

The One

I first saw her at a party sitting among the bohemian crowd, all skinny, all smoking, all intense with their words. She leaned forward with a glass of red wine in one hand, a cigarette in the other. She spoke as if in secret, telling them everything she knew of social injustice and political corruption, all the wrongs that they were certain in their hash-filled haze they could set right. Stewart came from his bedroom, hugged me, took my suitcase and ragged coat before sitting softly beside her on the couch. His arm hung loosely around her shoulder as he watched her speak. *This* was the girl he had told me about. *The one*, he said. *Suzanne*.

They took me in for several weeks and their two became three. We talked feverishly into the morning until the last drop of alcohol. He was a well-funded writer. She was trying to make it as a painter. I had been crashing with friends trying to finish my manuscript, but mostly I was drinking too much and running out of money. She was neither coy nor hesitant like girls I had known. The ones who pretended to know less than they did. Who sat with perfect legs pointing toward garrulous unkempt boys, quietly waiting for the moment one would want to take her home.

Stewart and Suzanne glided into the bedroom, arms around each other's waists, her lips like flower petals against his ears. I ached for her.

I slid under the blanket on the old plaid couch. I couldn't sleep. I lit a cigarette. I thought of them together until I drifted into a drunken sleep.

She was beautiful in the morning, boiling water for coffee and making eggs, taking drags from a joint at perfect intervals. Without Stewart I was speechless in her presence. I wrote in my notebook with a heavy head and waited for him to wake. She placed the coffee and eggs before me. Her slender brown fingers touched everything with a tenderness my heart could not bear.

I wrote about her.

Six months after I first saw her we were standing at the train station waving goodbye to Stewart. He was leaving for Paris for a month to write. A graduation gift from a father he barely knew.

"Be good," he said to Suzanne brushing her soft black curls behind her ears.

“I’ll be back,” he said to me with a wink and a pat on the shoulder.

Suzanne invited me to stay in her family’s home on the coast of Maine to finish my manuscript.

“You can write,” she said. “I can paint. I won’t bother you.”

The small white house stood at the shore. Wooden stairs led to a deck which gazed at the ocean. As I followed her up the stairs the wind forced waves to crash against rocks, showering us as Suzanne turned the key. Our shoes clacked against the wooden floor. I welcomed the silence after several nights of going away parties for Stewart. She showed me to my room, a perfectly tiny space with a twin bed and desk. Her room was right next door, our beds on opposite sides of the same wall.

The kitchen cabinet was filled with wine and liquor. Suzanne pulled out two coffee mugs and filled them with bourbon.

“Welcome,” she said, raising her mug to mine.

The wind calmed, the clouds danced apart and the sunlight stretched its way into the kitchen where we sat on stools, sipping, smiling, silent. The bourbon warmed my tongue and melted its way down my throat, settling in my belly.

She watched me for what felt like eternity, and I was desperate to find anything worth saying. I shooed away every worthless thought in my mind and felt relieved when she walked toward the record player.

The back of her dress scooped low to her waist, and I fell in love with her back. I wanted to go to her and touch the back of her neck, running my fingers all the way down. I wanted to drop to my knees and kiss the small of her back. I wanted to make her forget Stewart. I swallowed the bourbon whole.

She put on a Miles Davis record and swayed her hips. Snapping her long fingers, her thrift store gems sparkled in the sunlight. I lit a cigarette and poured more bourbon.

“Dance with me,” she said as she swirled in my direction.

“I can’t,” I took a long pull from my cigarette and my bourbon.

I tapped my foot to the beat and she danced her bare feet toward me. She finished off her bourbon and took a pull straight from the bottle. She wrapped her feathered scarf around my neck and laughed. Her perfect teeth. Her perfect eyes. My body weakened against her gentle tug and she pulled me up to my feet.

We danced and I was lost. There was no house, no ocean, no floor beneath my feet. There was only us. Our foreheads pressed together. I closed my eyes, never wanting to look up. I pulled her close and she let me. Her head rested against the deafening beat of my heart. I let my fingers get lost in her hair and she looked up at me and stared. We swayed until after the record stopped. The house returned, and the wooden floor creaked with every movement. I moved to the kitchen table and lit another cigarette.

“I’m drunk,” she laughed and swirled to the sound of wind and waves.

I smiled and looked into my mug.

She flipped the record over and slouched onto the couch. Sitting with her feet outstretched, she painted her toenails burgundy. I tried to write but it was all useless drivel. *I should not have come*, I thought.

“Why have you been friends with Stewart for you so long?” she asked as she painted her smallest toe.

“I don’t know. We’ve been friends since we were kids. I’ve never really thought about *not* being friends with him I suppose.”

“He told me that you were the smartest person he knows.”

“I suppose Stewart needs more friends.” My attempted joke was met with silence.

She sat upright and patted the seat next to her and like a dog I moved without thought, only sheer delight that she wanted me near her.

We finished off the bottle and she told me about her family - her parents’ divorce and her older brother who died in the war. She leaned her head on my shoulder as we passed the bottle back and forth. The muted trumpet sang to the ache of this moment and I wondered how it knew. I

brushed back a lonely hair that rested on her forehead. She smelled of tangerines and bourbon and nail polish and everything I could love forever.

It was still dark when I awoke. Her sleepy head rested on my chest. I had to go to the bathroom, but I stayed still, staring at the softness of her hair, her skin, taking in every inch of a moment I did not deserve.

She woke as the sun entered and walked to the bathroom, smoothing her dress and yawning. I made coffee, setting out a mug for each of us. I took my coffee and throbbing skull to my room to write.

We worked all day. She painted at her easel by the window facing the sea. I wrote in my room. In the evenings we ate and drank. She showed me her work. I read to her the bits I was not afraid to share. She was a compassionate reader with a talent for showing me where I had written too much or too little. She had the same disdain for useless words that I did though it did not seem as excruciating to her.

When we sat close I could smell the oil paints she sat painstakingly with all day. Painting the red and orange and pink sunset, the moment that typically marked the end of our work.

At sunset we cooked together and sat like husband and wife at the dinner table. And we danced. Every night we danced. She did not need to ask anymore. It became my role and I accepted the part.

Our last night in the house I could not sleep. I thought of Suzanne and the love I could not give to her. Stewart would come home. He would ask her to marry him. She would say yes. They would have children. Our lives would drift apart. I would visit at Christmas and comment on how big their children were growing, how beautiful Suzanne's expecting belly looked. I would congratulate Stewart. A job well done.

She was packing her paints and easel when I came out of the room. I placed my suitcase by the door. The sun was barely winning its fight against the darkening clouds.

We walked to the shore and sat with legs stretched toward the sea. The gulls mewed and circled the ocean. Suzanne wrapped herself in her paisley shawl, taking a drag from a joint.

"It's so beautiful," she said, passing the joint to me.

“It is,” I said, taking a long pull, squinting my eyes toward the ocean, and waiting for the rain.

(1559 words)