

Woe Betide, Doe Eyes

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It's Tuesday.

A girl with doe eyes sits in a stairwell, her back to the wall and legs outstretched. In her lap, a book. It isn't thick, by any means. She can hold it open with one hand. Each chapter takes her maybe ten minutes, enough to read a chapter or two in between classes. Her eyes are glued to the page, but her hands tug at a thin piece of foil. She has found that chewing gum wrappers are quite fragile. They crease well enough, but they tear too easily when you pull apart the wings of an origami crane. Her physics teacher in junior high used to step on them if he saw her folding in class, so she learned to make them without looking.

A man with pale eyes turns the hallway corner. He has chalk smudged on his nose and the fronts of his jeans. No matter how often he washes his clothes, there is always a film of residue. It's embedded itself in the grooves of his fingers and the covers of his notebooks. He taps at the side of his leg as he walks. The girl doesn't know what kind of music he listens to, besides the band on the T-shirt he sometimes wears.

She sets down the book and the aluminium crane.

Catching eye contact is her favourite. She turns her head to look at him. The corners of his eyes turn up with thin crow's feet, snitching past conversations in dimly lit halls. The stairway shadows hide light behind her eyes. The glint isn't yellow, it's something

golden.

She can't hold back her smile. A smirk tugs at the corners of his mouth.

He's standing at the bottom of the stairs. "So, do you just live here now?"

She gives him a laugh, something soft and moonlit. "It's warm, and quiet."

They talk about Russian books and how they drone on and on until you find interest in a two-page long paragraph.

She tells him that everything needs a name, and how he should name the plant sitting on his balcony.

He tells her that it's strange to mix tea and espresso, and how sugar belongs nowhere near hot drinks.

Beige walls and humming pipes melt away as she becomes lost in conversation. Words flow seamlessly, and she could sit here for hours mapping out the way he thinks and talks and moves.

She takes in the way he looks up and to the side while thinking, how the corners of his eyes turn up when he laughs, the premature lines that rim his mouth when he smiles, how he nods along and acknowledges her every callow quip.

They say their goodbyes, and he takes the stairs below her out of the building. She goes back to her book; hands resume tugging at the half-finished crane. She makes the final creases, and carefully pulls the wings apart. The foil doesn't tear this time.

She packs up her things, walks down the hall-

way, and sets the crane down on a ledge outside of a classroom. It sits beside two others, from the past two Tuesdays. There are still traces of the man's handwriting on the chalkboard inside.

It's Thursday.

The girl with doe eyes sits on her balcony. This time, there is a leather journal in her lap and a cigarette in an ashtray. The cover of the journal is dark and worn-down, and as her pen dances across the page, her writing starts to resemble a ball of yarn. There are feelings hidden in her scriptures and fictions.

Mornings like this have started to feel more tired as the air starts to turn thick with promised snow and biting cold. She takes a drag while looking up to watch the clouds as winter draws in, and they make ghosts across university fields. The horizon becomes the edge of the world; the sky is overcast, the streets are the same shade of grey.

From the apartment adjacent to hers, the door to another balcony opens. Out walks the man with pale eyes, holding a watering can. She catches his gaze, and the light behind her eyes turns into something nascent. His smirk turns up at the corners of his mouth as his eyes rim with crow's feet.

"Hey."

"Hi."

She sets down the journal, marking the page with a flattened aluminium crane. The pages are littered with her ramblings: she wants to see the way his eyes gleam earthbound rain, and the worn, pale palms of his hands, and the lull of his voice as she loses track of time, and the thud and the blood in her chest. Oh, how she would crack from love's weight; wings-spread, until her back breaks.

He stands in front of a pink chrysanthemum plant in a terracotta pot, and they start to talk.

She learns that he's a fan of Belle and Sebastian and listens to them on his morning runs.

He learns that she bakes every Sunday so she

has something to eat on her way to class.

She learns that he plays the piano and has found a few of them scattered around campus.

He learns that she dips French fries in mayonnaise mixed with ketchup.

She'd been telling him to name the plant every day for the past week, and he had finally come up with one.

"Meg, since it's a mum plant."

"Meg the mum plant. I like that."

It's Saturday.

The girl with doe eyes stands in a bookstore. The familiar smell of pressed paper and newly-dried ink hangs loose in the air between the shelves of colourful leather spines. She puts her hand into her jacket pocket and feels fragile aluminium wings brush at her fingertips, millions. Their beaks are gentle as they lightly peck at her skin, begging to be planted.

The man with pale eyes is standing next to her, eyeing a book with an ornate cover. She has shown him all of her favourites: mid-century surrealist satires, Greek philosophy essays, and all of the classics she could get her hands on. Behind every book she has excitedly picked up and summarised, there is a crane lying in wait for somebody to find. She can hear them chirping from behind the reams and reams of books where she has left them hiding. It makes the room buzz, and as she watches him read the synopsis of yet another book, her eyes shine with something blooming.

He opens the book and turns to a random page, skimming over the words. "Isn't this that thing you said? About physics?"

He tilts the book towards her, and she reads the line next to his pointer-finger.

It was something she had only said to him once on her balcony.

In the aftermath of an all-nighter, she felt like she had been going in circles. Reading and writing and reading and

writing, again and again and again. She had gone out to the balcony for a smoke to clear her head and hadn't realised it was morning until she stepped out into gingerly chilled air and lamenting birdsong.

The man stepped out onto his balcony in his pyjamas, just barely rubbing sleep from his eyes. She thought it sweet, how he looked around obliviously with tousled hair and sluggish limbs. It took him a while to look over and notice her on the adjacent balcony.

Her fatigue must have been apparent, either from the way hair hung loose around her face, despite it having been pulled back, the dark circles that engulfed her already dark eyes, or the way her hands shook every time she brought the cigarette to her lips.

He gave her a solemn look. "Long night?"

She wasn't entirely lucid, and started spewing the first thing that came to mind. "I'm giving my body to science. Not medical, but physics. Drag my corpse to the airport, lay me limp on the left wing, drop me from the highest point, and turn the stain left on the ground into a Rorschach test."

She could barely remember it.

She looks up from the book. "I'm surprised you remember that."

He gives her a laugh, something warm and sunlit. "I like to think I'm a good listener."

She can feel the cranes in her pocket hum against her fingertips as they start to burn. A quiet curiosity plants itself in her chest, and she knows it's only a matter of time before it burrows beneath her bones and nurtures this deep-seated fascination into a feeling so rich she would question if she had ever even been in love before.

The last line from the book passage creeps into the back of her mind.

Is it something you would maybe recognise from colouring my life with the chaos of trouble? Does it ever feel like you've gone too far?

It's Monday.

The girl with doe eyes sits in an office. The entire room is covered in chalk, from the bookshelves

to his desk, you can't touch anything without your palms being covered in a thin white film. The sunset casts an orange glow across the room, and she watches as the man with pale eyes sticks his tongue out while writing problems on the chalkboard.

Maths was never her strong suit. She's more of a poet, if she's being honest with herself. The man seems to think maths is poetry on its own; he sees clear meaning in the numbers and symbols, as much as they confuse her. Still, he has a way of explaining it that makes sense. It isn't hard for her to pay attention.

She can make more sense when he draws a picture, although he could never figure out how to properly draw a box without it looking lopsided. Whenever he turns to face her, her eyes shine with something verdant.

He's just finished explaining a problem. "Does that make sense?"

She looks at the lines of work written on the board and cocks her head to the side. "Yeah, but could you go over the bit with the triangle again?"

He starts explaining, and while his back is turned, the girl takes out an aluminium crane from her pocket and hides it on the bookshelf. They continue on with the maths; he does his best to explain, and she tries her best to understand. By the time she can find the answer on her own, the building has fallen unbearably quiet.

The walk home is slow with tired conversation as he walks his bike next to her. The sun has been long hidden behind the horizon, and the moon diffuses pale lustre on ice-coated streets. The lights on in old buildings, they go blinking in the distance like a Morse code signal from the wind and the trees.

They approach their staircase, and she can feel the rustle of thin metal feathers under her ribcage, something flitting and delicate.

She makes a quick, headlong decision and turns to look at him through snow-dusted eyelashes. "Would you want to get coffee sometime?"

The man stops in his tracks, his jaw tightening as he stares at the ground.

As soft as the snow that dances around them, he asks, "Like...as a date?"

She takes a moment, mulling it over. She feels like when they speak, he looks in her eyes, and sees something human. If he pressed his fingers against her shoulder blades, he would have felt the rustle of metal wings pushing up from under her skin.

She makes her choice. "Yeah, like a date."

He doesn't look up from where his gaze is fixed on the ground as his fingers tap at the handlebars of his bike. In the dark, his pale eyes look grey, but there are no fond crow's feet at their corners. She can see he's biting at the side of his cheek.

"Thanks, but..."

The wings are being pulled apart, and she can feel the foil tear as aluminium splinters against her ribs. Metal shards embed themselves into her lungs, and she struggles to breathe.

It's Tuesday.

The girl with doe eyes stands on her balcony. The taste of smoke sits heavy in her mouth. Winter cold bites at the ends of her fingers, but the buzzing in her lungs brings more warmth than the taste of mint chewing gum. Her leather journal sits at her feet, the lines filled with something she doesn't want to talk about. The scriptures of a hopeless romantic had left her writer's callus bruised so black she'd watched it fade through the full spectrum of colours.

Watching the constellations twinkle in the distance, her eyes reflect something dead. It's dark inside those eyelids, blacker than creosote.

There are no potted plants on the adjacent balcony, not since Meg got snowed on during that first frost.

She knows longing is a thing for tired romantics who can't help but sit with emotions lodged in their throats. The litany sits heavy, gold weighs more than aluminium. She struggles to keep her eyes dry with

the beaks of cranes pecking at the soil of her skin.

She replays their interactions in her mind.

She remembers how he noticed bits of amber in her brown eyes, and how she noticed patches of red in his golden hair. How his eyes lingered on her rushed poetics, and how she listened close to his long-winded tangents.

She looks down to her hands and sees her nails have started to shine silver under the moonlight, the metal spreading over her hands and forearms.

She remembers the faint scratching of an old Belle and Sebastian record while they baked in her kitchen. Their uncoordinated dancing was scored by sickeningly sweet love songs. Had she imagined the lingering glances? What about the dreams that made sleeping feel like a lie?

The shine reaches her chest and lungs as they start to turn metallic, her skin becomes stiff and taut. She spreads her arms to feel the cold brush against newly sprung feathers.

She remembers the film of sugar left on her teeth from Terry's Chocolate Oranges and Cadbury Creme Eggs. Those aluminium wrappers were always too thin to make cranes. Were sweets ephemeral like a schoolgirl crush? How had they never dropped pieces of chocolate while tossing them to each other between balconies?

She looks back to the stars as they get farther away, and the balcony railing gets impossibly tall. It's hard to keep her eyes open from the rush of vertigo.

She remembers the spontaneous uphill walks on over-cast afternoons. What had he been thinking during those out of breath pauses? If she had felt the goosebumps along his arms, and had somehow managed to translate them from Braille, what would they have said?

She crouches and feels as the shine spreads to her face, turning it into a glistening, pointed beak.

She thinks back to the crane on his bookshelf. Had he ever found it, or was it in tatters now like the splinters lodged in her lungs? And what about the cranes lining the hallway? Was an armada of feather-brained tinfoil never enough to protect a heedless heart?

The clouds draw in over the stars, and she watches a now blackened sky with wings spread and

back stiff. She can feel other cranes around her with their wings wrinkled from sitting in coat pockets. They still buzz with anticipation, waiting for the day they will be planted among books and crowded hallways. She wants to buzz with them, wants her tattered wings to flutter and ruffle for so long blisters form and heal, but only dirt would be brushed away; all the bad lies far deeper.

Woe betide your calloused heart, Doe Eyes. It was going to happen inevitably.