

They left that basement and walked uptown in the dimness of daybreak. The streets were a deserted mess. Cars stopped in traffic with no one in them. Newspapers and trash flying around. Smashed windows on the storefronts. And silence. Their footfalls echoed off the tall buildings. Behind the gray clouds it was speckly, like a monitor screen gone wrong. A small green dot hovered up there. Adrian watched it for a while as they walked until it blipped out of existence.

Whenever they heard something or saw something move, they hid. Abandoned storefronts, an old wreck of a house, and alleyways all made good hiding places. Something moved. It could have been anything. It could even have been someone who was still normal. Antoine wasn't taking any chances with Adrian's life. So they took cover and waited for whatever it was to pass.

Things fell apart so fast. Who would have guessed that the city could look this way so soon after the incident? That's what their dad called it, the Incident. He seemed pained even saying that much. Now their dad was gone. But Adrian had Antoine. He was going to look out for him. He would always look out for him.

ELYSIUM

Or, The World After

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*The flutter flutter of death's wings came for my beloved,
but I was not ready to let go...*

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>> open bridge

Connecting...

BRIDGE CONNECTED

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>> begin program

BRIDGE PROCESS: INITIATED 0000-00-00 00:00

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1.

Floating high above the city, dipping and swooping through the valleys of cinderblocks and concrete, landing on the edge of a rooftop to look down upon the inhabitants below. Watching, seeing, learning. They walk along the streets, alleys, and avenues. Moving here, going there, in a constant state of rush. Appointments to be kept, people to see, things to do. And Adrienne was one of them. She had somewhere to go. It was not deathly important. Just something she had been looking forward to all week, lunch with a friend at a place where they could sit by a window and watch the beautiful ones pass, examine their clothes, and take notes while rolling noodles around their forks, pretending to eat.

The city was a place to both love and despise. A place where a patchwork of new and old gray buildings stood side by side with icy-glass-covered skyscrapers. A blended terrain of high and low structures, each bookmarking history. A place Adrienne called home. She could never see herself leaving, though she often wondered how she could remain. Her mind wandered on so many useless thoughts as she walked along the busy sidewalk. Then she noticed, among the cars and the trucks and the buses, an elk. Its furry hindquarters protruded as it entered the crowd and sauntered through the shoppers, the vendors, and the construction workers. Its antlers rose high upon its elegant head, spreading upwards like giant fingers into a crown as it strode nonchalantly along the bustling city street. Adrienne stopped to examine what she could so clearly see, yet everyone else seemed blind to it.

The elk turned to face Adrienne. They considered each other for a long pause, gazing into each other's eyes. They were momentarily interrupted by a tourist double-decker bus. After it passed, they resumed their connection. Then the elk lifted its head as if in a nod and sauntered away. Adrienne watched as it disappeared into the crowd.

She remained on the street corner, blocking the path, and got pushed and shoved, not out of rudeness, but simply because she was in the way. Her mind was now blank. She had been considering something. Something strange that she could not remember. It was possible that the heat was affecting her. The sun beat down warmly over her face and hair. She moved away from the corner towards the shade of a storefront's awning, fumbling in her purse, searching for a piece of tissue so that she could wipe her nose and dab the perspiration from under her eyes.

Her phone buzzed.

"Hey, Helen, I'm on my way.... Oh.... Umm, yeah, no, I understand.... Yeah, that's okay. Don't worry. It's fine.... Maybe next week.... Yeah, really don't worry about it.... I'll see you later.... Yeah, bye."

Damn. It was just a lunch. An ordinary lunch. But Adrienne needed to talk. Something was happening at home. Something she felt through her skin. Something that if spoken to a trusting ear she might find was nothing but a wisp of smoke. But she needed to be assured that her imagination was working overtime before her fears gained form and weight.

Going home was not something she really wanted to do. And the streets were so full today. Vendor tables were lined up along the edges of the sidewalk with handmade crafts, T-shirts, scarves, leather holders for pocket gadgets. The table nearest to her had some jewelry that was interesting. She waited patiently while another woman examined a bracelet. The woman put it on and the shiny metal loops looked exotic and graceful on her wrist. Adrienne gently squeezed past her to pick up a necklace of polished stones that glittered over twisted bronze and copper. She held it up, decided it was too extravagant, and put it down. She looked at a few pairs of earrings, trying them against her face in the small plastic mirror hanging from the stand. None of them appeared as nice on her as they did on the table, so she put them back as well. The heat of the seller's stare told her he was about to make the hard pitch for a sale. She gave the table one final look before he could speak, then walked away.

Voices, accents, languages whose rhythms echoed places Adrienne had never seen (and maybe never would) beat past her like a marching band. The sounds were a blending stream of conversations and sighs. The faces that passed her were from all over the world. Each a different shape and color. The smell of roasting peanuts on open charcoal burners, curried meats, frying falafels, and urine from the gutters drifted through the heated summer air. Adrienne moved asynchronously in the uneven flow of people. Many in the crowd carried multiple shopping bags stamped with designer logos, walking credit card bills with grinning faces.

The open doors of the boutiques and electronic stores blasted icy wind from air conditioners set on super-high. The cold beckoned to her. She relished the cool against her skin. Through her reflection on the window of a clothing store she could see the plastic people looking at the mannequins in their styled outfits. She went inside to join them.

She roamed through the racks of shirts, skirts, dresses, and pants. The perfume of a passing salesgirl was a mixture of sea breezes and powder. She clicked her price gun on a tag.

A red and white blouse caught Adrienne's eye. She pulled it off the rack and held it up to the light. It was a flowing delicate faux silk blouse, long at the bottom with buttons at the top. She put it next to her body in front of a mirror. It was too young for her, so she replaced it on the rack without much care. She really shouldn't be here, she thought. She wasn't going to buy anything anyway. Back out to the summer streets.

The sun pierced her skin like a blade. She looked up and saw a dot of green hovering in the blue sky. It hung there for a few moments, and then it was gone. She paused to look for the dot, staring up from under scaffolding that provided cover from the heat. She leaned against the metal pole that held the wooden planks above, waving a newspaper at herself, as if the hot wind it produced could actually make her feel cooler. The headlines told of the possibility of war in some foreign land. Same old shit.

God, there is construction everywhere in this damn city. When are they gonna be done building this place?

"Hey, lady, look out!"

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*** SYSTEM FAILURE ***
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CREATING FILE: core.dmp
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>> opendoc /r core.dmp
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ERROR: CANNOT OPEN FILE
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>> opendoc /d core.dmp
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FILE: core.dmp 0 odus
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>> delete core.dmp
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*FILE DELETED*
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>> bypass error
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SYSTEM ERROR BYPASSED
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>> restart
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BRIDGE PROCESS: **RESTARTED**
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“Lady, you okay?”

He was brown, skin and eyes, and covered in dust. He looked shaken, as if he'd seen the hand of death. Adrienne lay on the ground, also enshrouded in dust. He took off his yellow hard hat and cautiously touched her on the face and neck with calloused hands. Adrienne reached up to feel the wetness on her forehead. The red on her open palm sent a sourness to her stomach.

“Easy now,” he said. “The paramedics will be here in a minute.”



When Antoine finally came home, Adrienne knew exactly what he would say when he noticed the huge bandage on her forehead. “Why don’t you watch where you’re going?”

And true to form, that was exactly what he said after the prerequisite: “Are you all right?” and “Can I get you anything?”

“Yes, of course, I’m all right and no, thank you, I don’t want anything. I’m fine. I have a little headache. It’s not like the scaffolding actually fell on me or anything. It was just a scare. If you don’t mind I would like to get some rest. It’s been a hell of a day.”

His tired eyes stared down at her. Maybe he wanted to hold her in his arms. But something stopped him. In the old days, he would have been all over her with caresses and kisses. There would never have been a doubt in her mind about his love.

Night was draining away and the yellow of the morning drifted through the window. It was 6:18 a.m. and her head still throbbed. It was so quiet. Barely a car horn or voice. Antoine snored in the living room. Adrienne was curled up in their bed alone. Of late, Antoine preferred the couch to being next to her. She touched his unslept side of the bed. He had taken his pillow. The place where it had been was flat and empty. The tabby jumped up on the bed and mewed, then massaged her thigh. He wanted his breakfast. Why couldn’t he bother Antoine instead sometimes?

She and the cat crept quietly past the couch so as not to wake him. He woke anyway. He faced her and poked at the corners of his eyes to remove the crust there. He was embarrassed. *He should be*, Adrienne thought. A flush of heat rose to her cheeks, and she passed him to go into the kitchen to feed the one male in the house that she didn’t despise at the moment.

Antoine shuffled in like an old lady in his slippers and stood next to her, still rubbing his eyes. He wore nothing but his boxers, and his hair was as spiked and spindly as a porcupine’s. The smell of sleep was heavy upon him, a mixture of sweat and yesterday’s cologne. He brushed past her and mumbled, “Sorry.”

Adrienne nodded without looking at him. The cat was impatient and mewed in earnest.

“It’s coming. It’s coming. Shh!” she said to the cat. He continued to yowl in a rhythm of his own making. The scraping on the bottom of the can, the occasional sighs, the opening and closing of cabinet and fridge doors produced a song of a lonely kitchen. The cat finally calmed once Adrienne bent down to place his bowl in front of him.

Antoine ground some coffee, then set some water in the kettle to boil. Adrienne pulled open drawers, searching for aspirin, anything for her head. Then she remembered the prescription from the Emergency Room for painkillers.

“Would you call in my prescription to the pharmacy?” she asked. “Hmm?”

“My prescription,” she repeated. “Would you call it in? They might deliver it. Would you ask them to do that?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, not looking up from pouring ground coffee into his French press. The kettle steamed, then shook as it prepared itself to boil.

“So what’s going on here?” Adrienne said. Venom dripped from each word.

“What?”

“You tell me ‘what.’”

He shrugged.

“Look at me!”

“What?” He turned around and for a half second met her eye.

“What’s going on? Why are you acting this way? Did I do something?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” He reached for the kettle and poured hot water into his carafe. The water turned brown. “How’s your head?”

She slapped a dishcloth down on the counter and left the kitchen.

The purse she used the day before was hanging on the bedroom closet doorknob. It still had dust on it. She fished around inside, looking for her prescription slip. It lay half crumpled and a bit torn on the bottom. Unpronounceable words were scripted on the little form, signed by a doctor she barely remembered seeing.

She flattened out the slip and returned to the living room and sat on the couch surrounded by Antoine's disheveled sheets. Her arm lay on his still warm pillow. The muskiness of his sweat swirled around her. She closed her eyes and breathed.

Antoine meandered out of the kitchen carrying his coffee mug. The cat jumped up on the couch, contented and full with his breakfast. He crawled in circles on her lap several times before he found the right spot to settle down into. He purred loudly, hypnotically. She fell under his spell, stroked his soft fur, scratched him behind the ears. For a moment, she forgot the pulsing pounding in her head.

Something tapped at the window. Maybe the wind. She gazed up from petting the cat and saw a large owl sitting on the ledge. She blinked several times. It was still there, twisting its neck slightly to the right like an Egyptian hieroglyph dancer. Its white face was in the shape of a heart, with black penetrating eyes. Adrienne's body went numb, her mouth dry. She couldn't move. She could only focus on the owl. The cat moved beneath her hand. He was staring at the window, too. His tail puffed out and his heart raced against her thigh.

A jingle of keys interrupted her. Antoine sauntered out of the bedroom dressed in his business casual, ready to leave for work.

"I'm going to be working late tonight," he said, "so don't wait for me for dinner."

Adrienne could barely speak. "What?"

"I said to not wait for me for dinner tonight. What are you looking at?"

"Don't you see it?"

"See what?"

She stammered the words, feeling crazy and wanting to take them back even as she spoke them. "The bird outside the window."

"What bird?"

She turned away for only a moment. When she looked back, there was no owl, only open sky interrupted by high-rise apartment buildings like their own. The cat calmly slept on her lap.

Antoine walked up to the window. "Oh, I see..." he said.

Adrienne jumped up, tossing the cat to the floor.

“...it’s only the owl statue for scaring the pigeons.”

A stone sculpture of an owl sat on the ledge facing the skyline, unmoving and quite fake looking. It was doubtful if even the pigeons would be fooled by it.

“I thought I saw it move,” she said. “I guess my mind is playing tricks on me.”

“Maybe you should stay home today,” Antoine said.

“Yeah,” she said, not taking her eyes off the stone owl.

“But like I said, I’ll be home late. It’s a business thing. I can’t get out of it.”

Adrienne nodded her head and rubbed her neck.

“You okay?”

She felt herself frown. This was not the man who still cared for her. He was a guy doing the minimum to be considered polite. If she had been a stranger who slipped and fell on the street, he would have done the same. Then once he saw that she was okay, she was none of his concern.

“We should talk,” she said.

“I don’t have time right now.”

“Then when?”

“Maybe when I get home. I gotta go. I don’t wanna be late for work.”

In a few steps he was at the door.

“Are you going to leave me?” Adrienne said.

The tension in his shoulders told her what she needed to know.

“I’ll see you when I get home,” he said as he put on his jacket and walked out the door.

He must be really distracted to put on his jacket in this heat, she thought. The *click click* of his steps echoed in the empty hallway outside the closed door. Her world spun on a wobbly axis; her stomach turned. Her head pounded. She had forgotten to give him her prescription. It was still in her pocket.

The stone owl sat cold and unmoving on its ledge. She had never noticed it before. Adrienne studied its form, its size, its color. It wasn’t the owl of her vision from moments ago. It was smaller and a different shape. And how could she have seen it

from where she'd been sitting on the couch? The cat had seen it, too. Hadn't he?

A blue untroubled sky filled with soft rolling clouds of puffy white hung suspended above the city. A lone airplane, the length of her pinky's nail, crept ever so slowly past. The street below was beginning its day, workers crowding it as they made their way to their jobs. From this height, it was difficult to distinguish the people, but the trees...the leaves were golden brown. It must be fall. But she could have sworn it was summer...

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>> break
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** SYSTEM INTERRUPT **
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>> state status
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STATUS: NORMAL
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>> continue
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BRIDGE PROCESS: CONTINUED
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