

TITLE: THE KIND OF LIFE (edit ver.)

Hi, is Anita there?

Fran had played with many different iterations of their first sentence before deciding to rely on that one and, though there are many other things they could say (and now, in hindsight, would have preferred to say), this is the preliminary they have chosen to use. Fran was younger than Anita. To clarify, “younger” was not a value statement. It was barely-an-observation. Fran thinks it and stresses its valuelessness because they believe it is unfair that one does not grant one’s self that concession. The term “younger” also includes the presupposition of an Older, and furthermore, the existence of a temporal continuum wherein Younger will become Older.

This was a brutal generalization against the passage of time. To impose these two adjectives together, by virtue of their nature, was to construct a dialectic. Younger and Older pushed against each other in equal measure as heaving, suited chests in waltz-step. This sequence only sometimes (never, maybe) occupies the same chronological frame, Fran realized. When Saint-Saëns came to an end, they would take exit to opposing sides of the room and hope to never see each other again.

From high above Jasper Street, Fran is watching the snow fall. Their hand holds a phone. It's late on a Saturday, yet they are still in the office. Parallel to their Chromebook is a cold mug of coffee that will eventually need to be washed in the shared kitchen before Fran goes from the ninth floor to the lobby, then from there to the underground parking lot, and then home. (The underground parking space was actually quite a major win for Fran this year. Previously, during their first year after moving out, they had commuted all the way from home by bus, even during winter. Fran made sure that would never happen again.) A couple hours ago, Fran tried to call Anita, but it went to voicemail after ringing through.

“Hi, is Anita there? This is Fran. I... just wanted to talk to you. It's okay if you don't want to, or don't call back, though. I'll try again later. Today.”

This is the kind of life that Fran lives.

They shake their head, turning their bleary eyes from the window's black void back to their laptop. The coffee goes down their throat with no gulping action. It tastes like shit. Fran had once heard about very expensive coffee grounds made from beans that had been swallowed whole and were then excreted by some small creature. Fran often wondered what that would taste like, and when asked about their hobbies, Fran would usually

reply “coffee” or “coffee beans.” At home, Fran used a Keurig. Anita bought it for them when they still lived together. Even though the necessary tools for making a proper cup were there—the beans, the grinder, the press, the kettle, Frans’ hands—Anita was still right. It was easier. And, Fran thought, it wasn’t like they were actually *good* at making coffee anyways. *Like the instant stuff, the shit you get from gas stations.* Fran had heard those kinds of sentiments before.

As a child, Fran had always been praised for their memory. Vowel books, the alphabet, and simple math were the same as classical literature or calculus. Even the piano made sense, given time. Fran made sure to be humble when people praised them for this. Not only because of their usual apprehension from pride, but also because Fran could only solve problems they had encountered before, or had been very specifically taught to manage. This was an advantage and penalty, but it was always easier to graciously accept a compliment than explain this strange problem. Thus, Fran played a comfortable game for many years. They graduated each of the school system’s stages with no fanfare. Fran remembered each one. They were all very similar, Fran eventually came to conclude. Whether that was their actual problem or not wasn’t on their mind.

Post-secondary school was a little bit different. Fran didn't really have anything they wanted to do, so they went to a local public community college. Although their parents were open to help pay for their tuition, Fran picked up an internship at the company they now work for while living at home. They sometimes "forget" how long their degree was, or what it was in, or what the names from anyone in Fran's cohort were, but that's not true. Fran just never bothered to remember those things in the first place.

Life is not easy, Fran often thinks to themselves, but it certainly isn't as hard as it's made out to be.

Fran hums as they continue to idly click and scroll in front of their laptop. They can feel the vibration through their chin, which rests on their fist. The sound of a blunted woodpecker begins to echo in the empty office suite, but once Fran's knee stops banging against their desk, it ceases. *Life is not easy, but it's certainly not as hard as it's made out to be.* For once, memory is beginning to fail. They weren't the one to say that.

Fran's head tilts to the side, tired eyes being granted allowance to close. It must have been Anita, then.

Fran remembered the feeling of being told that they were handling the break-up well. *Haha, they laughed. Thank you.*

There was not much to handle anyways. Fran and Anita had only been dating for the better part of a year. They met three years earlier, when Fran had not yet graduated. Anita worked two floors above them, for a separate business altogether. The first time they had met in the elevator Fran had greeted them like a coworker without realizing they were not, in fact, a coworker.

“Good morning,” Fran managed, pulling the slipping straps of their backpack higher over their shoulders. Trying to balance the extra fabric of a winter coat and a backpack was always hard. The latter had nearly fallen off when Fran was trying to get on the bus. The quiet ringing of passing floors became more obvious and Fran turned to see why they had not yet received a reply.

Shadows. That was the first word Fran ascribed to Anita’s gaunt face. They were about the same height, Fran guessed, yet they took up so little space in the elevator. Most importantly, Anita did not wear the bright blue security badge for the ninth floor, but a red one. Fran turned to look at the still-shut elevator doors and begged to their internal God for it to open faster. Although the awkward hell lasts for only two floors, Fran feels it an eternity and hastily exits once it stops on the ninth.

“... Good morning.”

Fran turns around. Anita makes and holds eye contact as the elevator’s reflective panels begin to shut. Now staring backwards with the realization that they are being seen, Fran’s body does not move. Fran begins to say it again, “*good morning,*” but both Anita and the elevator are gone by the time Fran can form the first plosive syllable. Fran’s God smiles cruelly, and they remain in that half-turned position until another phone alarm goes off.

The first horrid consciousness is a lumpy shadow interspersed and grasping into the gloom of daybreaking. Even in Fran’s memories, their fingers never break the surface of the bleary light-shadow. Perhaps, because it is the first one, Fran has had ample time to account for this disjunction. How old were they? Where was this? Was it even theirs? Eventually, the passage of time has led Fran to realize that the only thing from this thought worth thinking about was that hands were not made to touch sunlight, indirect or otherwise. Somewhere, the blunted woodpecker begins to beat its song again. In another great etude of hedonism, Fran shuts their laptop and uses the same resolution to bring the rest of their mug’s contents into their empty gullet. It was time to go home, now.

In continuously flowing the same course, rivers carve canyons. This is only part of the much larger system, though, and Fran once thought about what water could be thinking about as it made its dreary commute from snow, to snow-melt and evaporation, and then back to the clouds. It's a useful (and necessary) cycle to humans but, were they not here, snow would still take the elevator on the same path: from the ninth floor to the main floor, to the underground parking lot then onto the freeway, and then back to their home. The specifics of home don't matter; what it's like and who lives in it are secondary to what role it fulfills. When Fran returns home, it's just as cold inside as it was outside. No one can account for their absence while they are at work anymore. *It's a waste to have it on when no one's here.* Anita, again. Fran can't remember the minutiae of a committed relationship, but those single sentences still hum clearly while they wait over the kettle to boil (*won't* is a more salient contract than *can't*, in this specific case, but Fran can't admit that yet).

There is a card underneath stacks of flyers and ads. The waking boiler in Fran's one-story home provides the right hand for Gruber's *Stille Nacht*. Fran closes their eyes.

It's several hours later when they open again. The holiday song has long since faded. Fran takes the pile of mail

that had served as their companion for the long journey, along with the card that sits below it. The few steps it takes to turn this place into that place, where the trash bin is, feel like less than a less-than-a-second. Fran would like to say in their mind that *the garbage falls to the bottom and is not seen again, hidden by the darkness of the receptacle* but it is never dark enough in the city for complete hiding unless it is purposeful. Fran can see cold oil soaking into the newsprint. They can only assume the same act of submersion is taking the card, as well. It doesn't matter who it's from, but Fran can't admit why yet.

“Haha. Thank you.”

Fran's toneless voice calls out into the still-dark room. They have never wanted to never have a throat more. The melting of snow, the commute from downtown, the shitty coffee. The elevator panels, the balancing between jacket and bag, the *Danse Macabre*. Endlessly. Fran will continue to pack their lunch bag for tomorrow, remove their work clothes, and head to bed like every day before. When morning comes they'll make sure the heater is off before leaving. Fran is yet to do any of these things; they are still standing in front of the trash, cloaked by the half-murk. Younger's hand writhes into the backpocket of their pants to excise their cellphone. Lips part as Fran forms words.

“I just wanted to wish, uh, you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year, to you. Hopefully this gets to you. I don’t know if I’ll talk to you again.”

Their eyes close once more before they hear their phone landing atop the paper in the trash. Fran wished the oil would take them, too.