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A Crowd Formed Below

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A Crowd Formed Below

Strangely enough, I awoke in the night and didn't feel well. There were cramps at the base of my stomach that could have been an ailment or evidence of some turmoil. I wasn't aware of any turmoil, but I often wasn't until after the fact. I sat at the edge of my bed, legs dangling, while looking out the window. It was a terrific view at night. I was several stories up, above my university's quad where gas lamps lit the pathway and couples on a midnight stroll. This view filled my heart before breaking it as I loomed from the library attic.

This was peculiar, to live above the library, but I had been fortunate. My university gave a distinguished scholar award for each discipline that came with a tuition stipend and on-campus housing. This was my on-campus housing. It had been designed for the head librarian when the building was constructed but had housed scholars for several decades. Some of them had gone on to write prolifically. I was living under the burden of their achievement. The view was worth it.

A group of seven or eight students gathered on the south lawn, treading over the grass. They wore thick mittens and jackets zipped to their chins which made me realize how cold I was sitting in bed. My feet dropped to the scratched hardwood, and I padded to my table. The roof slanted down, so I had to duck while striking a match for my candle. I knew it wouldn't give off much heat, but the idea of fire was enough. My apartment didn't have electricity.

I aligned myself between the candle and my bed, hoping to block the light. Syd was over there, tangled among the blankets. She was covered except her face which poked out and twisted into a furrow. Her left arm hung off the bed, fingers splayed and twitching at uneven intervals. I looked at her and knew that she was beautiful. Watching someone sleep reveals how you feel about them. It strips away any need to be defensive or abrasive or engaging and allows you to simply be in their presence and contemplate.

Out in the quad, more had gathered with the original group. There were a dozen students. The moon revealed itself so I could see them more clearly. They appeared alert. I figured it must have been at least one or two in the morning. I couldn't understand them, but I knew one thing; crowds are human metaphors. They mean something: pain, tension, anger, and the bigger

they become, the more they mean it. A crowd is a metaphor, but it's also a sign of something coming. I didn't know what was coming.

I brought my candle to the corner we called the kitchen, intent to boil water for tea. I hoped this might settle my stomach. The front burner sputtered. Our kettle clattered, water sloshing to its sides as I set it down. The bottom was wet and sizzled for a few seconds. I stood waiting for it to heat and noticed a manuscript I'd left on the counter, my story in progress. I had been excited about it until I wasn't. At first, I thought I'd been expressing something acutely, but then it had descended into a jumble of words. I couldn't understand myself. It was frightening how thin the line was. Syd had given me advice. She wasn't a writer, but she gave good advice. Still, I couldn't reach the story. It wasn't her fault.

Syd lived with me, essentially. She paid a lease elsewhere but lived with me. The apartment was our fantasy, our roleplay that we were artists struggling and on the verge of something remarkable. Inspiration would seep through the floorboards and stroke us while we slept. It was a shame I couldn't sleep. Syd could always sleep, but she was only an artist vicariously. Her major was political science. Her emphasis was on being my antithesis, providing pushback when I needed it. She made fun of my artistic inclinations, saying that I was absent minded and couldn't see the world in front of me for what it was. In our apartment we were Gods.

Wind hissed through a window. I wandered over and tried to feel around for the gap. I found it and held my finger against a light pressure. The hissing stopped.

Below there were at least thirty students, a shifting mass. I watched as they assembled in a line, curiously organized for their twisted faces. They began to march. Something was off, and, initially, I couldn't place what.

They weren't making noise.

The kettle began to scream. Time had skipped forward. I turned from the window. It hissed when I tore away my finger. The kettle shook as I pulled it off. I glanced to make sure Syd hadn't been woken. She sat in bed, squinting into my candlelight.

"What's going on?"

"Wasn't feeling well. Just making tea. Didn't mean to wake you."

“What time is it?” she said, reaching for her phone.

“Don’t tell me.”

“Why not?” The screen lit the bottom half of her face. I poured water into my mug. A shiver of vapor trailed upward.

“It makes me anxious, like I ought to be going back to sleep. Then I can’t get to sleep because I’m anxious.”

“A vicious cycle.”

“You have no idea. Do you want some,” I said, “now that you’re awake?”

She sighed and shifted her weight. I thought I heard muffled footsteps from the crowd outside but was imagining it. There were gusts of wind I could almost feel. It was cozy in the apartment.

“Sure,” she said.

As our drinks steeped, I joined her in bed. It surprised me how warm she was, how warm I was next to her. I rested my chin on her shoulder.

“Look out there,” I said and was taken aback myself. The group had doubled. More came from the shadows and melded with the column.

“What’s going on?”

Her voice trembled. I didn’t want her to be frightened. It hadn’t occurred to me to be frightened until she was.

“I’m not sure.” I tried to sound firm. “They showed up not long ago.”

I watched her eyes trace a circle, matching the progress below. Her chin quivered. I couldn’t figure out why.

“Are they trying to say something?”

“They’ve been silent.”

“I meant metaphorically.”

“I suppose I did too.”

“Why at night? No one will see them.”

She covered her mouth with her hand, but I had heard her clearly.

“I don’t know,” I said, and this was the truth. “There’s never a right time.”

Our tea had steeped enough. I went to retrieve them. The mattress accepted me. I set Syd’s mug in her hand. She gave the impression she was shaking. The liquid was still in her cup.

We sat, and we sipped, all in silence. The night had been muted. This was fine. My cramps struck, an incessant jab. My thoughts were elsewhere. I was happy Syd was awake. Our heads rested against each other’s while we blinked at the window. I imagined the proximity connected our thoughts, and it was almost possible to believe.

The crowd swelled. It covered most of the path. Our anticipation heightened, our breath shortened, as the beginning and end of the line neared each other. The snake swallowed its tail, and we exhaled, turning our heads with pleading eyes.

“What do they stand for?”

“I don’t think this is working between us.”

We spoke in unison, but I couldn’t help feeling that her sentence was a response to mine.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Us, our relationship, it’s not working.”

“It’s unemployed?”

“I mean I no longer find it fulfilling.”

She knew how to be honest. I had liked that about her once.

“What a time to talk about this, one in the morning.”

“It’s two thirty-five—”

“Dammit.”

“—and there’s never a right time.”

I couldn’t look at Syd, so I looked through the window again. More were pouring into the quad. They crept at the edges of my blurry eyes. Their revolving square was beginning to collapse, overloaded with life. It had been beautiful while it lasted. I was caught in the rapture of its dissolve.

My tea was cold. Time had skipped forward.

Syd was talking, she had been talking. I had been listening, but nothing was coming through. This was shock. A grenade had gone off inside my bunker, and I was shaking from the reverberation. She regarded me with doleful eyes and departed with a promise that we’d discuss things tomorrow. Every stable surface vanished with her, and, as she shut my apartment door, I didn’t know where she was going. It was frigid. Her teal pajamas couldn’t withstand the night.

I wondered if she’d go through the quad. It would have been impossible to know. There were too many bodies, none of them clearly defined. The ground had disappeared. A gyrating form trampled the grass. Everything was moving slowly, but it looked violent. I watched them. I wasn’t looking through the window. I was looking at the window, an opaque portrait of myself hovering over the chaos outside. My reflection grimaced, and I understood what the crowd meant to me.

There were too many blankets in bed for one person. I scrambled to the center of the room. Everything was the same, but the context had changed. It was a carnival ride, spinning in circles and pressing me against the walls of myself. Tea was spilt across the sheets. My cramps had dissipated into something worse. I felt the floorboards creak and wished they’d break, sending me somewhere dark.

The rumbling became more pronounced. It wasn’t a projection. I staggered to the window and fell, my forehead colliding with the sill.

Time skipped forward, possibly. The world shook as if it was alive. My face was flat against the floorboards. I struggled to lift my body. A hand on the ledge above, I drew myself up to see the view had changed. In the crowd, I could almost make out Syd’s face. The mass was growing, pounding at the side of my building with savage movements. It came in pulses, each one threatening to shake me from my feet. It had reached its critical mass long ago. Our kettle, my kettle fell from the stove. The candle tipped,

extinguishing itself. The apartment was cast in darkness. The world was cast in darkness. I clutched my manuscript because it was nearby, and I needed something to hold on to.

Something was struck below, a pillar, a support. I felt it give way. The building moaned as it leaned, a sound so low it had a physical presence. It wrapped me and pressed me against the window as the moan became a shriek and the angle became irreversible. In the window I saw the ground and what was left of myself. Syd was gone.

About Parker Stenseth

Parker Stenseth is a film student at a school without a film program. He speaks a little French, plays a decent game of chess, and looks like if Machine Gun Kelly had gone to Catholic School and really bought into it.