

The Good Side

The city smog and frost lick their way along the outer panes. There are smudges on the glass— fingerprints from streetwalkers and children with sticky, curious hands. The outside’s watchful eye gazes at them, the couple on the other side of the glass—on the Good Side. The side that smells of coffee and kisses, and freshly baked bread. They sit – on that Good Side – opposite one another, eyes lowered, legs ever-so-slightly touching at the knee. Enough contact to suggest that there is a subtle intimacy, but one that has grown mutually silent after years of Saturday morning coffee and kisses.

The woman brings her hands up to the table. She slowly wraps her fingers around the cardboard cup in front of her, watching the steam that rises from its thick dark liquid. There is a weariness to her eyes, although they remain ensconced in listless wonder. Wonder for what was, what is, and what could have been. Wonder for the iridescent steam that dances higher up and dissipates as the gap closes between its vaporous body and the industrial ceiling—oh! So close! So close to freedom before it departed, before her eyes are pulled away and she looks back at the man opposite her, staring too, at the steam rising from his own cup.

There is a passiveness in his eyes. One that has grown with the longevity of the two’s weekly routine. A ritual that involves Jerusalem bagels, apple turnovers, and piping black coffee. A ritual that ends when the clock strikes impatience in his wife, brought on by the flock of youth and yoga moms with infants in tow. She never understood the urge to be lithe and flexible after giving birth.

“Surely their bodies have stretched enough?” She’d mutter half-jokingly to her husband, leaning in closer to him, mouth smiling yet eyes glowering above her coffee cup, staring daggers at the women before her.

He would respond with a simple shrug, whispering, “Who knows.”

While knowing the truth all along: that her joke comes from a point of misplaced hurt. A hurt that can’t be cured with their weekly ritual, but can be alleviated with enough distance from the root; from the mothers and children who unfortunately seem to always penetrate the Good Side of the glass, breaking his wife’s soft delicate haze of coffee, kisses, and untouched intimacy.

Ushering his wife out of their beloved safe space, deemed no longer habitable by the shaking of her hands, the man exits the cafe, arm extended behind the door, holding it long enough for the pair to escape the maze of gurgling infants and matcha-fuelled mothers. The hairs on the back of his neck stand straight as they are re-exposed to the outside frost. He puts a hat that was once not needed over his now-bare head, and looks to his wife as she daintily slips gloves over her fragile fingertips. The series of events had gotten to her, it was clear. Though she’d never admit this to him. So instead she covers the stressed exposed vein in her neck with a soft cream scarf she’d knitted herself—a skill she’d learned long ago for a life they had lost. Tucking the loose ends of fabric tightly into her coat, masking her yearning from those on the inside, she forgets, of course, that on the outside, standing next to her, is a man whose love for her once held an urgency. An urgency that turned into protection and tenderness as it aged, like day-old coffee stains.

He can see her hands shaking, despite the attempt she makes to hide this under soft supple leather. He hears the raggedness and warble in her breath as she breathes the frosted air into her lungs. He can see the longing shine through the cut-cold blue of her eyes as she glances back and forth between her knit-work and the women in the window, strollers in tow. He watches the downward curl of her lip behind the loose strands of graying hair that blow across her face. He sees her, dressed in layers of cashmere and tungsten, fiercely fighting a soft-sharp vulnerability. Reaching to grab her shaking hand, the man looks toward the traffic going by as they stand together on the street corner. He wonders to himself, why time and time again, the two go through the same ritual when it acts as a constant reminder of what is, what could have been, and what can never be.