an effect on your relationship to her?

- When last we spoke, you mentioned that you weren't sure that these feelings were "real". What do "real feelings" mean to you? What quality keeps these feelings from being "real"?
- From the outside, you seem stuck. You don't seem to want to push for something more between you and Kay, and you certainly don't want to pull back from her. The next step in this project should be to find actionable paths forward. Why don't you start by simply enumerating options. What could moving forward look like? What might stepping back look like?

Seriously buddy, this is really great stuff. Not usually what I see in journals, but you've always been a heck of a writer.

Remember to breathe!

Jeremy

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ately notify the sender by telephone, facsimile or email and delete the information from your computer.

Jeremy brings up a lot of very good points and I will admit that I am both pleased that he has recognized the work that I have done already (and that he apparently enjoyed my writing) and also a little frustrated that I still have so far to go. However, I recognize that the latter sensation there is a fallacy and the result of me not being mindful and in the moment. The mind is ever drawn to conclusions and finales, when in reality, this is a process, not an end goal to be achieved. He is very careful in his writing there, in that he specifies that I should “see where they go” and “what could moving forward look like”. This is very process-oriented language, and something that I would do well to engage with, myself.

I can also tell that he is gently nudging me away from being hung up on the past. I know that that hug with Kay has stuck with me, and that I have done a very good job on latching onto moments when we have gotten particularly close or that she has shown me a level or quality of attention that has felt particularly fulfilling. It is important to have good memories, but it is also important to not stagnate.

The second item of note is that I had a dream about Kay last night.

Dreams are such nothing things. At best, they represent a means by which the unconscious mind adapts to stressors in order to build up defense mechanisms, and at worse they represent random firings of neurons in the sleeping brain — neurons that perhaps fired rather a lot during the day.

Dreams are such nothing things, and yet to them we pin so much meaning.

I dreamed that Kay and I were back at her senior recital, except that she was sitting next to me in the audience instead of up on stage, and we were watching her works being performed together. We were silent, rapt. The whole audience was rapt. The works were of breathtaking beauty⁶ and when they were finished, the applause was so uproarious that she was not able to make it back up to the stage to take her bow. I tried to help her, but she got separated from me and was drawn off.

She did not seem displeased by this, however when I called after her, I, as in so many other dreams, dreams I'm sure we *all* have, had no voice. I was barely able to manage a whisper, and my muscles grew so weak and my limbs so heavy that I fell over and that's when I woke up.

Powerlessness, separation, falling, these are all common features in dreams, and yet I am pretty firmly in the school of dream interpretation being largely bunk. Sleep is a protective action for the body, and dreaming is just the same for the mind. It is unguided, and serves to provide a break from taxing both our physical and our mental forms.

But we are so hard-wired to read deeper meanings into the mindless mutterings of countless neurons. "What does it mean that she was sitting next to me? Does it mean anything in particular that we were separated from each other? Why did I become so weak without her presence?" I am Nebuchadnezzar seeking my Daniel, not the other way around. There is no one to interpret my Mene, Tekel, and Peres but myself.

⁶Not that they weren't very good at the time, of course, though they were certainly beyond my ability as an active listener, and beauty often seemed not to be the goal. She tried to teach me about them, once, but we are not built the same.

Some part of me craves answers to these questions and so many more, but there are no answers to be had because they are non-questions. They are questions one might ask the sky supposing only that that is where God resides.

The writing on the wall. Hah! Dreaming of someone that you have a crush on means absolutely nothing, and yet it certainly feels like it must mean *something*. It has left me spinning with so much to think about and a lot to feel whether I want to or not.

I did not dream again last night.

