



Thomas

Trinity Scalia

“Seriously, Thomas, get over yourself.” She slammed the door in my face and went back to whatever she was doing before I decided to visit. Through the glass, I watched her silhouette climb the stairs, making hollow steps the whole way up. I rang the doorbell again. It chimed deeply like a grandfather clock, but no one came to answer. An untouchable rain was falling. The kind that feels like mist. Stuffing my hands into my pockets, I walked around to the backyard.

Orange leaves blanketed the lawn. On the second story, framed by her white latticed window, she was pacing her room. Occasionally she would be concealed by my awkward angle. A cool strain of jazz floated into the evening. Some artist I was unfamiliar with. She seemed unreal, like some kind of movie star. There was something alluring about her in there and me out here. The wet air was soaking into my jacket and hair. My hands, still in my pockets, were starting to shake. But there she was, a square of light cast into the backyard. She was undoubtedly warm.

I watched her for longer than I should have, but she never looked out the window. It's not like I was well hidden, she could have seen me if she tried. The blue evening melted away, and the autumn night settled in. At some point, the rain fell like it was supposed to and the world got colder. Even then I didn't want to leave. The Italian cypress I hid behind swayed in the wind. When the rain got heavy, she closed the window, and I walked home.

Under the streetlights, I felt yellow. Light played around the corners of my eyes, blurred by the water that ran down my face. My hand looked jaundiced. The rain convinced me to stop at the next bus stop and ride home instead.

A girl I'd never seen before was riding alone, sitting with her knees squeezed together, and her bag to her chest. I passed her on my way to my seat. Her hair was a shaggy red curtain that fell over her eyes and onto her shoulders. Her facial features were unremarkable. They all seemed to function independently, but when put together on her face, anything exceptional about them was lost. I sat two rows behind her.

Other than the girl, the only other passenger was an efficient-looking businessman sitting in the back row. His head was resting on his palm, lost in thought or dozing off. I tried to look at the smear of streetlights, but couldn't stop myself from stealing glances at the girl in front of me. The copper scent of the bus was entwined with a sugary smell. Maple or vanilla or something. I couldn't get that jazz tune out of my head. It ran its way around my plans for conversation. Everything I could think to say to the bus girl was drowned out by a sultry trumpet.

I couldn't bring myself to talk to her. She was standing to get off. As the bus came to a stop, she looked at me and smiled. A square kind of smile, crooked and meaningless. Then she stepped off the bus and into the night. I pulled my coat tight around my shoulders. The metal bus seats suddenly felt very cold.

There was no way I could go home now. The bus ambled along its preordained path and when it arrived downtown, I got off. I could walk home if absolutely necessary. A blue digital 7:02 flashed on my wrist. Rain was falling around the bus stop, sliding down the clear plastic walls, and pooling at my feet. I couldn't complain, I was still relatively dry.

Across the street, two girls were standing under the awning of a bar. A neon cowboy was drinking beer on a continuous loop. An "open" sign glowed in the window behind them, bathing the whole scene in a faint red. They were just talking to each other. One would make big gestures with her hands, and the other would nod along in agreement or occasionally cock her head or gesture along. It was like watching a puppet show. I tried to imagine the puppet master and could think of him only as a medieval jester. The world, a wooden stage framing this hollow life.

My clock read 7:14 when a car pulled up, obscuring my view of the bar. A Toyota Corolla, mid-2000's by the looks of it. Minutes later it drove away and the only thing remaining at the front of the bar was the neon cowboy sign throwing back another one. The rain showed no sign of slowing down. I

decided to have a drink. The quiet in the streets was interrupted only by the steady beat of rain. People pack up early on nights like this, maybe I could grab a beer in peace.

The man behind the bar was pouring a drink with a stoic look on his face. The place was nearly deserted and a thick cigarette smell hung in the air. A man who looked like the cowboy on the sign was shooting pool alone. The people who were there milled around like they had been dropped in some bar purgatory where there was nothing to do but drink, smoke, and walk around like NPCs. The barstool I sat in was cow patterned, I pulled it as close to the counter as it would go.

The bartender eventually made his way over. He asked what I was drinking in a twisting country accent. "Heineken," I responded.

He sniffed with one nostril, looking me up and down. I assumed he would ask to see my ID, but he didn't, just turned around and made himself busy. He returned with a Budweiser.

At 8:00 more people started funneling in. The stools around me filled up. People would press over my shoulder and gesture for the bartender, now joined by a short guy who looked equally uninterested in everything going on around him.

Everyone who walked in was dressed in upscale country clothes. It looked like an odd imitation of blue-collar life. The girls were all wearing short skirts and cowboy boots. One with curly blonde hair and a cowboy hat looked at me. Unreadable expression. Across the bar, two more girls were talking to the short bartender. One laughed and held her hand near her mouth. The pose was identical to Barbie, inarticulate and unreal. A country song was playing, the lights were set to a moody purple. I couldn't tell what was making me sick, but I thought it was the beer. I paid for my tab and started to walk.

My mom was cooking dinner when I got home. She was wearing flannel pajamas, slippers, and her wet hair in a loose ponytail. Standing over a pot of boiling water, she was smoking a cigarette and flicking the ash onto a paper plate. She didn't notice the door open. Humming to herself, she dumped a box of pasta into the water. With large, exaggerated motions, she stirred. I wonder what my dad saw in her. The fluorescent light bulbs made her duality strikingly obvious. Not old yet, but not young either. I felt bad for her, straining over spaghetti that would sit uneaten in the fridge.

I walked past her without saying anything. In my room, I thought about a jester, playing with his little puppets. My mom was talking softly in the hallway, an indecipherable whisper. I didn't respond to the knock on my door. The bossa nova from earlier wouldn't get out of my head.