

The girl in the bathroom at the bar shares her glitter with me. I didn't know her five minutes ago, but now she's standing between my legs pressing shiny stars to my eyelids. The sequins of her dress press into the soft skin of my thighs, and I am almost trembling. The space is filled with the chatter of other women, and it's comforting. The ambiance of the night and the warmth of alcohol make this strange communion easy. I have no clue where the people I came with are, but that's okay. I think I like it here, sitting on the yellowed tile of the counter. Did I have any makeup on before? Not a clue.

The girl brushes my collarbones with a shimmer the color of angel dust. She uses her middle finger to tint my lips a deep red. Her fingerprints catch on my cupid's bow, and I fight a shuddering gasp. She smells so nice, like, well, like lavender in a summer breeze or cherries on fresh snow. I've never actually smelled cherries on fresh snow, but I once saw a scented candle with that name in a grocery store and was quite taken by the notion. I imagine it smells an awful lot like this woman. I wonder what I smell like? Probably sweat and stale curacao and, if I'm lucky, maybe a hint of the vanilla body spray I put on before the evening began.

'Tilt your head for me, sugar,' the Glitter Girl says. I do because she's pretty, and smells nice, and called me sugar, and is doing my makeup. No one's ever done my makeup before. My mother once said that only girls of the devil wear makeup. When she found my middle school lip gloss collection, she dumped it in a blender. She forced me to watch as it turned into a shiny gray paste. If she were to find the small pouch I keep tucked in my car's glove box now, containing a single tube of mascara and concealer, she would be livid.

She's wrong, though, about so much, because a girl who smells like cherries on snow and hums as she does a stranger's makeup in a crowded bathroom couldn't possibly be wicked. Or, I suppose, if she is, I would very much like to be of the devil too.

Why exactly had I come here again? I don't drink, not much at least, so why had I come downtown in the first place? Had I been on some kind of date? No, I didn't trust the men in this city, and I remember there being a lot of us together on the train. Was it someone's birthday, maybe? That wasn't right either. I don't think I'm close enough with any of the people I came with to celebrate their passage of time. So why had I come? I think I might've been celebrating something.

Or maybe mourning it?

'There, all done.' The glitter girl says. What was her name again? Had she ever told me? 'You look even prettier now.'

She moved out of the way so I could hop down and look at my reflection. It was a surprise to discover that I looked downright sultry. Silver clung to my eyelashes, refracting light in a way I had only seen in spiderwebs when it rained. My lips looked as if red wine and freshly spilled blood had a secret rendezvous. Every imperfection, every impurity of my face, had been brushed away as if by magic. This was dangerous. I looked so different and felt so, so good. Maybe this was what my mother had meant. Maybe to be of the devil was to feel *too* good. Maybe I was the devil now. Maybe I liked that.

The dress I was wearing didn't have pockets, so I had shoved my phone into my bra for safekeeping. I felt it vibrate against the crux of my armpit now. I didn't have to guess who was texting me so late.

I ignored her, though, too absorbed in the image before me. I would deal with the consequences later.

I looked so completely different from Glitter Girl, who stood behind me in the mirror, only a bible's width away. She had painted herself to look like a radiant fairy frolicking in a field. She was tall and elegant, her honeyed hair falling over her shoulders and her shining, lilac

dress making her look ethereal in the fluorescent light of the bathroom. I was none of those things, but even I could admit I looked great. Glitter Girl smelled amazing and had makeup brushes made of magic. How do you thank someone like that? How do you even dare to speak to someone like that?

I'd missed my chance to say anything. She moved on to the other girls lounging by the paper towels, offering soft smiles in response to their pleas to become pretty. Two girls sat on the tile floor, sharing a water bottle between them in slow, careful sips. More than a few of the women had their shoes clutched in their hands, willing to risk the dirty floor for some semblance of relief. So many of them were laughing and passing around their phones, and it was easy to forget, upon viewing this scene, any of the bad parts of being a woman. The grotesquity of girlhood suddenly didn't seem to matter.

I turned around, leaning with a sigh against the edge of the counter, and then a giggle fell from my lips of its own accord. Glitter Girl was now brushing shiny pink onto the cheeks of a girl who looked far too young to be here. She was probably using a fake ID, but she looked so perfectly giddy, who would I be to bother her?

As wonderful as I felt, I knew that the strange spell in the bathroom needed to end at some point. Rather than wait for such a rude awakening, I slipped quietly out the door. Then I, the devil girl, wove my way through the thick heat of the main body of the bar. Bar? Tavern? Club? I wasn't actually sure. This wasn't where I had started my evening.

Oh yeah, I had come out to celebrate something. The end of something. Celebrate? No. Mourn? I was starting to get a clue.

Something had ended for us, for me, but nothing was starting.

I was afraid. *That* was why I was here. Because I was so afraid.

My phone buzzed again. It was slipping in the band of my bra, the case beginning to dig uncomfortably into my ribs. Another text, I'm sure, with more questions or accusations.

I no longer liked the glitter. It lay thick and heavy on my sensitive skin now. The dark color on my chapped lips suddenly felt oily and too much. I was struck by the urge to scrape it all off, to maul my own image, oh, but what if Glitter Girl suddenly left the bathroom? She had shared something precious with me, and she smelled so nice. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, and I didn't want to waste her hard work, so the makeup had to stay. I would deal.

Bodies slithered against me as I moved, foreign hands reaching for the material of my dress and the loose hair that fell around my face, but I brushed them off. I didn't want to dance anymore.

It was a big place with lots of windows and tables, and so many staircases. None of the faces swarming around me looked familiar. Had the people I came with left already, bound for the next watering hole? Maybe. I found I didn't care as much as I probably should.

There was too much, all at once. Too much noise, too much heat, too much glitter, too much company. I had to get out... no, not out. I wasn't ready to leave yet. I had to get somewhere I could breathe, though. I stumbled towards the staircase that had the fewest people.

My phone buzzed three times in quick succession as I began to climb. I pinched the bridge of my nose, and my fingers came back shiny. I couldn't ignore her any longer. I stuck my hand down the front of my dress and extracted the device. I had to use my sleeve to wipe away the layer of sweat that had accumulated on the glass screen. Sure enough. Five unread messages, all from my mother.

*You haven't called me today.*

I sighed as I passed the first landing.

*We need to talk about when you're moving back home.*

A couple was making out in the next landing, but just as they didn't notice me, I paid them no mind.

*Why have you turned off your location?*

Someone was sobbing on the next floor.

*I know you know better than to hide anything from me.*

And finally, the last set of stairs ended. Can't go any further up from here.

*Remember to behave like the woman I raised you to be.*

My fingers hovered for a moment over the keypad before I shook my head and pressed the off button. Not right now. I wasn't coherent enough.

This landing opened up into a balcony that overlooked the entire city.

I was still too loose, too unsteady, to care that it was already occupied.

I did, however, hesitate until the person sitting there noticed me.

The old woman took a long drag of her cigarette and released the smoke into the night. At last, she turned just enough to look at me before gesturing to the empty side of the bench.

Although she said nothing, it was invitation enough for me.

My dress rode up enough that the concrete of the bench dug into the bottom of my legs, desperately trying to get at my ass. I did my best to shimmy the hem downwards.

'Well, aren't you a pretty one?'

The old woman didn't smell anything like cherries on snow. She smelled like back rooms and late nights and ash. It was a hazy, heavy scent, but I didn't scoot away. I just looked out across the evening and breathed deeply.

'No, I'm just shiny right now.'

She quirked an eyebrow in question, and I squirmed. How could I explain Glitter Girl and her sweet scent and the way she had cradled my face as she made me art?

I couldn't. I just shook my head and gripped my phone tighter in my hands.

'You're young.'

I shrugged. I didn't feel young.

'Why are you up here?'

She took another long drag of the cigarette. Dad used to smoke. He would light a match in the bathroom to hide the scent, but we always knew. Mom would pretend she didn't. She never threw his cigarettes in the blender, at least.

'It is my way.'

What a strange answer, but then again, I was here too. Was it also my way? I didn't ask, although I suspected this stranger might have an answer for me. I didn't want to hear it.

'It's a nice night.'

'It is,' she agreed. 'Seems an awful waste to spend it in the company of perfect strangers.'

'Strangers are more interesting.'

My own words surprised me. More interesting than what? The people I came with? Spending the night alone with my cat? Me?

It was probably me.

'What brings you here tonight?'

Cigarette smoke poured from her lips as she spoke.

'It was a little stuffy downstairs. I needed some air.'

She tutted slightly, shaking her head. Even viewed in profile like this, her eyes looked tired.

'Not up here, child. That even I could've figured. To this bar, to this part of town, to this night.'

My face felt hot even with the cool air that the evening breeze breathed onto the balcony. I wanted to scrub the heat away from my cheeks, but then the glitter would come away on my hands.

Something had ended, I was afraid.

School. School had ended. I was afraid because I didn't know what was coming next.

*That* was why I was here.

I blinked rapidly. My eyelashes fluttered like injured moths, the mascara thick and heavy and clumsy. I couldn't cry, couldn't let the eyeliner run. Not when Glitter Girl had applied it with such care and told me I had beautiful eyes.

What was I doing here? I should be back in front of my computer, figuring out what the hell my next step should be. What was I doing in such a strange place, acting so unlike the woman I was raised to be?

I could practically feel my mother's disapproving glare as it stretched across space and time. I knew I was doing this all wrong.

The stranger was still patiently watching me. She must've seen the shift in my mood, but did not comment on it. She was still waiting for my answer.

I couldn't leave someone waiting, even if I didn't have the answers myself.

'To celebrate an end.'

My half-assed answer didn't stop her side-eye the way I'd hoped it would. If anything, she was looking more intensely now. She stared at the makeup lining my face, at the way I was still subconsciously tugging at my dress, at my phone clutched close to my chest. I knew she didn't miss the way I was fidgeting, how the frizzy hairs clung to my forehead, or the way my whole body tremored when a car honked somewhere in the distance. She dissected me with the same intensity that my own reflection did whenever I stood before a mirror.

‘An end,’ she finally looked away, back out across the dark shapes of buildings with their illuminated windows, ‘or a beginning?’

My lips were so dry. I didn’t know if that was the result of the waxy lipstick or simply my own nerves. Trying to wet them with my tongue only rewarded me with stained teeth and an unpleasant film in my mouth.

I should really leave. I was feeling dizzy and invincible and fragile all at once, and what good would staying do? It would be better for everyone if I pretended that this night never happened.

A smell like cherries on snow floated up on the breeze.

‘Beginning of what?’

The cigarette was dying. It had almost reached the woman’s withered fingertips. She had dark nail polish on, just like mine, and it was chipped, just like mine.

‘That’s up to you.’

I wanted to scoff. Was it really? Sure, on paper, the prospect of freedom was lovely, but paper had not lived my life. What power did I have over my mother’s critique? What could I do about the list of acceptable husbands she had waiting for me back home? When I’d never be allowed to be covered in glitter again as soon as I left this place? When my degree didn’t guarantee me a career like it once might’ve?

‘I don’t know about that.’

The woman dropped the butt of her cigarette. She crushed it under the heel of her flats. I almost envied her. Those were the kind of shoes I normally wore, and my feet were screaming because of the heels I had risked tonight.

‘I do.’

The old woman turned to fully face me for the first time since I had sat down. Her face held the weight of many years, wrinkles pulling at all her features. Dark valleys marred her forehead, her jowls drooped ominously, and her mouth pressed itself into a thin downward line. The only place she seemed to lack these marks was where her laugh lines should've been. How sad that one thing not reflected by a person's age would be joy? Her grey hair was piled atop her head, a lot like the way my mother wore hers. She wore no makeup, but her eyes were still striking. She wasn't looking at me anymore so much as looking *through* me. There was something I knew in those uncomfortably familiar eyes. I could see my own reflection staring back at me in the moisture that collected around her pupils.

'I'm not one to give advice, child. I live and let be, but it is because I have not lived the way I wanted that I am telling you this now. You are at a point in your life where the decisions you make will change everything. You are standing at a crossroads, my dear, and depending on which way you turn, you will be able to keep making choices. If you fall into what's familiar, frightened by the prospect that you are doing things wrong, you will not be the one in control of your path for much longer. You need to know that there is not one *right* way to be a woman.'

I felt my brows furrow and crossed my arms tight over my stomach. If I pressed hard enough, maybe I could force my gut to settle down. I should leave, should get away from this person who was clearly losing it. No one talks to strangers like that unless they are unwell. I needed to go home.

'I don't-'

'What do you want?'

'What?'

The woman looked borderline desperate.

'If no one else was watching, if there was no tomorrow, what would you want to do?'

I looked away. I had to. Her gaze was too intense, too expectant. I rubbed my eye. I was getting tired, and I had to call my mother. I didn't have time for this.

My fingers came away silvery and glittery, and I stopped. The makeup shimmered in the night, gleaming like fallen stars lodged under my nails.

Suddenly I had my answer, but...

'But there *is* a tomorrow, and there *are* people watching.'

'Why does that have to change your truth?'

Because I am a coward and I don't know any other way.

My entire body began to buzz, my flesh pulling tight and goosebumps prickling my skin. Maybe I was about to pass out.

Or maybe my phone was just ringing and I was dumb.

I had pressed the device between my thighs, I wrenched it out to look at the screen. Upon seeing the contact that flashed there, I began to nervously chew on my thumbnail, a bad habit I could never indulge in unless I was alone with my own company.

Mother, Incoming Call.

I stood, my legs shaky.

It seemed I had run out of time. The strange haze of the evening had to end now. It was time to return to the real world.

'You don't have to answer that, you know.'

The old woman wasn't watching me anymore. She was tapping another cigarette out of the box into her palm.

'You shouldn't smoke.' I found myself saying.

She shrugged, fragile skin pulling taut with the movement.

‘Habit I picked up from my old man.’ Her bony shoulders tensed. ‘A habit I hope you never pick up.’ She placed the fresh cig between her teeth. ‘You don’t owe her anything.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Mother.’ She struck her lighter once, twice, and lit the cigarette. She must’ve seen my phone. How else could she possibly know who had called? ‘Don’t answer her call tonight. If you do, you’ll be answering it for the rest of your life.’

‘What other choice do I have? She’s my mom, after all.’

She pulled the cancer stick back out, the dark plume pouring past her teeth.

‘You could hang up and go back downstairs. If you hurry, you can make it back to the bathroom in time. Let yourself be your own kind of woman for once.’

I really was shaking now, my whole body trembling with the intensity of those words.

‘Who are you?’

The only answer I got was a distant, bitter smile.

I left then, my knees almost buckling with every downward step.

I stared at the two buttons that illuminated the bottom of my screen. One red, one green. My hands shook as I made my choice, tapping hard on the glass.

The bar was starting to empty, but that made it easier to see the faces swimming around me. So many of the girls from the bathroom were out here now, but transformed. The girl with Doc Martens now had sharp, decisive cat eyes that would rival Cleopatra. The young girl bounded past me laughing, hair in pigtails framing a face that looked like candy. A classic Hollywood model sidled past me, red lips glittering like a jewel. A woman with soft, plump curves and skin that shimmered like a mermaid smiled at me. Standing there, in the crowded bar, witnessing a display of such varied femininity, I truly realized for the first time just how many different ways there are to be a woman.

I knew there was one person to thank for that.

The bathroom door screeched in protest as I pushed it open.

She was the only one there now, and it was she who sat on the counter this time.

She raised her head when I stepped inside and looked mildly surprised when she saw me.

Her face flushed a brilliant rose.

‘Hi,’ she offered upon seeing me. It might’ve been a question.

‘Hello,’ I answered.

The door swung shut behind me with a heavy thud. The small space was flooded with a smell an awful lot like cherries on snow.