

Ineffectual

by

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FROM BLACK

We hear the sounds of nature.

We hear a stream gurgling.

Birds.

Leaves.

Thrashing water.

A match is struck in the dark.

EXT. RIVER'S EDGE - DAY

From a distance, we can see a footbridge and a stream. The landscape is cold and muted; the trees are skeletal.

Then we see her. A girl stands beside the river, her back to us. She is looking down in the stream.

From her vantage, atop the footbridge, there is stillness in the water. There is silence.

We notice a momentary and pensive sadness in her eyes before a gust of wind sets a chill in and brings her back to the present.

Her name is AMELIA. She is twenty-eight with a severity that ages her. Bracing against the harshness of the Pacific Northwest, she is alone. Looking back toward the stream we notice-

EXT. STREAM - NIGHT - PAST

A man writhes and flails in the water. Churning up a rich foam, his bearded face is in a panic.

The water looks so cold. Each gasp is one of considerable effort.

There is fire reflected in his eyes.

EXT. STREAM - DAY

The stream is calm. There is no one but her looking down. Amelia seems almost troubled by the vision but resolute. She exits the bridge.

EXT. HILLSIDE - DAY

The young woman travels up the countryside toward a lovely cabin, pulling her overcoat tight.

Silently, she mouths numbers as she walks. She is counting her steps.

As the sun sets behind her, a storm cloud rolls in.

Just then--something in the grass, flitting like a field mouse with a broken foot. She retrieves it.

It is a book, open to a page which reads:

Existence, or at least a minute part
Of my existence, only through my art,
In terms of combinational delight;
And if my private universe scans right,
So does the verse of galaxies divine
Which I suspect is an iambic line.
I'm reasonably sure that we survive
And that my darling somewhere is alive-

Amelia promptly closes it.

The lightest wisps of snow trace the breeze.

EXT. CABIN - DAY

Upon arriving at the cabin, Amelia notices a man walking away from the porch.

MAN

Amelia, that storm's coming in fast
 and you're surveying the
 countryside with a fractured
 whatchamacallit.

AMELIA

I'm healed, Shep.

SHEP is sixty-one this month, one half Chinookan Native, draped in stiff work-wear and smoking a clove cigarette. He stands by his pick-up.

SHEP

Heal-ing.
 (beat)
 I thought she would be done by now,
 child. Those damn German parts.

As Shep steps closer, Amelia recoils. We take special notice of the ember on his cigarette.

SHEP (CONT'D)

Sorry.

He realizes and steps it out.

AMELIA

It's alright. About the car. I'll survive. I always do.

(looking at leg)

I don't have anywhere to go anyway.

Shep hands her a big paper bag of groceries.

SHEP

A weeks worth.

AMELIA

Thank you.

She notices his trepidation.

AMELIA (CONT'D)

What is it?

SHEP

Can't I convince ya to come down, stay with Maria and me. Just until the storm passes.

AMELIA

No.

SHEP

I'm afraid you'll be snowbound and I won't be able to get back up this road. If we lose power-

AMELIA

If we lose power, I've got the generator.

SHEP

The people down in town, they- there's no reason to be-

AMELIA

What?

SHEP

No one would bother you is all.

AMELIA

I'm not afraid of the people, Shep.
I just need more time.

Amelia nervously moves in to hug Shep. He is delicate. When they touch-

There is a flash of images:

EXT. CABIN - NIGHT - PAST

A Volvo station wagon is pulled up on the flank of driveway. All the doors are swung open. The nighttime is damp and swollen. The trees reflect the orange of the raging fire which engulfs the nose of the car.

Again, a match is struck.

EXT. CABIN - DAY

She breaks the embrace.

SHEP

Goodbye now, child. Oh, there's more of them now. Them publishing types out of New York can really afford the good ones too.

Amelia sighs as she walks toward the porch.

There is a vase of flowers on the bottom step when she arrives. A card sticks out of the bouquet. She takes them in hand.

After Shep drives away, Amelia looks down at the stairs.

She tries to mount them, counting as she does, but is forced to restart time and time again. It becomes evident she is suffering from some form of compulsive disorder.

INT. CABIN - DUSK

Finally, she bursts through the door. Tears stream down her face.

She pulls the card.

I'm so sorry for your loss, Amelia, love. What a terrible accident. We want you to know, we're thinking about you in New York. Both of you.

Lydia Kinbote

Putnam Associates

Amelia plucks the heads from the roses and eats a petal. She then closes the door behind her.

Inside, the cabin is one large space with conjoined living room, dining room, and kitchen. Above the kitchen is a loft space with master suite. There is a short hallway leading a guest bedroom and powder room.

In the kitchen, Amelia drops the flowers into a trash bin filled with several other bouquets at various stages of decay.

We hear wind beat at the exterior walls.

She still has the book and, opening to the first pages, reads a handwritten inscription:

For my nymph come pirouetting. The only editor I trust. My wife. I love you. -Charles

Amelia leaves the book on the counter.

In the living room, she puts on a record (compulsively flipping it a few times before dropping the needle). We see her walk in this pattern, stopping only to pull a teabag from a drawer. She turns on the T.V. She eyes a thermostat. She carefully warms her hands by a space heater.

Back in the kitchen, Amelia eyes the gas stove before dejectedly taking out an electric kettle and heating some water.

While removing groceries from her bag, Amelia finds a long box, gift wrapped with a note:

Just in case of emergency, child. The wise at nightfall praise the day. Just for emergency.

AMELIA

I think he should be a king of this land or others.

She tears the paper off and immediately drops what she recognizes as a box of extra-long kitchen matches. They spill across the floor.

Amelia gasps and recoils.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT - PAST

At the fireplace, a man holds an unlit match. Kneeling beside Amelia, he strikes it, holds it up, and takes her hand. We recognize him to be the man from the water. No longer thrashing. No longer dying.

He is showing her how to light the wood burning stove within the fireplace.

INT. CABIN - DUSK

Amelia hastily collects the matches and leaves the box on the counter. She resumes her pattern. Checks the thermostat. Checks the electric heater. Takes note of the cold fireplace.

From the center of the room Amelia notices an announcement from the television and turns the knob down on her stereo.

FEMALE ANCHOR

More than 30,000 residents in the state are without power as those winds and snows and freezing rains move in from our northeast.

MALE ANCHOR

It's the freezing rain that really gets you.

FEMALE ANCHOR

Absolutely, Mark. Now, we've been in this cold front for days but when your husband drowns out there that's just a completely different story now isn't?

MALE ANCHOR

Well that's right, Martha, I mean do you suppose the water would actually freeze in a sheet above his body, effectively, preventing him from ever escaping that cold watery prison?

FEMALE ANCHOR

Well that's tough to say, Mark, but what we know for sure is that-

She clicks off the television and sits beside the record player.

She closes her eyes and-

INT. CABIN - NIGHT - PAST

He takes her by the hand. We can see their wedding rings. He is leading her in a dance.

CHARLES

You found it. My favorite book. How ever did it get all the way out there?

INT. CABIN - DUSK

Amelia opens her eyes. She sees the book on the counter. She sees the box of matches. She sees her kettle roiling.

In the kitchen she pours a mug of hot water. Then spills it in the sink. Something about it just wasn't quite right. She pours another. And spills it. The water continues to boil. Suddenly-

His hands are around her waist. He turns her around. Runs his fingers through her hair.

He kneels and runs his hands along her stomach. Tugging at her clothes. He takes her fingers into his mouth. Bruises are revealed.

We can't see his face. We know understand he isn't truly there with her.

CHARLES V.O.

It's gonna get cold.

The needle is skipping on the vinyl.

The temperature on the thermometer is dropping.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT - PAST

The living room is now darker. He stands in the center, dripping wet, arms out as though waiting for a dance partner.

This is the vision of the man, drowning in the icy riverbed, come back to his tortured wife.

INT. CABIN - DUSK

At the stove, she is alone. We get the sense that at some point, her O.C.D will break her.

As Amelia tries to cross the room toward the record player to stop it from skipping, she has trouble choosing her path.

One second, he is there, lighting the fire for her. The next he is gone.

She stumbles and falls. When she hits the floor, the bump is enough to fix the needle and the song resumes. Only now the kettle is screaming.

The power goes out.

Amelia has lost consciousness.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT - PAST

In the moonlit living room, he takes her hand. They dance a dark, slow waltz. Sometimes it looks pleasant. Other times, he is dripping wet, ghastly. Other times still, she is dancing all alone. We see their hands clasp. We see their feet perform the steps. We see the torn flowers. The framed picture.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Snow beats against the window panes. The kettle has gone cold. Amelia wakes up. The thermostat has dropped.

She sits there, on the floor, afraid. She looks at the fireplace.

CHARLES V.O.
You'll have to do it.

AMELIA
No.

EXT. CABIN - NIGHT

Amelia clings to the wall as the snow piles up around her. Finally, she finds the generator.

AMELIA
What the fuck is wrong with you?

She unscrews a cap, shakes the basin. It is full of gasoline. She recoils and falls on her ass.

Amelia stands. She finds a second cap and undoes it revealing a hand pull. She grabs it, rears herself, and yanks the cord. The generator doesn't turn over.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Amelia takes her landline phone off the wall and tries it. The lines are down.

Charles stands in the center of the room dripping wet and looking quite dead.

CHARLES

If I were there, I would do it for you my love. If I were there I would do so many things. I've been vanished, my dear. The lunatic king. I'm so glad you found it.

AMELIA

I can't make fire. I can't.

CHARLES

Why are you so afraid? Your own pale ineffectual fire stolen from the sun.

(beat)

I left it there for you to find.

Amelia takes the book. She rips the pages out. Balls them up. Into the fireplace.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT - PAST

Pulling out of an embrace, she takes her face out of his shoulder, looks up at him. He drags a thumb across her lips. The striking of a match is reflected in her face. The somnolent romance of their waltz melts away into fear.

The car with its doors all open. Tail lights turn the forest red.

The stream, flowing.

CHARLES V.O.

Did you tell them it was an accident? The editors? The publishers?

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Amelia tries the matches but her O.C.D. won't let her. One after another. This one not right. Too long, too large, too asymmetrical.

Charles is still dripping. He wipes a drip away, smells it, then licks it and recoils.

CHARLES

Hazel Shade drowned herself in a frozen lake for the beauty she could never possess.

Finally, she strikes a match, but drops it in fear and steps it out.

Amelia begins to cry.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT - PAST

The sweetness sours as his hands find her neck.

A cup smashes across the floor.

The fire rages.

He is screaming at her. Pushing her. Hitting her. He holds her hand to the flame. Strikes a match in her face. Throws a cup, a dish, flowers, a picture.

He lifts her shirt and reveals a patchwork of burn marks.

CHARLES

Be a good wife Amelia. Everyone in New York says you're such a good wife. I tend the fire while you tend my words. Everything clean and orderly.

AMELIA

Please don't.

CHARLES

Fire is clean.

Amelia is able to free herself by smashing a plate over her attacker's head.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

There is one match left in the box.

She picks up the book. Opens the first page and, looking at the inscription from her abusive husband, tears it out.

AMELIA

I won't do it anymore. I won't.

EXT. CABIN - NIGHT - PAST

Amelia runs out the back door, down the driveway. Her attacker isn't far behind, but he pauses in his pursuit, to pick up a gas can.

CHARLES

Honey! Don't make me do this!

He pours the gasoline all down his head and body. Gritting his teeth through maniacal anger, he moves on.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

(taking out a match)

Amelia! I will do it!

He light the match and-

Suddenly, the man is struck with a Volvo station wagon. The gas can bounces off the hood. The match ignites the flame. Charles is knocked into the snow unlit but the car goes up in flames.

Amelia escapes, leaving the car just as we've been seeing it.

EXT. HILLSIDE - NIGHT - PAST

She drags his unconscious body. All the way to the bridge. And rolls him off of it. The impact sinks him but slowly Charles begins to rise. Surely, to wake, soon.

But Amelia comes back with a large stone and rolls it off the edge.

He is thrashing again. Writhing. His face deeply submerged. Gasping for air. Just as we first saw him, only this time, the stone is revealed to us. Sitting on his lower abdomen. Holding him down, indefinitely.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

She strikes the last match and ignites the crumpled page before tossing it into the stove.

It catches.

EXT. RIVER'S EDGE - NIGHT - PAST

Heaving, she stands on the bridge looking over the man.

INT. CABIN - NIGHT

Amelia falls back away from the fireplace.

She is freed from her fear and able to save herself from the cold. Warmth fills the cabin.

EXT. CABIN - NIGHT - PAST

The car fire raging up the hill behind her, Amelia watches her husband drown.

She is freed from the man, able to save herself from his hands.

AMELIA V.O.

I was your darling. Difficult,
morose. Beneath the word but above
the syllable. Stunted by your false
azures. Burnt by your promises. I
fucking killed you.

She smiles.

The End.

'Gotta Get Away' by The Black Keys