

*This is a bad town for such a pretty face.*

Everyone is equal parts unblemished and flamboyant when they first set foot in the loop. She was too – her smooth metallic jumpsuit flowed flawlessly, no stray ends, not even the perfectly straight seam courtesy of a talented, diligent seamstress – it was an outfit that dropped from the metaphorical sky onto the metaphorical body that she was, fitting each and every perfect curve,

When she first set foot in the loop, everyone came to see her. She basked in the attention, believing, perhaps unglamorously and unwisely, that this was what success tasted like in one of the most industrious cities in the world. Day by day she leaned into the sun, sang in the rain, and welcomed greater upon greater crowds to her presence. She watched with anxious anticipation for their awe-filled faces, she waited with bated breath for them to make the tour round her posterior, she tensed with all her might as they imparted passing caresses.

Chicago winters shatter dreams. Call it hazing, if you will, the sleet, snow and gloom draws out big, colorful jackets ill-fitting the dreamer's flair, clumpy snow boots dampening the spring in their step, the ten-minute pre-outing routine enough to discourage all spontaneous socializing. Chilled to the bone and without the premonition to stock up on wintry resources, she curled up on her pedestal in the plaza as snow merrily piled onto her hunched back. Try as she might, as the sparse visitors came, she could not shake off the stubborn whiteness that tarnished her smooth metallic expanse.

They pointed with their gloved hands and giggled and laughed. Then their gazes moved downwards to the uncovered metal, pointing at figures on her body, tilting their heads, emphatically waving. The sun out of sight and without energy to sing, she listened and watched, and looked where they looked – she saw each and every one of them, reflected as fully and immaculately as her outfit was allowed. She watched as they pointed at themselves, snapped polaroids of their reflections, of the sky, of the surrounding trees.

How quaint, she thought, and began searching for herself among the little figures plastered on her silhouette. With each figure she counted, her dismay mounted, and after endless rounds of searching, her heart fell as she realized the truth:

They had not come to see her – they had come to see themselves.

*I wake up with the morning sun but the light never comes.*

At the ripe age of 40, he fell in love. He had thought that was not possible, thought that he had seen all that could be seen, perched atop the second tallest skyscraper on the Chicago skyline. She perturbed his worldview like a smooth pebble in a still pond, sending little tingly ripples that were altogether small but significant. He compared her to all the sequinned plunging necklines, crackling synthetic fibre, laundromat aromas mixed in with sharp cologne and hypnotizing perfume, their inebriated laughs and tottering footsteps trailing into the glass doors below, ringing on the white marble. She definitely did not belong there, with her woollen plaid skirts, practical warm tights and sensible flats.

She came to him each day whenever the crowds tapered, in the glaring early afternoons and the pastel tails of dusk. Sometimes she would talk, beautifully normal and relatable anecdotes punctuated with snickers and sighs. Authentically unglamorous. Most of the time, she would pick a warm spot, awkwardly stretching out her legs, or sniffing with her arms around bent knees. He braced himself against her predictable, unimposing warmth, his strength not in exuding his own reassurance, but amplifying that beauty which was inside her.

On the days she paced, he eagerly uncovered what eccentricities he had to offer. A satellite dish here, a solar panel there, his two funnily shaped formidable spires. She gripped the coated steel ladders and jumped from the little ledges that organized his space. Her soft smiles and mischievous wonderment as his collection became her playground became highlights of his day.

Between them, they had no secrets – after all, what could they hide? New Year's Eve, when it all was too much, she ran to him in her soiled apron and blistered feet. He held her as she sobbed whilst the streets below counted down to the new year. Pointless, numbers in a continuum.

Then one day she came to him past closing hours. There was no apron, and her hands smelled of that piercing lemon soap for employees' regulation use. In her same woollen skirt and plain shirt, she looked out over the fabled views of Chicago skyline, for a moment too long. After all, what was there new to see? She was intimately aware of their existence, having jostled cocktails and martinis, platefuls of overpriced fries and burgers, against this spectacular backdrop of concrete garnished with gold.

And he knew he would never see her again, that this was goodbye.

*I sleep alone in the city that never sleeps.*

A trolley whammed into its side. As he wheezed and fought to keep his red light stable, a baby's cries filled his eardrums. Internally rolling his eyes, he counted to twenty – Three, two, one, switch. With satisfaction, he watched as the infant was hastily put back into its trolley and wheeled, clattering, across the zebra crossing. The squealing was no longer his business.

The pigeons on cables twitter about sand roads, parking lots and vast expanses of green. He eavesdropped appreciatively, but his world and all he knew was defined by the intersection, and he could not help but feel a sense of superiority for playing such an important role in it. On a stage defined by gray concrete skyscrapers, he was the lighting technician and audio engineer – upbeat patter songs fit with merry green hues and bright white figures, sturdy thuds backlit with red.

In his place, he saw, and met many, but was never seen nor met. He loved and hated the fact that intersections were the opposite of destinations. Good passers-by never stayed, heading off at the walk sign to bigger and brighter dreams, but bad loiterers didn't either, the pressure of the crowd sweeping them to the next mundane crossroads. Those who shared his immediate circle never raised their eyes to his towering height, but those across the street were intimately aware of his every feature. Shy and awkward, he restricted himself to observing contentedly, as did they him.

He chronicled many events he didn't fully understand. A few decades into his life, he switched his lights and recorded the smoothest, most beautiful sound he had ever heard. Pedestrians chattered, and he learnt that the savvy navy vehicle was a *Tesla*, and it held an unbeatable acceleration record. The words washed over him. Another time, he was flashing his digits when he noted a girl in sweatpants wander away from the island he sat upon with a peculiar, white square in her hand. Her fingers swiped faster than her legs took her. The object flew from her fingertips onto the ground when an oncoming cab honked unceremoniously at her. She ran to it, picked it up and dashed across the road, visibly flustered and shaken. The drama was perplexing.

Nights confused him the most. With the darkness came desertedness and the unshakable loneliness. With the quiet also came cars that stubbornly refused to follow his directorship, and occasionally brought on inexplicable blue-red light generators whose sole purpose was to interfere with his carefully designed colour scheme. The sirens and tyre screeches ring shrilly past his intersection, and he always tenses at their impending approach. He never knows how these episodes end – time has taught him to anticipate a dreadful din, and a crusade of white uniformed men.

Times like this, he wishes his intersection was silent.

*Feel just like a tourist in the city you were born*

Airports are everywhere and nowhere. The traveller is neither here nor there, he has departed his old life but not yet begun his new. Limbo is how every journey begins, and limbo how it ends. This, he believes, puts her in a peculiar position – what to make of one who has seen so much and never belonged to any? As one of many vessels that only exist in limbo, she also laughs at the oddity of it all: limbo is the in-between, and how could one be transported in a manner where the beginning and end are both undefined?

In her peripheral vision, she observes today's Texans bite their lips as they shrug on layers upon layers of jackets, parkas and blankets in the biting Chicago winter. Many yawn as they set foot on airport grounds, but the gesture quickly melts into a smile of anticipation, for the home or the adventure that awaits beyond baggage claim. The children's restlessness, the businessman's impatience, the youthful backpacker's excitement, the middle-aged son's crankiness – their uniquely authentic and unfiltered selves juxtaposes to the canned, repeated greetings of the cabin crew. She snickers at the many ironies of the people who inhabit the in-between.

Limbo is home to many, and will never be home to many more. Those belonging to the prior either stumble in unglamorously, or strut into their positions. Pilots, engineers and stewardesses are the enviable few, their intellect, looks and (or) mechanical skills strides beyond their peers. Stories, true or tall, are told about their heroic, clever acts, and wayward exploits. Then there are the manual labourers, whose harrowing pasts, perhaps even a few strokes unlucky, have culminated in a simple, taxing routine – for good or for worse.

As for the latter, she notes the bizarre difference between the alighters and the boarders. Both parties exude weariness and anticipation, a hodgepodge of unresolved feelings, but the bitter in their bittersweet cocktails are of different flavours. Perhaps a spell in limbo ages and matures – where those who board clutch to headphones, snack bars and book bags like lifelines, those who alight grip ever so little loosely to their possessions. The collegiate boarder texts his summer fling with a frenzy not unlike the sister's last call to her brother to cement pickup plans fit with a confirmed ride, snack and tailored coffee. Upon touchdown, everyone, be it infant or businessman, ogles the vast, flat expanse out the window in expressionless silence. The anxiety of what may be lost and what is to come overpowers the boarder, is lulled to sleep by the horizonless clouds, the bird's-eye views of twinkling city lights, calmed by the sparkling ocean waves, and produces the sedated alighter trope.

The incongruence of the dependability experienced by those who have made it home and the transient and frequent disorientation undergone by those who have nomadically hopped is perplexing to her, to say the very least. She is not sure where she fits, and she has no one to ask, nor anyone whose judgment could validate one identity over the other.

As she nurses the painful slap of a groundworker's rough, gloved hands against her once glossy fuselage, she thinks to the times when she peered under the cirruses to see pairs of curious, appreciative eyes sandwiched between pointy antennae and clunky skyscrapers, scrutinizing her colourful, blue-red-white livery. Smiling, she recounts her many ventures - She has nosed through snowstorms, sashayed across sunsets and sunrises, and swaggered through Sao Paolo, Singapore, South Africa, and many more.

But she has never *been*, and never been loved. She wonders if she ever will be.