

The Pretender

The apartment was far too small for a party. There were only meant to be twenty guests, thirty tops, but, like any good party, word had spread. The host had long given up trying to keep people out, and now stood protectively at a wall that donned (presumably stolen) street signs in an attempt to stop guests from knocking them down. Beside him, people made out on couches or crowded around the makeshift beer pong table, peering over shoulders in an attempt to watch a trick shot (back turned, ball off the wall). Closeby, a boy hunted for his Juul—stolen from where it charged in the wall outlet—pushing with drunken fury through people dancing in the living room. There was beer—always beer—and it clung to practically every surface in the room, turning the pong table sticky, clinging to shoes and bare feet, and even mingling with the football players' breath.

It was your classic, run-of-the-mill college party. And, in that moment, Beverly hated it all.

She hated the long looks she got from strange boys across the room, the fake laughs that followed her jokes, the hugs from people she hadn't spoken to since first year. It suffocated her, so much so that she'd retreated to the open balcony, a cigarette tucked between two fingers, softly blowing smoke out into the night.

She'd been drunk not long ago, but the buzz had faded to something close to sober, leaving her with heavy exhaustion more than anything else. Inside the apartment, the party raged on. Her gaze drifted to the group she'd come with, still caught up in the haze of alcohol, cheeks red, jumping along to the Foo Fighter's "The Pretender." One of Beverly's friends caught her eye through the window and waved her back, but she only lifted her cigarette in response, offering an apologetic shrug.

“Those are cancer-sticks, you know.”

The masculine voice startled Beverly. She resisted a sigh, instead turning to the stranger with a tight smile. “I’m aware.”

The boy was lounging in the balcony doorway, half inside the apartment and half out. In his right hand was a solo cup, untouched.

“I thought everyone Juuled these days?” the boy went on, this time louder so as to be heard over the thrumming music of the party.

Beverly snorted. “I guess I’m old-fashioned.”

After a polite period of silence, she turned back to the railing. From here, she could easily gaze into the apartment across the street, where a woman lay curled up on the couch, watching television. Beverly longed suddenly for her own bed, for her own peaceful solitude. She’d retreated to this balcony to escape the small talk, and yet, somehow, it had followed her here. She closed her eyes and focused on her cigarette and its smoke, trying to ignore the boy, even as she felt him step closer, so that they stood together at the railing.

“I hate these things,” he said without looking at her.

“So why do you come?”

He shrugged. “The guys complain I work too much.”

She hated to admit it, but he was not unlike her. She wouldn’t go so far as to say she didn’t *like* parties—because she did—but they were always followed by these moments. Feeling too sober and strangely alone, wondering why the hell she tried so hard.

She didn’t know what possessed her to do it, but she found herself raising her cigarette for him to see. Smoke furred from the end of it, towards his face. “I don’t even like these.”

He tilted his head. “Then why do you smoke them?”

She shrugged, once again raising it to her lips. “It’s an excuse to get away, to have a moment to myself. No one questions it.”

“And your lungs pay the price.”

She rolled her eyes, turning back to the railing. “No need to lecture. I’ve heard it all before.”

She’d picked up the habit in her senior year of high school, when parties were no longer shiny and new. Her now ex-boyfriend had been a smoker himself, and though she’d always hated the cigarettes offered to her, she’d grown fond of the atmosphere. There was something about sitting outside, feeling the music reverberating through the windows and the night air biting at her skin, that gave her some remnant of peace. A moment’s reprieve.

“I’ll be the first guy to admit this,” the boy said, cutting through her thoughts, “but I actually hate beer.” He raised his solo cup as if in proof. It was still filled to the brim.

“That sounds like a waste of beer,” she replied with a nod at his cup.

He half-smiled. “Less questions this way.” Before she could open her mouth to ask, he went on, “Alcoholism runs in the family. But people don’t seem to get what that means, you know?”

“You’re never tempted to try it?”

He glanced down at his cup thoughtfully. “I did once in high school. But my dad found out and his disappointment...that was enough.”

She wondered what that would be like, having to justify your distaste for alcohol over and over again. She supposed it was not unlike her mixed relationship with parties. Saying you “just needed a moment outside” always drew concern and some frowns. It turned you into the staple “wet-blanket,” the one who ruined others’ fun. In a way, cigarettes justified that moment

outside, changed frowns to understanding nods. Cigarettes gave her a moment to herself. A moment to recuperate. A moment where she could stop pretending to be so damn happy all the time.

If she were out there, in the midst of the party, talking to this strange boy about his familial alcoholism, she would probably have made a face of shock and told him how sorry she was. But here, skulking at the outskirts of the party, reality felt a little different. Instead of offering some empty words of comfort, she only nodded her understanding.

“These parties...they make me feel trapped,” she said, surprised by her own bluntness, surprised by the way she almost blurted out the words, as though they had been inside her all this time, hovering at the surface of her lips, waiting to spring out. “Like everyone expects me to have a good time, to be in a good mood. But sometimes I just get tired of pretending.”

It was exhausting, really. The forced smiles. The small talk. Drinking until that pit in her stomach loosened, and all she felt was some drunken semblance of “happy.” People always said to “fake it ‘til you make it,” but to Beverly, that was bullshit. Synthetic happiness, cultivated in fake laughs and the buzz of alcohol, was short-lived and left her feeling nothing more than empty. Thinking about it now, she felt tears prick at the backs of her eyes. *Stupid*, she thought bitterly, forcing them back. She glanced up at the boy in embarrassment, expecting him to shift away uncomfortably and make some lame getaway excuse, but he looked only thoughtful.

“I think everyone goes through life pretending,” he mused. “But I think we kind of have to, you know?”

Beverly snorted. “A bit pessimistic, don’t you think?”

He smiled, shrugging. “We can agree to disagree.” He paused. “But I do get it.”

“Get what?”

“Just needing a moment.”

They stood together in silence, Beverly smoking her cigarette and the boy simply holding his beer, but it was a companionable silence more than anything else. Two strangers who, for perhaps the first time, didn't have to make small talk or pretend to be something they weren't. They could just be, in whatever way that was.

When Beverly's friend Sydney approached with two shots of vodka, Beverly didn't cast a second glance at the boy. Instead, she stamped out her cigarette, clinked glasses with Sydney, and tried not to gag as the liquid burned its way down her throat. She let Sydney pull her away, gathering all that remained of her energy in an attempt to have “fun.” They talked about boys, and the assignments they had yet to do, and drank more, and danced—and all the while, Beverly longed for the sanctity of the balcony.

“Bev, you want another drink?”

She turned to find four pairs of eyes staring expectantly at her. Beverly stretched her lips as far as they would go. “Always.” As the girls squealed their approval, disappearing in search of the keg, Beverly glanced over her shoulder. Not far away was the boy from the window, being embraced by a group of guys who thumped him on his back, sloshing his still-full cup. He smiled at them and said something that elicited a rumble of laughter. Then he looked up suddenly, meeting Beverly's gaze. For a moment they found that peace again, in each other. But the moment passed quickly, and they turned back to their respective groups, fitting masks to their faces once more.

Sydney returned with drinks in hand. As she handed Beverly a cup overflowing with beer, she nodded in the direction of the boy. “Do you know him?”

Beverly followed Sydney's gaze, just for a moment. The boy was standing among his friends, cup raised to his lips. She swore his Adam's apple bobbed, as if he were swallowing the very alcohol he had sworn himself against. She felt a flicker of disappointment in her chest.

"Nope," Beverly said. She knocked back her drink and let the alcohol consume her once more, until her mind had grown fuzzy, and her encounter on the balcony was a memory long-forgotten.