

You come find me

Upon hanging up the phone, I step into the nearest café and order an earl grey tea. The name of the café had obviously suffered through the spindliest ends of time's horse-haunting whip, so the only letters that remained viewable with the naked eye were E S T. Yes, *it is*. Or, somewhere in the east.

I find a table in the back of a long room and shed my coat and scarf, the latter tightening around my neck before letting go, as if someone thought of yanking me away but quickly changed their mind and genteelly loosened their grip, not only on my neck but on this reality as a whole? Oof, I really need this tea. I sit, close my eyes, and breathe. All I have to do is breathe.

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My call drops and I scurry into the café. Why bother calling back? I have wet hair and a wet nose, and I'm assuming my scarf isn't too dirty to rub the downpour off my face. Now, to order.

"I'll have one Thai iced tea please. Without bo—no, with boba. Thanks!"

I find a seat off in a different room I had no awareness of when standing outside and rest my bodice on a long chair, plush and elegantine. I can't see my breath anymore, so I close my eyes and quiet my breathing, pretending that's all I have to do.

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I open my eyes and squint at all the murmurs of my sentient surroundings. Then I take my glasses from the table and rub the downpour off them so I can stop squinting and start taking in the scene, for real this time. I notice this café is uncannily similar to the ones depicted on to-go coffee cups—you know, the thick paper cups with tables of sharp faced, warmly dressed people whose drinks' steam floats in streams from one mug to another. It's what we want from the hot beverages we purchase from outdoor stands and carts or when we're rushing out the door of a place like this one. Anyway, the multicolored warmth on those cups I thought was matchless has come to life in the café I've stumbled into today. There are all kinds of people—mostly couples—dawning clothes of varying spectacularities and eyegrab. The volume of everyone's conversations is loud enough to feel entirely unalone while quiet enough to speak aloud to myself and really hear what I'm saying without anyone else taking notice.

A woman comes over to my table with a puny *oh, no, it's just me* tea set, jade pot and cup with brown flecks at the edges.

"Excuse me, what is the name of this café?"

"Feste," she says, about to wink, but turns away.

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"Thank you," I say, cutely, without dread—I've had enough of it. Or is it the cute I've had too much of?—to the waiter placing my Thai tea before me. I smile the way I always do with strangers I could fall in love with, but not the way I wish I did more, with the ones who make up my smiles, my soul. I take that life-avowing first sip of tea, punctuated with the tapioca pearls I've missed. Despite all the choices, I think I did make the best one. "Things *weren't* better back when they worse! Ha-ha, take that, you paradox bitch!" Self-awareness curdles inside me once it hits that I've said that out loud. No matter, I like cheese, ergo 'curdled self-awareness', especially with blueberries frosted on top. I was about to step into a memory when I turn my head toward the door and catch the name of the café I've seized for my day. Huh, *LIE*, it says. That's an ominous name for such a cozy atmosphere. Better not to look that way again, I think, but only an instant before I see a phrase above the doorway much more to my liking. *Be in here now*. You don't have to ask me twice.

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"Youth's a stuff will not endure," I perform to myself. It's been a long time since I've thought about that character, let alone that play. "Twelfth Night,"

"—Or what you will"

Huh? I shudder at what was just said to me. Who said it? I mean, they're not wrong, but I can't fathom who around me could finish my thought before me. Everyone is so immersed in their own tabletop gab, I doubt any of them had poked their head in my solitary cloud. I rewrap my scarf around my neck but leave it loose, just in case. I bring the teacup to my lips and take a few gulps of tea, which reduces the shudder. I return to thinking about the fool, and how the truth of Illyria's court was pierced by her thorny and rose-scented wit. Call her mad, call her crazy, she was secretly a genius. And now I am in *her* quarters. Oh, Feste: "*Better a witty fool than—*"

"—Stella!"

"Gah! Who said that?" I arch my body like a salamander around my chair and fling my head back, forth, and sideways in sporadic jogs. But I don't see a soul.

"You can't see one; not entirely."

“God, who is this?”

“Oh, it’s just me. Would you like to speak to God instead?”

“Just who?”

“Try when, or where, or – oh! I dare you, *why!*”

“You mean to say...you’re—”

“—*than a foolish wit.* Yes, I am.”

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For some reason my tongue feels sore, and there’s a tingling sensation that can’t be quashed by tea. Even the boba can’t roll out the feeling. I pull out the book I’ve been reading for the past year and tunnel into it again with the world’s tiniest ice pick.

“Ow!” The tea burned my tongue. Wait, burned? This tea is iced.

I question if I had resorted to imagining the pain to avoid finishing the book. I can’t even remember the title.

“You’ve always had shit memory.”

“Oh fuck no—”

Whichever daemon’s up in the treehouse in my brain needs to get out now. This kind of intervention is crossing the line—

“Hey, hey, it’s me.”

“No, I think *this* is me,” gesticulating for no one but to everything around me.

“Have you really forgotten?”

I love-hate that captive moment when someone remembers something more clearly than you do, or really, at all. Most of the time it’s one of my best laid schemes they call to mind and I start laughing again like it’s the first time. But sometimes they open their palm to a dead moth and I’m shocked by the person I’ve forgotten I was in my memories gone astray. I summon the powers of Wall, Lion, and Moonshine and hazard a guess of which fae’s cobweb I’m tangled up in this time. Key word: hazard.

“Forgetting why...”

“—Remember how.”

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I take a sip of tea and feel the heat cross my lungs and disappear.

“I know you.” I’m talking now at a level audible to a person sitting at this table with me, but of course there are none.

“Duh. I’m your angel, your twin flame, your foreverling. Of course you would remember. “

“We’re connected by the same root.” She may be but a voice, but I can hear her nod.

“Though, frankly, I’m relieved you recognize me. You haven’t always in the past.”

“Oh, I haven’t?” My heart drops wondering how this feeling could ever be or have been unfamiliar. “What do you—I mean, how do you mean?”

“Good choice, how. It means you’re remembering. Let’s just say that for as many lives we have known each other from the root up—infinately many, let’s say—there are just as many where we’re unknown to the other. This is the planet of forgetting, after all.”

My whole body is tingling, as if the fibers that make me up are sensing infinity in this very room. The tea in my cup is rippling. I have no other choice but to begin weeping.

“You mean, it’s just as likely that I never meet you. That I keep walking down the street and your voice never comes to me?”

“Try not to think of it in terms of likelihood. The truth is, everything is unlikely, but our knowing each other is inevitable. Those universes where you and I are not privy to each other—and therefore, ourselves—we may be friends in those lives, but never realize that, under the surface, there’s an interconnected web of ancient, modern and prescient stories between us. I like to think that the infinities aren’t truly equal; that the number of realities where we know who we are is one greater: infinity + 1, and that we’re searching for the one dimension that tips the scale. Hopefully it would even break it, so that the balance could never tip the other way. But as of now, it’s *always have, never will*, if you know what I mean.”

“Or *never have, always will*.” I say, unable to hide the smirk in my voice. I wonder if I’m just a sound to her, too.

“Or *never always, have will*.” I start laughing; I can hear hers’ too.

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I feel my body wanting to giggle but I’m feeling hot pink and it’s no longer funny being haunted anymore.

“So, you think you know me?”

“Yes, but it’s not a thought.”

“There’s still a couple months before winter—have you known me then?”

“I’ve known you every winter since the very first.”

“Okay, calm down. Also, I don’t think that’s true.”

“You’re right, it’s not—I’ve missed some darker days. But it isn’t untrue either. Look where I am now.”

“Yeah, you’re in my head.”

“Think again.”

“In my true f-heart?”

“Closer, but also bigger. And less f.”

“The only thing bigger is the universe itself.”

“Somewhere between here and there then.”

God, another fucking riddle. Haven’t I done enough crosswords in my life? This must be penance for all the words I’ve corrupted over the years. I’ll find my out, I’m sure, but there’s some part of me that wishes I weren’t.

“Okay hotshot, you’re on thin ice. I’ll put this Thai tea in a to-go cup if I have to.”

“You could want to leave, and I’d follow you.”

“You won’t ask me to stay?”

“Everyone leaves.’ That’s what you told me once, in one universe.”

“And what else have I said?” I ask him, the voice, earnestly, feeling all the nostalgia for what I hope really did exist and simply can’t remember.

“You said you would sail the world with me, and you did. That you’re a visitor from another world, and I believed you. That you felt me in the water all those miles and miles away, and I did. That you rescued me from a spell I could not break, in braids, wearing the smock made from the sun’s loom. That you would shave your head on your 23rd birthday, but changed your mind and that was beautiful. That the whirligig of time would bring in his revenges, and it did. Should I keep going?”

I’m shaking my head, overcome with all the life I had not remembered I was alive for. It’s coming back to me though, and I start to feel the speckled sunlight of those shafts that strike through the canopy. A window behind me outshines the fairy lights inside, the candied orange lamp, the candle. I remember who he is.

“You’re my tree.” I say, hiccupping a slow hurtling sob that launched the second this universe exploded and was inescapably created.

“Yes.” The tears are the most mine they’d ever felt.

“I’d never let them chop you down.”

“I know, but still, I can’t help but smile hearing you say it out loud.”

“Have I never said it before?”

“No, you have. It just—it always feels good.”

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My earl grey has gone cold, so I put it down next to my chair for the mice. I think I saw a few dart in and out of my periphery, but I can’t be sure, especially not with mice.

“But do you remember?”

“Yes, I wrote a poem to my soulmate at the top of the Eiffel Tower. I wrote that we were angels, the sun and moon were ours, the wind spoke only with “I love you,” and a wizard is never late.” The more I talk with her, the fuller of memory I become. Surely I must be dead.

“You swore we’d meet each other there.” Like snatching the mosquito with an arm already pink from bug bites, she brought the past into being like it had never gone, only hidden.

“And we did, almost.”

“Almost means nothing.”

“Okay, but I wrote something when we almost made it too.”

“Oh, you did, did you? I don’t remember you ever reading it to me.”

“Well, I can read it to you now.” For once the random assortment of books and journals I lug around with me has the lines I need. I pull out the beaten-up field notes I took on the Tower’s second tier and pronounce them like I would a poem.

“Ce soir on n’est pas seules. Toi, mon âme-sœur, au 2ème étage. Je t’aime plus que personne. Tu brilles même si on n’est pas au sommet. Un jour on l’atteindra ensemble et tous nos anges et êtres magiques nous y suivront aussi. I will wait for us to jump to the top of this infamous, French stick.”

“You know, now that you’ve read it to me, and to the whole café, it does sound kind of familiar. Are you sure it’s an original?”

“Original! You were there when I wrote it.”

“I was there the next time too.”

“Next time? You mean we finally made it to the top?”

“Stop, you don’t remember? Oh, this is a good one. You might want to order another tea.”

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“May I make a request?”

“I’ll allow it,” I say, much sassier than I have any pretense for being. I’ve stopped crying.

“Would you perform for me?” I pause, even though I knew deep down I never did before. What gives now?

“Okay, but where? Also, I don’t have any instruments.”

“There’s a stage in the room in front of you, just to your right.” It feels like his voice is coming from behind the curtain, so I guess that this is my cue. I follow it.

Inside the room is a dimly lit stage with a microphone stand front and center. I climb up to it—it's a big step—and use a random branch protruding from a dark corner to balance myself. Then I step into the light. What am I doing?

“So, what do you want me to sing?” I ask. Strangers in the café look up at me as if I were addressing them. What am I going to tell them, that I'm taking direction from a lick of a ghost?

“Imagine the chords are already planted, by someone you can trust. Once you hear it, begin.”

“Oh, so I don't have any choice in the matter?”

“This is what you chose. It just doesn't feel like it's all come from you. Also, I *am* a paradox bitch. Sorry, not sorry—there wasn't any other way.”

I roll my eyes, but only long enough before my heart starts to roll in tandem. I hear the music somewhere, and it is there I perform my song, the one he claims saved his life.

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My laughter is too rambunctious, noxious to the tranquility of those around me, but I can't stop it. My gut hurts from her turn of phrase, her facial cursive, her bodily humors bumbling within. And all I can hear is her voice.

“You know, I have my own theory.”

“Neither walnut nor autointerrogative?”

“No, I can't remember if I ever told you about it or not.”

“Well, it's a great day for forgetting but an even greater day for remembering. What is it?”

“I think that when I die, I'll get to view a reel of memories from this life, and one of those reels consists of every moment you've ever waved to me. I believe that is what will be waiting for me in the interim between this life and the next.”

“Have I really waved to you that much?”

At that moment, the woman who brought me my tea comes over and tells me I've become a nuisance to the other guests, and that I have to leave. I try to reassure that I'll be tamer, but somehow when I speak, she only looks confused, as if my talk is unintelligible.

“Wait, am I making sense?”

“You never have, but I will always tell you it's better than that. And I love you for it.”

It hits me then that I'm sitting alone at a café table with no one to talk to, and yet I'm still talking. I'm being ushered out onto the street, my scarf mysteriously draped

over my chair, the chair opposite me empty as it had been all day. And she—she doesn't say anything anymore. I hear only her humming. That feeling she made for me; it's slowly slipping away.

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"But not today..." he sighs, making the sounds of repose. "You don't know what that song does for me."

"I think I understand. It's such a release." The other people seated at the tables had gotten up and left. What did I do?

"Yes, yes, it is." There's something else I hear in his voice, something brought up to mine. I don't know what it is, but it's human. You would need a body.

"Can I share with you one more memory?"

"What do you mean, one?"

"It's actually a memory displaced across many eras, but it can be told in one telling. Its most essential parts, at least."

"I'm listening." I stand there in the house light. I don't care where the fuck we are anymore.

"Some of my favorite moments in the universe have been watching you perform."

"Naturally," I say, stout, smug, alive.

"But you don't know the nature of what it is—to listen to the universe exhale, relax itself for you. You get to see it quiver; you get to hear its sleeping murmurs. The trees stop shaking and listen to you sing. The light of a refrigerator door pours through you and your voice, illuminating what is inward and invisible. I feel the universe ballooning in my gut, the electricity of air soaring up my spine, sending frost and flame to the edges of my body. I remember how the angels caress humanity's pond, hands at water's edge looking to bless tadpoles. You were one of the few they chose."

As he helter-skelters with his words down the universe's eellike waterfall, I see the café staff come into the room. They're after me, so I run off the stage, mic still in hand like a child holding a dandelion.

"Keep talking, I think I can mince around them."

"You once paid me to stop talking. Those were in the days when I wore yellow stockings and cross garters. You spoke to death directly, confusing it. At night we listened to the stars' form of prayer, and also to their chewing noises."

I dodged the hippie baristas and tripped them up with the mic chord. With divine, seismic timing, a rat came skittering out of the woodwork and chewed the wire at the base of the mic, freeing it and my hand, somehow unable to let go of the device.

“And what about the aliens?”

“Two of us, two of them. We saw ourselves that day, and we learned new languages, all four of us.”

“And the baked potato?”

“Our meeting place in many lives. Also, every earth apple is an interdimensional portal.”

I squeeze out of the entrance and take off, running in the middle of the street.

“And the solar eclipse? And the last doughnut-nap? And the green velvet frog? And all the thieves who were never thieves?”

I realize I'm yelling out in the street to no one. I can't hear his voice anymore, and the mic I'm holding no longer amplifies my speech. It's only exactly what it sounds like.

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I walk on the sidewalk with my hands in my pockets, my mind addled and foggy. The kind of fog that beckons you to bathe in it in your underwear late at night, and you leave the sliding door open. I wish she would come into my bedroom one last time and ask me if I wanted to go with her. I'd say yes this time.

My phone starts ringing, and for once every thousand or so years, I pick it up.

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I don't think the people from LIE are following me anymore. Maybe they never were, and I just kept running. I buy a spiced mango from a Mexican fruit cart, ask for a little lemon. I end up daring myself and strolling in front of the café another time, curious about the mess I make and never stop making. I notice for the first time the café's name isn't LIE at all. It's NATALIE.

My phone starts to ring. I really feel like answering it.

“Who calls?”