

## I've Been Getting Better

It was a year ago, now, when I met her. If I could go back to that moment, I wonder if I would stop myself. It's a question I've been asking myself a lot, actually. A part of me wishes that I would say "yes", that if given the chance I would go up to my past self and say "don't do it, don't go over to her, it's a death trap". But I know I wouldn't. I know I would just sit there and let myself be drawn to her, captivated like just before a car crash. I can see the headlights right in front of me, drawing closer and closer like twin suns blazing in the night, and I have the briefest of moments to swerve out of the way, to scrape by just in the nick of time, but I don't, I just sit there and let those lights consume me and the glass ruptures around me and my world is tossed about like it's nothing, and that is because it *is* nothing, and all I can see in that moment is the cocky yet self-aware smile curve her lips in that way that made me go wild, and I know that it is too late. The reaper has taken me.

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It was a night like any other, as so many stories begin. I think that all good stories *have* to begin with mundane rituals. I used to think it was cliché when a book would open with "it was a day like any other (or at least, that's what she thought)" or something—dark and stormy night my ass—but I've come to realize that that normalcy is necessary. That backdrop is what sets the oddity, the life-changing moment that is sure to follow, apart from everything else. If you begin with chaos, then it has no impact, but mundanity? The humdrum just makes everything that little bit more impactful. Whatever, I'm rambling.

The sky had been dark for quite a while at this point, the shadow oppressing the street beyond. The only lights were the bright pink neons placed around the sign hanging from the front of the bar, and that just served to punch a meager hole in the darkness. A yawn drove my mouth open, felt the *pop!* of my jaws growing wide. I turned. The clock read 11:20. Usually business was pretty bustling at this time of night, but today'd been a slow day. That usually follows an afternoon rush, but I'd still been hoping to squeeze a bit more out of today. All that was left were the few stragglers, drinking their whatever-the-hells away—anger, sorrow, disappointment, what have you—but they just gave the whole place a really yucky atmosphere. One of the guys earlier'd tried to hit on me, but seeing as how he was basically falling out of his seat that didn't go very far. You get used to it, after a while, and it doesn't happen *too* too often which is nice. The bar I work at is a pretty respectable place, all things considered. Aren't too many of those around this part of town.

I caressed my forehead, working the creases out. Those damn lights were getting to me. Pink neons out front, pink neon bulbs lining the places where the walls meet the

roof, pink neon under the bar, behind the drinks, pink neon like a million little daggers driving into my eyes and up into my skull. God damn lobotomy by pink neon. Thinking about lobotomies just made me feel even worse. I get like that a lot, where my train of thought will take me to something that just makes me feel awful. I need to get better about that, but it's just hardwired into my brain at this point. Habitual torture, I guess you could call it. It's been said that I project that onto others, but I don't really see it. Not a great thing, but I've learned to live with it.

There's these little bells above the door that jingle and ding against each other whenever someone opens the door. Normally they're pretty damn annoying, especially 'cause we're usually pretty busy so you just have to hear these stupid bells jangling like hell, and if a big group comes in then good *God* it's awful. I've been tempted to go over there and rip the damn things off the door quite a few times, but if I did I think Bentley—he's the owner—would fire my ass on the spot if I did, so now I just have to sit through it every day until I go mad. I'm getting closer and closer.

This time, though, that *ding!* sounded different. No, that's not right. It *felt* different. Like the bells of Hell. It unsettled the hell out of me but I didn't really pay it any mind at the time. Rodney—another waiter—pushed up from the bar and made his way over to the new arrivals, and all the while I just stood there oblivious. What a fool.

Rodney took their order—it was clearly a *their*, I could hear two voices—and started back on his way to the kitchen. Finally I looked up. At first, it didn't register with me who I was looking at. In the booth right in front of me was a man and a woman, him seemingly in his mid-thirties and her in her late twenties, like me. He surprised me. He seemed pretty put-straight to be hanging in a bar at nearly midnight with some chick a good seven years younger than him. He looked like he worked out, maybe a military guy. He was pretty ripped, but he also composed himself like a guy who works out. I don't know. Doesn't really matter. He had short-cropped black hair and a pair of those real thin glasses that military people always wear. Unobtrusive, I guess. He'd somehow managed to fit himself into a white button-up but he was bulging out of it so much that I couldn't believe that one of the buttons hadn't whizzed off and hit me in the eye or something. He was leaning over the maroon table with his elbows planted, real caught up in whatever his girl was saying. All I could hear of it was a faint mumble occasionally punctuated by a big booming laugh from the guy. I kind of hated him, honestly. I couldn't tell you why, I just *did*. Maybe deep down I already knew who the girl sitting across from him was, or maybe he just rubbed me the wrong way. In that moment I was able to convince myself that his type were the kind of people I'd always hated which is stupid 'cause I can count the number of times I've talked to a military guy on one hand and frankly I thought he was pretty attractive besides, but I just hated him all the same. The old me might have even gone up to him and introduced myself, maybe even strike a match and get his number, who knows? I've never been the kind of girl to just sit around and let things happen *to* me. Or at least, I wasn't. Now I'm not so sure.

Military Guy's girl was stunning, at least in an odd, uncomfortably familiar way. I could swear that I knew her from somewhere—her appearance was pretty iconic, to say the least—but I couldn't quite place it. I took to studying her, real covertly, 'cause I just couldn't get the thought out of my head that I'd seen her somewhere before and I hate that feeling, like a song at the tip of your tongue that you just can't quite remember. The first thing that caught my eye was her hair. Blacker-than-night strands cut short to just above the shoulder with flames of neon pink licking up jaggedly at the edges. When she cocked her head her hair seemed to sway and meld the light around it, caught in such sharp contrast like the night and neons outside. She had a pretty face too. Green eyes, lips that were thin yet full at once, colored cherry-red, remnants of freckles around her eyes and on the crests of her cheeks—much like my own—and a nose that might once have been petite but was now slightly crooked, like it'd been broken and had healed wrong, but in its crookedness there was a new kind of beauty, a harsher, less innocent kind. Innocent was not how I'd describe her.

It hit me like a truck. I nearly fell over, to tell you the truth. I just couldn't believe it. Didn't *want* to believe it. That Lillian was here. That she was here with that... *man*. God, I wanted to vomit right there, all over the counter and the glasses and stools. What a sick joke, that we'd meet again here. That we'd meet again at all. Jesus Christ.

She was gazing out the window now, her dialogue faded even deeper into vague mumbling. Military Guy was studying her, taking a swig of his beer. First his eyes traveled across her face and it was okay, but then they journeyed lower and lower and my heart almost came up on the counter. Pig. God damn *pig*. I wanted to smash that bottle over his head, anything to make him stop *looking* at her like that. Finally he got up, heading towards the bathrooms. Lillian'd turned her head back to the seat where he'd been sitting, staring off into space.

I have no idea what I was thinking, honest to God, but I made my move. I shimmied out from behind the counter and went over to the table. My hands were clenched so hard my lacquered nails dug into my palms, sweat and now little trickles of blood drenching them. Oh Christ. Even my vision was getting fuzzy, but I just kept on going. I was a robot at this point, just following orders. I didn't realize I'd reached the table until I looked down at the top of her head. I was close. Too close. She looked up at me, met my eye, and I watched as the recognition and horror dawned on her. So much horror.

"Marjorie," she said. God, her *voice*. That lilting almost-lisp that had so taken me back when I'd first met her, just a year ago but that felt like an eon, many eons.

I gulped. "Lillian."

"What are you doing here?"

"I work here. What are you?"

"I drink here."

"I see that."

"Then why did you ask?"

"Christ, Lillian, I don't know."

She said nothing.

“Who’s he?”

She raised an eyebrow, so queenly, so hateful. “His name’s Jerome.”

“Oh.”

“Mhm.”

Before I could help myself this wicked scowl grew on my face. I couldn’t help myself. I really couldn’t. “Is he your new toy? Do you like it when he looks at you like that? Studies you like a lab exhibit?”

“What are you—?”

“You know *exactly* what I mean. I can see it in your face. Don’t think I can’t recognize that. You haven’t changed enough that I don’t know you anymore.”

She leaned back in her seat, disgusted. “Why are you here, Marjorie?”

“You already asked me that. Like I said, I—“

She held up a hand. It stopped me right in my tracks. “No no no. Why are you *here*, Marj?”

I gulped again. God damnit, I gotta stop doing that. “I don’t know, Lillian. I just thought....”

“Thought what?” She was relentless.

“That I could find out why.”

“Why what?”

“You know what.”

A silence hung over us, clouding us from the rest of the place. For a moment longer than eternity we just stared at each other, neither willing to back down or be defeated. God, if only I’d known.

“Because you ruined me.”

All the breath escaped from my body in a single moment. One second it was there, and the next, just gone. No, this couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t be.

“Lillian, I tried to—“

“You didn’t *try* to do jack shit, Marjorie! You just used my problems to feed your ego. It just took me a while to see it. You tried and tried to ‘help’ me, to let me work past things, to *be there* for me, but it just wasn’t worth a damn. And you saw it, too. It ate you up inside. No, don’t try and deny it. I know you just as well as you know me. *Better*, in fact. You saw one little issue with me, and yeah, I’ll admit it, my addiction was a problem, but I was working through it just fine without your help. And then in you come and I refuse your domineering bullshit, and suddenly your ego’s wounded. So you crack down. That’s what you always do, Marjorie. You crack down until you’re on top, until *you’re* the ruler. You invented problems for me that never existed, and then you made them real. Because that’s what you’re best at. Projecting your own insecurities onto others until those issues become a part of someone else. Maybe it gives you some sick pleasure, maybe it gives you relief, *that* I have no clue about, but what I do know is that half of the problems I have I have because of *you*. But I didn’t want to believe it, because

I loved you. I loved you so Goddamn much. But you're wicked, Marjorie. You're wicked and controlling and domineering and it sucks so bad because I want to love you and I want you to be the person I thought you were, but you just aren't. You never were, and you never will be, and I've learned to live with that. I've moved on, but clearly you haven't left behind the memory of your last prey." She spat the final words.

That rage returned, flaring so bright that I thought I might strike her, pummel her until only a little puddle of guts and gore remained. I hated her. God, I hated her so much. "But I loved you, Lillian."

"I loved you too, Marjorie. God, I loved you more than you realize." She paused. "I've been thinking a lot lately about what I would do if I could go back to the moment we met. If I would tell myself, seeing you across the way, to stop, to never talk to that woman because she *will* destroy you. If I would save myself." She shook her head in disgust. "But I don't think I would. It's like in the moment right before a car crash, where you just see the headlights of the car in front of you, two blazing suns in the dark, and you can still save yourself but you don't because you've accepted your fate. I wouldn't swerve. I would let that car hit me, let it toss my world about like it's nothing because to you it *is* nothing." She snorted. "The reaper has taken me."

I heard Military Guy returning from the bathroom, sighing like he'd just had the most glorious piss of his life. Lillian just sat there, staring up at me.

"Lillian."

"Marjorie."

"I love you."

She gazed down at her hands, like there was something inexplicably curious about them. When she looked back up at me, met my eyes, there was nothing in her gaze but hate. Just the most awful hate. "I don't love you, Marj. I don't love you and I never will again. Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice...." She nearly laughed. I could tell. I could always tell.

"Lillian..."

"Would you stop saying my name, Jesus Christ!"

My entire being crumbled around me. "I'm so sorry, Lillian. Goodbye."

Military Guy was almost at us now. This was it. These were the final words I would ever hear from her. "Goodbye, Marjorie." She smirked. "You always asked me if I was getting better, and even when I said 'yes', you never believed me. Believe me when I say this: I've been getting better, and it's because you aren't in my life."

Those words haunt me to this day.

Everything beyond that was a daze. I somehow got away from the table, heard Military Guy return and ask 'who was that chick', to which Lillian responded 'no one. Just someone I used to know', and then they laughed together and his hands were all over her and he was kissing her cheeks and her lips and her neck and all the while I could just barely make it out from the corner of my eye and I watched her watch me as he kissed her. He pulled her up from the seat and he slapped a wad of cash onto the

table and they went out the door, laughing and kissing and being gloriously happy all the while, and all the while I just stood there and watched.