

strawberries

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Please note, this work includes content related to mental illness.

Thomas had taught himself not to listen to his mother.

He sat on that bench and the afternoon sun baked the grass into a green casserole and he could feel his face burning, so lightly, under its warmth. She'd tell him to "put on sunscreen or he'd get that cancer everyone was always talking about that ran in the family that would certainly run in him too and kill him if he wouldn't just put it on his face and how was she supposed to afford the medical bills and what was the use of medical bills anyway if the sun was going to kill him?" Thomas had taught himself not to listen to his mother. He felt her in the back of his mind, but he didn't listen. He felt the burn in his face but *the sun was hot*, after all—and what better way to enjoy summer than bask in the heat?

Thomas sat on that bench and he fondled his hair and he watched the woman in the grass. Her legs were splayed over a checkered picnic blanket—that cliché picnic blanket that he only saw in movies and never in real life—and her skin was paled by the bright sun but her fingers were stained red by strawberries. Fat, bloody strawberries just days from going overripe, squeezed between her manicured nails. They made her mouth shimmery, pinkish, as though glazed by lipgloss and she ate every one in slow motion like an actress in a movie. She was just like a movie. That soft curve in her jaw, the barely-noticed jut of her small cheekbones, the delicious glow in her blue eyes the untouched curls in her blonde hair the sparkle of sweat on her face—or wait, she had no sweat on her face, because she was just like a movie. Thomas's mother did not let him watch movies because she believed he took them too literally. *Don't touch that, Thomas. Don't look at that, Thomas. What are you doing, Thomas? Go home.*

Home was a sad, grey, empty excuse for an apartment on the third floor where the view was blocked by a city skyline and the city skyline belonged to the begging streets of the lower class. Thomas's mother used to tell him that home was made home by modesty, so he filled every surface of his apartment with his belongings. Useless trinkets from every shop, uneaten Chinese food boxes, action figures, unread magazines, TV remotes with no TV, sewing needles dull kitchen scissors crumpled napkins dead leaves and mouse corpses and so many empty pill bottles that when the summer sun stained the inside of *home*, the walls glowed orange. Emergency orange, like a Road Work sign. Thomas sat on that couch and his fingers peeled back the curtains to let the light in. He saw her there, three stories below, like he always saw her. She was a movie. She fussed with her delicate curls, zipped up her puffy white actress coat with the fur hood, and looked up at him. She smiled. He ripped the curtains closed again.

Thomas stopped helping his mother with dinner. She had asked so many things of him, but he had learned that in protest, one cannot listen to some things and not others. If he was going to stop listening

to her advice, he was going to stop listening to her requests, too. She asked him to help her stir the noodles in the pot so they didn't fuse together. He let them fuse. He sat in that chair, knees pulled to his chest and shins propped up against the kitchen table and he let the noodles fuse, overcook, melt and boil over and so many bubbles swelled over the rim of the pot and onto the flames that they went out and wouldn't come back on and he just sat there. *Don't touch that, Thomas.* He didn't, and it still always fell apart.

Thomas was learning to listen to himself. They told him he still had instincts, a drive to take care of himself, and a need to love, but he wasn't listening. He knew when he needed to eat, to bathe, to get out of bed in the morning and to talk to someone, and sometimes he listened when he needed to do those things. Thomas was getting better at listening to his instincts, but what the doctor wanted, his mother also wanted. *You need to listen, Thomas.* Why should he?

His instincts were telling him not to talk to that woman that day, when he sat on that bench and let the sun bake his face, and she stood up from her picnic blanket to sit next to him. Her breath still smelled of strawberries and her ringlets tumbled onto his shoulder and she leaned in so close that he thought he could taste the sun that had been baking her, but the sun did not touch movies like it touched him. She said, "I like your home." And Thomas looked up from his hands, where they had been anxiously picking at the holes in the leather couch. He blinked quickly. He blinked again. It was all coming back to him suddenly, and his skin crawled. How had he gotten here? How had she gotten in?

Thomas's mother once told him that pretty women lie with their face and ugly women lie with their words. Thomas's first instinct was to look at his mother and wonder which of the two she lied with. She leaned in close, and he swallowed because she knew he had listened to her, and her breath smelled of death and it was suffocating, "So don't look at the pretty women, and don't listen to the ugly ones."

Thomas was getting extremely good at not listening to his mother. When she ordered him out of bed, when she asked him to eat, to bathe, to take his pills, to get out of the house, to go back home, to not say this and don't look at that and don't touch this and *for god's sake throw away that dead mouse*, he got really good at ignoring her. His body reeked of stale sweat and his skin hugged his skeleton and he left the house past midnight and returned at midday and he stayed in bed until the center of the mattress began to cave in like an open mouth and he *would not* take his pills, those awful things. But now that woman was sitting beside him on that bed, so maybe he should have.

She looked out at the wall and everything but her eyes was so still—like the camera was on her face and not her body, like she was an actress, like she was a movie, like she was *all Thomas could look a*— and she said, "I like your home."

Thomas blinked again. He blinked again and again. He swallowed and he kept his gaze down because he hadn't yet decided whether he shouldn't look at her or shouldn't listen to her and he scratched at the end of his nose where he could feel it burning. "This is not my real home."

The woman looked at him. He did not look back.

"I will take you to it, if you'd like."

Thomas was learning to listen to himself. His instincts were ablaze, as though sunburnt and consumed by skin cancer, telling him not to talk to the woman. But his drive to love, *to love, love, love her* was so effervescent that he could feel it bubbling behind his face. Burning in his face. Burning his face, *his face was burning.* *Put on sunscreen, Thomas.* *Don't look at that, Thomas.* *Don't touch that, Thomas.* *Don't touch that don't touch that don't touch that* but Thomas was getting so good at not listening to his mother and he could hear her

screaming in the back of his mind. Screaming and screaming and banging on the elevator doors when they closed him and the woman inside. His mother slid to the floor, weeping.

Thomas was sitting against the elevator railing. The walls around him were plastered in wealthy emerald green wallpaper and shrined in real gold. He had never seen real gold, but he imagined it would look like this. The floor numbers ticked up and up toward the top floor because *of course he would live on the top with the pretty view* and they glowed red as overripe strawberries and the thought reminded him of the woman standing beside him that still smelled very much like strawberries. He very much liked the smell of strawberries. It was tart and raw, rich with flavor, sweet like summer air. But the higher the numbers went, the more overpowering it became. It was burning the inside of his nose, *burning* him. Burning his tongue, his eyes, his throat and his face and he tried to reach for his skin but his mother said *don't* once and he was here because he didn't listen and maybe it wasn't too late to start.

"I like your home," the woman said. Thomas looked at her.

The only part of himself that Thomas was good at listening to was love. He could only love without those pills. That woman began to show up all over his life, like a perennial weed, and he started to love her. Outside his window, out on the grass, beside him on every bench and every couch and every bed and every railing and his mother once said not to look at pretty women so he didn't. He could picture her pretty face: the amalgam of every superstar actress he had ever seen framed by those flawless yellow curls and those huge expensive coats. He imagined how every curve of her body fit into those coats, how the gentle slope of her face leaned into those curls, how the overripe edge of that strawberry snapped between her teeth but he saw—he saw for a single moment in slow motion—how horrendously mauled and misshapen her teeth were. Chipped away, twisted, missing, and sharpened, like shark's teeth after gnawing on bones; and that body—he saw for a single moment on that couch—was so reaped of muscle that she was nothing but ribs and wrists, starved to near death, but swallowed and concealed by her oversized coats; and that *face, oh god that face*, was the amalgam of every superstar actress he had ever seen but sewn together like a quilt and her features were slipping off of her skin like they didn't belong there. He saw it for the first time in that elevator: the thing his mother had been warning him about. It had finally found him.

Her lips were dripping with red strawberries, strawberries, *blood. His blood*, smattered all around her face, coloring her teeth, drooling off the edge of her tongue. Her fingers had been digging, digging, and ripping at the skin of his face for what must have been hours now and it was falling all around his neck in mauled slabs like a peeled fruit and it burned. It *burned*. It burned when she bit into his flesh and tore it off, it burned when she plunged her fingers between the grooves of his exposed muscle and bone, it burned when she chewed on him and all he could think about is how much he loved her. *How much he loved her, loved her, loved her.*

"Don't look at her, Thomas."

"Don't touch her, Thomas."

"Go home, Thomas."

"What are you doing, Thomas?"

"Your pills, Thomas."

"Sunscreen, Thomas."

"Listen to yourself, Thomas, because clearly you don't listen to me anymore."

And god, he should have listened because as much as it satisfied him to let his mother down it also

burned and he was *dying* now in a building he had never been in before with the woman he had sworn he would never touch but that he couldn't help but love because she was *exactly* what his mother did not want but also everything he didn't want, either. What had he done?

His body was nearly out of blood and his clothes were heavy with the weight of it all and he could no longer see or feel the woman, the elevator, or himself. He was only Thomas—a useless ball of consciousness floating in everything and nothing at the same time, a void but not a void, blackness but not a solid enough, bottomless emptiness that also couldn't have been empty. He was alone. He was dead. And he knew he was dead but also felt impossibly infinite. Immortal. Peaceful.

Thomas awoke on the bench, his face marred by a sunburn, his phone harassed by missed calls from his mother, the picnic blanket on the grass in front of him still there, but empty. He called his mother back.

"You didn't listen to me, did you?"

Thomas laughed, very humorlessly, set a reminder to pick up his next prescription and a bottle of sunscreen while he was at it, then finally replied, "Nope."