

Lost in Pantomime

I could smell the freshly baked bread from two blocks away, the scent floated carelessly from the Café Amour. The weather, for early May, was decidedly cool; but the tables were all filled on the outside patio. Couples pinched tightly together and craving the so-called *French* experience of love. They would say to the waiters, in terrible French accents, *café au lait*, and immediately return to their imported cigarettes and *beautiful* company. But, as for myself, well; *Je ne comprends pas*. And honestly, I never could understand how they were so oblivious. Maybe it was all their words; obtaining pleasure from the constant droning of their own voice. But I could see her; sitting amongst them and unknown to their eyes. The quiet ideal of love. A woman, a most beautiful woman, alone and lost on the crowded patio. She was reading a beat-up paperback. I would occasionally catch her eyes flicker up from the pages of the book; a conversation that had piqued her interest. But it would only last a moment. She would just as quickly return to the typeface of the page. I would watch between my choreographed gestures; craning my head between the crowds of people around me. I watched from a distance; like some kind of stalker.

I am no stalker; this is my corner and I have been working it for years. The locals usually ignore me; this is common in my profession. I have become accustomed to both the taunts and occasional threats I receive from angry tourists; and you *know* who you are. You are the type who continually ask me to *stop following!* What they never consider, though, is the difficulties I endure every day in my profession. I know the risk a performer takes once they step through the door; especially a street performer. I have lived it my entire life. But since the lady has become a part of my routine — of my life; things have changed. It is her, and this feeling, this other thing;

it is entirely new to me. I was not prepared for it, and in the last few days it has grown into something about to burst. Every passing moment this thing continues to swell — even as I work, at this very moment, performing my usual routine.

For days I have watched. A pathetic, vulnerable, and distant gaze aimed toward a total stranger. I go through the motions of my performance, but most my energy is spent thinking of her; how I would approach the lady? What would I say? There was nothing I really could say, obviously, considering words are not at my disposal. I have not uttered a single syllable in public since taking a vow of silence ten years ago. It is my family's tradition. The white face, the horizontal black and white stripes, white gloves, and a painted on smile. I am a caricature, usually viewed as nothing more than an ornament, something to point and look at. *Look, he is stuck in a box. Wow, he is pulling something with a rope! Look, he is drinking coffee, and OH NO! he spilled it on himself!* And no, I wasn't really having coffee. And I have never been stuck in a box! Well, excluding that one time a few years back, but that is another story entirely.

Anyways, I continue gesturing these acts, and because I appear to be doing or feeling; I am therefore captivating my audience. I make it look as if they could even participate in the acts. But I am only as good as my conviction. My job is a blend of creativity and discipline. I must perform this same routine, maintain my energy at all times, and never make a sound. I must never break the code of silence, it is the primary rule. Nowhere does the use of words fit into my routine; or my life. All attempts at communicating must be pantomimed.

On the fourth day I noticed she had a different book in her hand. It was just as thick as the previous one, the cover red and looked worn from attention. She wore a navy blue dress trimmed in white. The book opened, her legs neatly crossed. A waiter appeared and she ordered a *café au*

lait, immediately turning her attention back to the page. I wanted to talk with her, to reach out and touch her. I had tried approaching her the previous three days as she floated down the sidewalk of *Rue de Marseille*. A black clutch and a book, she looked as if she had everything she needed; all in the palm of her hand. In a vain attempt to impress, I walk toward her, my legs wobbling from my sloppy strut impersonation, *the tramp*, and offer both my hand and a rose. She smiles, but leaves the delicate emblem extended in my empty hand. The invisible flower of my affection, limp in my grasp, fading away in a warm breeze. I told myself that it was a misunderstanding. My act of *la belle passion* needed some tweaking, that's all. I needed to try something different. And, of course I would—on the sixth day.

I woke on this morning; the sixth and final day was tired and nervous. The morning should have been inviting, a kind of morning for loose tee's and half buttoned dress shirts. A morning for wine and conversation. This morning would be filled with drunken smiles and words from all around; but none were for me. The treasure I had pined for, the lady in solitude, she had rejected my rose. My face painted and hidden behind a character's mask, I wanted to disappear. I swallowed my voice, all of my words, my identity, and like every morning I enter the bustling streets of the world. For an hour I walk a dog, ride a horse, sell balloons, of course there is a doctors visit (which usually receives a small crowd, simply out of curiosity), and then I spend fifteen minutes creating more balloon animals. There is always the act of tripping over my own feet; I do this one usually before my *grand finale*. On this particular day, as I was finishing my stuck in the box routine (the grand finale itself), she appeared from around the corner, parading down the sidewalk. A kind of solitary performance, much like my own. But it was I who felt like a lone member in an audience of strangers, entirely mesmerized by her show.

Maybe it was the way she tilted her face a little to the right, or her dark hair pulled back with a single blue ribbon. It could be the way her lips curled into what had to be a permanent smile. Her arms lightly swinging at her side. She made it look effortless as breathing. Something beautiful yet simultaneously modest. It was just as she passed by me that I was able to free myself from the captivity of the mysterious box; the one which had been my prison for the last five minutes. The walls had been closing in and threatening to crush me at any moment. Just when it looked as if there would be no way to escape, a key to my freedom was conveniently dropped in front of me. Of course this was all improvised, the lady was unaware of her participation in my exodus. The three members of the audience who were watching all applauded as I made my grand exit. I escaped from my prison, turning and flipping over myself, and conveniently tumbled back to my feet, flinging my hands into the air, and all while simultaneously taking a bow. The lady, though, had not seen any of the act.

She took her normal seat; a round table made for two. I casually, but with hyperbolic gestures, walk to her table and place a single rose in the center. I had to use the rose again, it was all I could come up with at the moment. Obviously, this was not the same rose that she left wilting in my hand. I had freshly plucked this rose from my imagination. The lady must have noticed this time because she allowed her book to rest on her lap. Her eyes — I now could see her green eyes framed by dark lashes, like cellophane wrapped candies. A curious smile was painted on her face.

“Hello!” These are the first words coming out of her mouth. “My name is Jessica, we see each other every morning, right over there.” She gestures (like me!) toward the corner where I usually perform my morning routine. “It is a beautiful morning. Take seat, I could use some

company...and I am sure you could use a break.” I look around, acting like she must be talking to someone else (but I know she means for me to take the seat) and I tap my chest with my index finger, a gesture that implies *are you talking to me?*

“Of course I mean you...” Smiling, she again gestures and offers me the seat.

Very graciously, while returning her smile, I begin to take a seat but misjudge my landing and miss the chair entirely. There was a loud thud as my rear collided with the floor. This was all intentional, certainly, but Jessica was concerned and immediately jumps from her seat and to my aid.

“You?...are you, okay?”

She is down and sitting beside me, eye to eye; and I am on my ass. I cracked a ridiculous smile, a blend of humiliation and pain, and signal with my thumb and index finger (making a circle) that I am *okay*. This was all part of the design, though, improvised in many ways, but still part of the plan. Jessica helps me up, lifting both myself and my pride from the floor, and then kindly guides me to my seat.

“Alright, that’s much better.” She says this while walking back to her own chair, brushing some inconspicuous dirt; maybe nervousness, from her green dress, and eventually sits down.

“You had me worried.”

I give an exaggerated grin, cross my legs, and leaf through a book (a novel with no cover, no pages, and no title). She tells me *that isn’t funny*.

“It is the one thing I can do alone, it is something for myself.”

I let the book evaporate from my hands and from our conversation. She was always alone, and with her words. I know this because I see her every morning; but not like I am seeing

her now. And the book? What was she reading? I had to know, so I expressed my interest in the subject by pointing to the book resting on the table.

“It is called “The Parasites,” would you like to see it?

I wave my hand, wrinkling my nose and looking away from the table. Jessica ask me, “Do you not read...?” Her voice trails off before she can complete the thought, and then she looks at me, her eyes wide and filled with curiosity. “I don’t even know your name, how rude of me not to ask.” She places both of her hands on the red and white checkered table cloth (to show interest), her palms down. Then she asks for my name.

I was initially taken aback, although I had no reason to be. The question was flattering, honestly, *she wanted to know my name!* But the question had never been asked before, and I was not sure how to answer it. I begin to wonder; do I have a name? I often asked myself that same question. Had I forgotten it, maybe lost it somewhere? Has it withered and died after so many neglected years? I had to think about the question for some time, *my name?*, and I know Jessica was watching me the entire time. Her green eyes burning against my chalk colored face. I slipped back into the tiny locked box. I became a fragile porcelain doll. The walls were once again moving in and threatening to crush me. The question remained, and ran tirelessly through my mind. Who was I? Do I have a name?

“It’s alright if you don’t want to answer.” I was not sure how much time had passed before her voice quieted the noise in my head. She said the words so delicately; it was like waking to the morning sun embracing you after a dream. Still, I wanted the word, I wanted a name. If I did not have one of my own, I would create one. I knew what had to be done.

With my left hand, palm up, I hold *something* in the air. I bring my right hand toward the side of the *something* and begin the action of *cranking*. Her eyes are focused on my hands, watching my mini-performance with intent. I bob my head rhythmically, holding this imaginary object while I turn *something* from the side.

“Is there...ah...hmmm...a handle of some kind?” Jessica is unsure if her response is correct, but when I nod to acknowledge she is, she claps her hands together, three or four times, applauding herself.

“It is musical; isn't it?...like a music box...” Her voice filled with confidence, I smile to acknowledge she is close, getting warmer, but not yet cooking. “Oh...I get it; you're a musician!”

It was at this point I was a little concerned. I wanted to believe my career choice was obvious, but now that Jessica thinks I am a musician, I am having doubts with my abilities. I wonder if I should end my current career and start over. I consider this for a few moments, and ultimately decide to pause what I am doing and place the fictional box on the checkered table cloth; my eyes remaining on Jessica. I tilt my head to one side, smile, and place my left hand over top the box; waving it side to side as a magician might—a gesture to show the object is still there. Again, I start turning the handle from the side, and with my magician's hand I simulate the action of something *popping* out from the top of the box. A tiny yelp escapes Jessica's throat. I sold the *popping out* part very well, she jumped from her seat a little and clasp her hands to her face. Now, with both hands, I show that I am stuffing whatever had *popped* out from the box back in it, and adjust the top before sliding it over to Jessica.

“My turn?” She looks to acknowledge the object, that, in reality, is not actually there. Still, we both can somehow see this invisible object. Imitating my movements from moments ago, Jessica starts turning the crank, bobbing to the music that must be playing in her mind. And when she looks up, her eyes have brightened, like Prometheus bringing fire and knowledge.

“A Jack in the Box! It’s a Jack in the Box...”

I nod, and at the moment find myself trapped in a box. My hands pressing against invisible walls. Jessica smiles, “*so you are the Jack in the Box!*” I return the smile and nod as the transparent walls come crashing down around me. No one is aware, of course, since imaginary walls tumbling down do not make a sound. The intangible walls are falling around both of us as a waiter walks up to our table.

“*Café au lait...*” Jessica says the words with certainty, and then looks at me to see if I want to order. I pause, pondering how might I explain what it is I want. I can feel the waiter’s eyes watching me, like Jessica’s had before. Beads of sweat begin racing down my forehead, white drops of wet paint and nervousness. I try to smile at Jessica, but it ends up looking more like I am forcing the left side of my face to tense up, like a constipated child. My anxiety has apparently contaminated Jessica; her cheeks flushed, both hands tucked on her lap underneath the table and out of view. It is at this very moment an idea strikes me like a bolt of lightning. With one finger, I point towards Jessica, and then trace an imaginary line with two fingers back toward myself. I punctuate this mime by showing the waiter both of my fingers, resembling the universal hand signal of peace, but now intended to represent the numerical value of two. I make sure to look him in the eye so he knows I am certain about this decision.

“*Deux, café au lait...*” The waiter about faces and leaves us to ourselves.

When the waiter returns and we are served. Jessica, between sips of coffee, watches me in silence. We just sit at a table for two, quiet, and enjoy the others' company. I study the way she uses both hands to bring the coffee mug to her mouth. How she wipes the lip of the cup to remove any lipstick tattoo. She wore a certain shade of lipstick, mauve — it compliments her olive complexion. When she smiles, it is usually the left side of her mouth that turns up a little more than her right. Her hand reaches towards the invisible rose, and I reach to meet her there.