

Fixed

It looks like a shadow, but what else could it be? Bloated and caught, head down like it's watching the bottom of the river. Its tail is stretched out behind like a wet rope. I follow the balloon of the body as it bobs in the water, but I don't tell anyone about what I see.

Besides, they don't care. Everyone is dancing. I stand in the corner, staring out the window to the river below. Very discouraged. I'm in a shadow of the warehouse loft wondering why I expected to have fun at this God-forsaken party. It's Oliver's crowd; I knew this before I came, but I thought it would be different. People are talking behind me in the background. They're laughing. The warehouse is dark with colored lights and smells like dust and metal. A welder lives one floor below, and his sculptures have been hauled up the freight elevator for this art show. He builds life-size monsters made from scrap metal and trash. They appear stunned, like walking dumpsters surprised to find themselves in this state—not altogether different than the rest of the people at this party. I'm surrounded by freaks, some of whom I recognize. I lean against the wall and watch them. From my corner, I imagine I'm an invisible judge hovering above, seeing them without being seen, being here without belonging, condemned to this point of view.

I came here for the drummer, some guy I met in a coffee shop who had tattooed sleeves and Asian symbols drawn around his neck. He invited me to come to the warehouse where his band, Lisa from Tokyo, would be playing. He'd handed me a flyer—he'd handed everyone a flyer—but he smiled at me and said, "Hope you can make it," and I believed him, I believed he meant, "Hope *you* can make it." I was flattered. Not many guys approach me. I tell myself

they're not bold enough. I'm a depressive type in combat boots; tall and scrawny with bony shoulders and uncombed hair that falls in my eyes. I am not what you would call beautiful, though my appearance isn't an accident of birth or low self-esteem. I want to look this way, like vanity is not my problem.

"O.K.," I said, and stared at the flyer in my hand.

"I'll look for you," he winked and smiled again.

I nodded. I didn't know what else to say.

Later, I realized I could've introduced myself, "I'm Jane," or asked him what kind of music he played. I didn't think of it then, so I came to the party to meet him again, have a conversation.

From my perch as overseer and judge, I watch the drummer in the corner opposite me. He keeps a hypnotic beat to a song the bass player is improvising. The room is smoky, the music slow and ghostly. Suddenly, the guitar screeches loud and monstrous, then low again. The singer is so fucked up, he's hanging onto the mike stand for support. He moans to the music as if he means to. The drummer can't see me, he barely has his eyes open, nodding to the beat of the song. I like watching him, though. He's attractive to me and seems familiar. Tough and helpless, sad but trying not to show it, he's a cliché: a lost boy who flirts with excess and escape. He reminds me of someone who will die tragically and stupidly. For that reason, he reminds me of Oliver.

Oliver was a filmmaker, and he'd shot a series of beautiful short films. I loved them. Oliver shot my favorite film in the winter, in the city, when the streets were shut down. There was a single man in the frame, walking away from the camera, huddled against a snowstorm.

Oliver put an original score to the film. That's all it was: the lonely sound of a piano and a man walking in the snow.

I often wish I could see that film again, but his family has it now. They cleared his things from our apartment after he died. I think they blame me, as if I stole him away those last few months, but he was going to ask me to marry him. I know it. He said he fell in love with me the first night we met, but I said that was because we were both drunk. We lived together for a year, and if he were alive, I'm sure we would be laughing right now. He thought I was the funniest person he knew, and he appreciated my jokes, my dim view of the world. He thought I was smart. He would've turned twenty-eight right after he OD'd, almost five months ago.

I stare at the drummer, at his tattoos and muscular forearms and wish him better luck. If I had the nerve to approach him, I'd say, "Good luck," or, "Be careful," I might say, though I never said any of this to Oliver. I admit I never said stop.

"What are you talking about?" the drummer would probably answer me like I was a freak. "Are you a friend of Sherri's?"

Sherri is a person around whom circles develop, a hairdresser who studies fashion, and for that reason, people hang on her every word.

"That's really deep," she says. "Like seriously." She is sitting in a pit of sofas near me, smoking pot and attempting to talk about art. She's wearing a pink wig and leather turquoise platforms, hot pants and a sheer black top. No bra, of course, and that's what everyone is listening to, they're paying rapt attention.

"It looks like water," she says, pointing to a painting on the wall. "Like drowning in water. See the mouth and the bubbles? Just imagine!"

“That’s cool,” some guy says as though drowning is cool, is something he’s lived through once and is willing to try again.

Next to him sits a fifty-year-old junky bisexual with dreads whom everyone loves, literally. She puts her head on the drowning guy’s shoulder.

“What made you paint it?” she asks the artist. The artist is holding court, wearing an undersized sports coat and a crushed fedora. He tells the crowd how Rilke was influential to the process of painting, how love and solitude entered into it. “Love is so multi-faceted,” he says, like that means something.

He can’t hear me, but I snort at this. What a fake. *It’s evident from your painting that you don’t know crap!* I almost say. No one is standing around me or looks in my direction. No one sees it as I do.

“Rilke,” they say. “How interesting.”

“Rilke is The Shit,” the artist says.

I turn away from them and peer out the window to watch the water below. I can’t believe all the trash floating by. No one else seems to mind. There is an empty warehouse on the other side of the falls. Large slabs of cement taper down the hill to contain the direction of the flow. Stink weeds grow on both sides. The stream pours down the middle and carries with it sticks and bottles and bits of paper. I’ve lost sight of the animal that was bobbing in the water. Perhaps it’s moved on; perhaps it was pulled out, too late to be saved.

Occasionally, people walk toward me at the party and say hi as they grab a few pretzels from a bowl. They don’t stay long. *Don’t even ask*, I want to say, not that anyone is trying. It’s like I have a circle of ill will around me, the way I stand with my arms crossed, pushing everyone away with my thoughts. My councilor says I need to talk, that too much silence will

kindle and implosion, will create a big mess on the inside. Other times I'm afraid I'll open my mouth and words will erupt everywhere, a disaster of words that I had not given permission to shoot out of my mouth.

"Hey, Jane," a girl says.

"Hey," I answer.

I know the girl and a few other people through Oliver, though not very well. I know them by sight and through gossip. I know a few of them from the funeral. "Man, I'm *really* sorry," they said in the reception line and shook my hand.

Here at the party, a few people nod toward me, but they don't know me, just that I am the girlfriend Oliver left behind. I'm like a ghost to them, an idea of a person. Most people know enough to leave me alone. They know I read a lot of books and don't talk much. Even dead, Oliver is more real to them than I am. But that's O.K. Anonymity has its vantage point, its perks. For instance, they don't know—thank God—that my mother hustled me off to some Christian sobriety boot camp two weeks after Oliver died. It was a facility for young adults, and she said it would make me feel better to be surrounded by people my own age, help me with my grief and depression. *And drinking*, she didn't say. She was trying to reform me, put me in touch with Jesus so I could be saved from the useless life of a nonbeliever. I went because I didn't have the energy to say no.

The cure didn't take, of course. I was surrounded by a slew of smiling twenty-somethings; I felt older than them, weighed down, too cynical for all their hopeful shit. I refused to hold hands and sing along with the guitar or get excited about Jesus.

Secretly I felt peace at the facility, but I would never admit it. I enjoyed sitting on the shore of the lake and throwing stones into the water. I liked the sound of the rocks sinking. I

found a fake plastic fossil with a partial imprint of a leaf. I turned it over in my hands unconsciously for hours like a worry bead and carried it everywhere. By the end of three weeks, the only thing I fully understood about myself, drilled into me by smiling Baptists, was that I didn't have faith, and this would be my downfall.

"Do you believe your Savior loves you?" they asked one afternoon. There were two of them, a blonde girl and her new boyfriend. They hooked up at the facility but were going home in a few days.

I didn't want to answer them. If I believed in something, I didn't know what to call it. "I believe in this fossil," I said. "This fossil rules."

"You'll need more than that," the girl said, exasperated. "That's just junk, cheap plastic."

"Whatever. I think life should be made like this fossil," I said. "Solid, hard to break. If there *is* a God, I think he messed up in the design."

"God can be your fossil," the boyfriend said. "He can stay fixed in your life like that. You can carry Him anywhere." Hello? Suddenly these two were cured and their lives were perfect?

"Oh, *please*," I snorted. I turned my head away to look out toward the water.

"That's fear," the guy said.

"No, that's funny," I answered. "You think you suddenly have the answers." I wouldn't look at them.

"Let's go," the girl whispered. "It's obvious she's hopeless."

Hopeless/Godless—the girl said it as if the words were interchangeable. She moved away quickly; I think she was afraid my doubts were contagious and would infect her. I've learned people don't like to spend much time around a person contaminated by death.

Another girl I know walks by me at the party and smiles with pity eyes. She keeps her distance but regards me as if she knows what I must be going through, as if she understands because she owns some part of the sorrow too. She'd had a crush on Oliver once, maybe always—they'd shot up together—but as far as I'm concerned, she possesses nothing.

On the last day of camp, I saw a black snake stretched out on a rock near the parking lot. He was long and curved like a shredded old tire, perfectly still, warming himself in the sun. I liked him. A couple of people were standing around the snake, waiting for it to move. Then a councilor came up to look at it. He had a shovel with him, and I expected him to scoop the snake, to push it away so no one would get hurt. But he lifted the shovel above the rock and came down hard, chopping the snake in half.

"Why'd you have to kill it?" I said, louder than I expected. "It's not poisonous!" The councilor looked up at me for an instant, but went back to the task of pounding the snake's head and shoveling the two halves off to the side. "Oh, man," some guys laughed. I was dumbfounded. For a split second I saw myself grab the shovel from the clean-shaven Baptist man and pound him over the head with it. I howled as this other version of myself and swung the shovel like a bat, taking out a row of them. I was unstoppable.

"Who do you think you are?" I said. "You don't have a right to kill that snake! How would you like it if I killed you?" What I meant was: It empty and wasteful, what he did. Life chopped in half unnecessarily. I should've seen it coming. I didn't stop the man and I blamed myself for that. I might've prevented something. Even with Oliver, there were words I realize now that could've saved at least one of us.

I tried to tell my mother about the snake on the way home.

"I'm sure the man was just doing his job," she said.

“Jesus Christ!” I muttered. She started weeping then, and we didn’t say anything for the hour’s ride home. No one understood what I was trying to say.

For a few weeks after that I stayed in the apartment. I watched black and white movies in the dark and listened to angry music with divas screaming. I ate cereal for dinner and lost weight. There was something beyond grief I couldn’t reach. “Shouldn’t she be over him by now?” Oliver’s friends were probably asking each other, but they didn’t say as much to me.

Maybe they were right. I suspect if it had been me who died, Oliver would not have come to a halt as I have. First, he’d get high and pretend he was fine. He knew so many people from his prep school days and from college before he dropped out, then film people and artists. He wouldn’t be alone like I am, wondering what to do next. If he were here, he’d be in the center of this party. I know this, but I cannot imitate what he would do, I cannot be him. Instead, I stand by myself between the tall warehouse windows. I move occasionally, from window to window and pretend I’m supposed to be here. I sip soda water from my plastic cup. Maybe I’ll say something to somebody.

The band finishes playing their song, and the musicians take a break and disappear into a back room. Everyone else scatters throughout the warehouse. A few people come near the windows to cool off with the breeze. They hang out in the makeshift kitchen and grab beers out of the cooler. I scoot over so I’m next to the counter. A guy comes toward me carrying a bag of ice. In the dark he looks like someone I know.

“Hey Patti Smith!” he calls. He’s talking to me, to my ratty hair and wrinkled state.

“Can you hold this?” He dumps the ice into my arms. He tilts his straw cowboy hat at me. I realize he is not the person I thought he was, but he talks with me as if we’re friends.

He leans over and opens the cooler next to me. There is a paperback in his pocket; I imagine it's a book about spirits and poetry, but I can't make out the title. The cowboy guy is thin and strong, with long sideburns, good looking in a hip, well-read kind of way. His shirt is unbuttoned, and he has a smooth chest. I immediately like him, though I don't trust him. He seems like the kind of guy who attracts beautiful, fucked-up girlfriends. If I were beautiful, he'd probably treat me differently.

"O.K.," he says. "Dump it here." I tear the plastic bag and let the ice cubes fall into the cooler.

"I'm making margaritas," he says. "You want one?"

"Why are you asking me?" I accuse, as if there is a crime in it.

"Jesus, are you breathing? Help me out," he says. Then, "Here, hold this." He hands me a box and pulls a mixer out of the cabinet. In the process, he knocks over a bag of cat food sitting on the counter. Little pellets of food scatter everywhere.

"You know, you're a pretty lousy flirt," he says. "The gruff approach doesn't become you."

"You dropped something," I say, and point to the pellets of cat food.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he answers, which means he's not going to sweep it up.

"What happened to the cat?" I ask. This is as close as I get to telling anyone what I saw in the river. I can't believe no one else has noticed.

"What are you talking about?" He takes the box from me and shoves it back inside the cabinet. There's a mirror inside the cabinet door and he checks himself out. Then he pulls me next to him so we're looking at each other in the glass.

““Sometimes it is necessary to re-teach a thing its loveliness,”” he says. He winks at himself in his cowboy hat. I roll my eyes and step aside.

“Did you just make that up?” I ask.

“I’m quoting,” he says.

“Who?”

“No idea,” he says, “but you could use a page from that book.” I can’t tell if he’s joking or being kind, whether he likes me or feels sorry for me.

“You don’t even know what book,” I say.

“There you go again,” he says. “Pouring on the charm.”

“I used to be funny,” I inform him.

“Yeah, I can tell.” When he bends down to plug the mixer into an outlet, I see his book again, sticking out of his back pocket. I want it to be a profound book, one that I recognize, one that would make me like him. We could have a conversation about it. But I have a hard time reading the title upside down, the letters look like they should spell ‘Flaubert’ but I can’t make it out completely.

“Hey, what’s your book?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Someone just gave it to me.” He empties a bottle of tequila into the mixer. “Something about outer space.” My heart sinks. I was hoping for a sign.

The cowboy guy presses a button on the blender. He leans close to me and says something in my ear, but I can’t hear him for the whirring of the blades.

“What?” I nearly shout.

He just smiles as if I heard him, as if I’m in disbelief. He turns the blender off and winks.

Sherri in her pink wig comes up behind him then; she presses herself against his back. “Can I have a little drinky-winky?” she asks. She is taller than him in her turquoise platforms.

“Test it for me,” he says. “How is it?”

“Baby,” she answers, “I don’t care.”

Before I can say anything more to the cowboy guy, a crowd of people show up in line for margaritas. They reach around me to grab cups.

“You’d better get some before it’s all gone,” the cowboy guy says.

“That’s O.K.,” I answer.

I stroll across the room toward the back door where the musicians have disappeared. I pass paintings on the wall, most of them abstract and meaningless. There are canvases speckled with paint that seem exhausted with too many layers.

On another wall, there’s a large shadow box full of photographs and voodoo dolls. A second box is filled with clay figures, people caught in mid-action behind glass. The figures are pinned to velvet, arranged like a Victorian butterfly collection. I notice a woman figurine that’s asleep with her mouth open; there’s a mirror glued to the outside of the box where, theoretically, the viewers are supposed to see themselves and understand the connection, as if we’re all asleep with our mouth’s open, or pinned to a wall, caught in a box, something like that.

Further down the wall, I find a series of nude drawings I like. They seem so simple and light in comparison, single lines defining a body without the mess of splattered paint. There is a drawing of a pregnant nude and that holds my attention: the roundness of possibility, the big balloon of hope. I turn away quickly, then, afraid of my own blank space.

I walk toward the back door. Next to the door stands a metal sculpture of a person named, “Who?” He’s made of found objects, and he wears a trash can lid as a hat. His face is a

series of oily bicycle gears, and he appears startled, his mouth in an “o.” His arms are folded across his chest, and he has a circle of syringes welded to his heart. “Hey, Oliver,” I say to the garbage head. “Glad you could make it.” He doesn’t answer.

My councilor said our relationships with the dead continue long after the bodies are gone. Perhaps they’re the most profound relationships we have, those big conversations with nothing. Lately I’ve been wishing for this relationship with Oliver to be over, for him to die completely. Meanwhile I run into him in the stupidest places, him looking more and more surprised to be dead. “Oh!” he seems to say, “How did I *get here*? How could this have happened?” I get angry with him then, when the answer is obvious.

The door to the back room opens a sliver and someone I don’t know squeezes out into the gallery. He’s careful not to let anyone else into the room.

“Hey,” I say, “is the drummer back there?”

“Who?”

“The drummer?”

The guy just shrugs and walks away. Then the door opens again, and this time it’s the drummer who comes out into the gallery. “Hi! Remember me?” I almost say. But the drummer wanders past, and I let him go. I recognize the glaze in his eyes, and I’m sure I don’t want to know him anymore. He is lost behind a glass wall, seemingly here, but not. What else looks like that? Sometimes drunkenness or sorrow. I become discouraged then. I know there is nothing here for me, too many needles welded to too many arms.

“Fuck you,” I say to whomever might be listening. But no one is paying attention, just as no one has looked outside and noticed the poor dead cat. How could they miss it?

I ditch the party then, give up on finding something in this place. I don't say 'thank you,' or 'goodbye' to anyone as I make my way across the room, which smells of spilled beer. I glide through the crowd as if I'm not even here, past the whirr of the blender and people laughing, and I walk down the dusty warehouse steps, several stories to the street. Then I stand outside the door to catch my breath and feel a breeze.

For a moment, I consider going down to the falls to fish the cat out of the water. I could put his fat body in a box, take him back upstairs to the party and call it art. Found object. I'd title it, "No Swimming on a Full Stomach," and laugh at my own joke. I could glue a side view mirror to the outside of the box and paint in small letters, "Objects in mirror are closer to death than they appear." People might look at themselves in the mirror and fix their hair. Maybe they'd get high and think it was deep. It would make a statement. I can picture all of this as clearly as if I were there.

Traffic passes behind me, and I turn in time to see an old white bomb of a Buick round a corner and disappear. Another night I might've thought it was Oliver's car, but tonight I am tired of believing things that aren't true. One day I'd like to believe in possibility again, nurse it back to health, have something like faith. But I'm worn out.

After the funeral, some people said if Oliver hadn't been a junkie he would've been a barfly. But I knew he'd gotten sober once for a period of time. He was full of life and learned to ice skate that winter. He said, "Jane, don't give up before the miracles happen." He said, "There's more than one." It wasn't original, he was quoting someone, but it made him happy for a while to think that change didn't require effort, that it was simply a miracle, and for that reason, things would stay fixed. I remember he was skating very slowly when he said it, one skate in front of the other, trying to draw a figure eight. His ankles were wobbly.

“You need to make the circle connect,” I said, pointing to the top of the eight.

“I’m *trying*,” he answered, a bit annoyed with me, as if I had missed the point.

I should’ve seen it coming. I should’ve said something.

I cross the bridge leading away from the warehouse party. The bridge is covered in graffiti and weeds, an unlikely link to anything. Then I spot the cat, its balloon of a body caught on some branches in the river. He’s puffed up, except for his tail; his ears are pointed down into the water like he’s listening to the bubbles, to the faint voices and conversations the water makes with itself. How could this have happened?

For a long time, I stand at the railing, look down into the river, and watch the shit roll through, slow and steady. The falls are an arm of the reservoir, like a vein running through the city. I wonder how long it takes the water to carry itself from one end to the other and if it ever unclogs and moves without burden.