

Ella's Red Balloon

By Wei He

Estimated Running Time: 10 minute

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Address: 4601 Bayard St. Apt. 906, Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Characters

HAMILTON Male, 20s-30s

ELLA Female, 20s-30s

Setting

On a giant red balloon

Time

Present

A few minutes before the moon rises.

HAMILTON stands on the top of a giant red balloon.

HAMILTON

A giant red balloon is floating in the city.

The hugeness of the balloon is beyond your imagination. So you cannot tell that I'm standing on it right now. Just like it's hard to perceive the roundness of the earth.

Isn't it interesting to think about? How a flat surface expresses the immensity of something round. Hey, this is philosophy. How many of you know philosophy? That means I'm smart. Teaching philosophy to a bunch of college students can be my next career choice when I am too old to be in this business.

Oh, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Hamilton, a professional killer.

My profession is a traditional, noble business. Like anything old, like, like a piece of antique furniture, it's always about being classy and beautiful. Okay, I will give you an example. Anybody smoke cigars here? Anybody? Well, if you smoke cigars, you need to cut a cigar and light it before you can enjoy it. My target is just like a cigar. The goal of cutting a cigar is to open up the cap without cutting past the shoulder, a visible line where cap and body meet. Here, can you see it? A tiny dent. Squeeze the cutter closed. The cap comes off neat and clean. Lighting a cigar can erase the possible trace of any irregularity of the cut and its aftermath, the shocking, hideous effect to the eyes. It is a process of achieving balance and delicacy. Remember to use the hottest part of the flame, the part above the visible flame.

That's where the invisible danger is. The rippling excitement. The burning cordiality.

I'm waiting for my new target. All my previous targets are male. My new one is a she. I've done some research but I dug up almost nothing. I only knew she's a food designer and she is mesmerized by round things. I think this balloon must be one of them.

What I am standing on now is a pretty balloon. It must be looking like a red orange from afar. Oranges are lovely fruits. Tasty, juicy, healthy. Especially those red ones. THRILLINGLY SWEET.

The balloon is still growing, and rolling forward very slowly. Slow enough for me to remain on top. I've been waiting for three days, a new record for my ambush time. But the longer I wait, the more patient I am. I'm curious what universe this woman harbors in her heart.

(looking around)

The balloon just passed her apartment. I'm sure she has seen it. Isn't this balloon serendipitous for her?

For both of us?

ELLA joins HAMILTON on the balloon.

HAMILTON

Hi.

ELLA

Oh, hi. I didn't expect I would see someone on the top.

HAMILTON

(imitating Michael Jackson's moonwalk)

This is my personal spaceship.

ELLA

(looking around)

Nice view.

ELLA lies down on her chest and stretches her arms.

HAMILTON

What are you doing?

ELLA

I'm hugging my balloon.

HAMILTON

This is your Balloon?

ELLA

Yes.

This is a birthday gift I gave myself.

HAMILTON

Why a giant balloon?

ELLA

It may sound strange to you, I have a passion for anything round. Roundness is too perfect for humans to achieve.

So I chose designing round food as my profession.

HAMILTON

Like a bagel?

ELLA

Yes, like bagels, and donuts, and pies. And, and macaroni.

HAMILTON

Macaroni is not round; it's a tube.

ELLA

But its both ends are round.

HAMILTON

All right.

What's your name?

ELLA

Ella.

HAMILTON

Ella.

ELLA

No, E-L-L-A. You have to twirl your tongue, try to make it a circle. E-L-L-A.

HAMILTON

Your name sounds like you're tying your tongue into a knot but it's not long enough.

ELLA

What's your name?

HAMILTON

Hamilton.

ELLA

Your name makes me think of a reliable car on a quiet street.

HAMILTON

Why?

ELLA

I don't know. All the Hamiltons I know are good people, nice, harmless, a little vulnerable and awkward.

HAMILTON

It's just a name. Names usually convey expectations. They don't necessarily deliver real facts.

ELLA

What do you do for a living, Hamilton?

HAMILTON

I have an ability of giving one man's life trajectory a hard twist and tying it into a dead knot. Hey, knot! My job features the roundness you're seeking.

ELLA

You're a novelist?

HAMILTON

Wow, you're amazing. How did you know? When I said it so vaguely.

ELLA

That sounds a lot like a piece of pulp fiction. Making characters veer from their tracks and fall off the cliff.

But roundness doesn't function as a dead knot. A dead knot is an exclamation mark, it has a shocking effect, but that's all to it. It's dead. Like a bad joke fails to stir the air and falls flat on the ground.

What I'm looking for is flowing, changing constantly. It's malleable. Like, like lake water, turns into vapor in summer heat, and becomes clouds in the sky, and falls back onto earth as rain. The life of water is a circle.

HAMILTON

But our life is a one-way journey, not a round trip.

ELLA

Well, I guess I'm thrilled by that attainable unattainability.

HAMILTON

Hmm, interesting. So you're saying it feels like you can get it but actually you cannot?

ELLA

I guess so, it's not easy to articulate.
Thank you.

HAMILTON

For what?

ELLA

For being interested in my whatever this is. It doesn't benefit the world the way an ideal does, not as motivating as a childhood dream, not as comforting as a religious belief, lasts longer than a whim.

HAMILTON

I will just call it an idea. A thought. Something tucked in a corner of your heart.

ELLA

My balloon is rolling forward.
Very slowly, though.
We just passed 42nd Street.
It's so quiet here.
We can't get this marvelous stillness anywhere downtown but here.

HAMILTON

That's true. I enjoyed the quietness when waiting for you.

ELLA

What? You were waiting for me, did you say?

HAMILTON

Yes, I was.

ELLA

Do you know me?

HAMILTON

You're my target. I'm a professional killer. I was hired to kill you.

(takes out a cigar, about to light it)

Hope you don't mind.

ELLA

Actually, I do.
I'm pregnant.

HAMILTON.

You're pregnant?

ELLA unbuttons her coat and caresses her belly lovingly.

ELLA

Only for a month. So it's not obvious yet. But I can feel a tiny curve already.

HAMILTON

I'm a professional killer. A good one who knows what he's doing all the time. Top-notch.

ELLA

Do you know what the embryo looks like in a month?

HAMILTON

I never fail to accomplish my mission.

ELLA

My tiny baby curls up in a bubble. Like this big.

(gesturing with her thumb and index finger, in a baby's voice)

Hey, Mommy!

HAMILTON

That's adorable.

ELLA

Hey listen, Hamilton, I'm not asking you to let me go. I'm just begging for more time. To give birth to my baby.

A pause.

HAMILTON

Have you thought about the name?

ELLA

Of course! Thousands of times every day.

HAMILTON

So BAGEL for a boy, MUFFIN for a girl?

ELLA chuckles.

ELLA

So far my favorite name is ORANGE. A beautiful, round fruit. Juicy. Sweet. Exactly my expectation for the baby.

HAMILTON

(surprised)

Orange is my favorite fruit.

A pause.

ELLA

Give me eight months. My baby needs that long to be ready for this world.

The moon comes up.

ELLA

We get a full moon today.

HAMILTON

Okay, eight months. I can wait that long. On the full-moon night in eight months just like this one. You will give birth to your beautiful baby here, on this big soft round bed. I will see you here.

ELLA

But what if the balloon bursts? It could be pierced by the waning moon.

HAMILTON

I'll protect it. I'll prevent the balloon from bursting.

ELLA

See you in eight months.

ELLA exits.

HAMILTON

Maybe I can become a philosophy teacher in eight months. Or a novelist.

(hugging the balloon, feeling its breathing with his palm)

A tidal, moon-driven breath.

HAMILTON wants to leave but doesn't. We can see a gleeful hesitation in him.

End of play

Drive and Lane

By Wei He

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Characters

Drive: M, 63, he is like an ocean on an overcast, windless morning, with an undercurrent of sadness.

Lane: M, 21, he is like a creek on a lazy, sunny afternoon, with bubbles of cheerfulness.

Setting

The porch of an old, worn house.

The porch of an old, worn house. Plaster is peeling.
Two rusty chairs and a small table.
LANE sits in one of the chairs.
DRIVE opens the screen door and steps onto the porch,
holding two bottles of beer.
He hands one to LANE and sits down in the other chair.
LANE takes the beer and sips from it.
DRIVE holds his beer upside down above his mouth
and finds the bottle is already empty.

DRIVE

Damn it.

DRIVE rises from his chair and exits into the house.
LANE sips more from the beer.

LANE

Hey Drive!

Moments pass.

DRIVE
(from inside the house)

Yeah?

DRIVE appears behind the screen door, holding a beer.
He pushes the door open and enters. He takes a seat.
They clink their beer bottles.

DRIVE

Happy birthday, kid.
You can finally drink legally now.

LANE

Thanks.
But I have to say, it's kind of boring being legal.
(takes a sip)

What were you doing?

DRIVE

What?

LANE

What took you so long to grab a beer?
(Sincerely)

Were you contemplating in the kitchen again?

DRIVE grunts.

DRIVE

Contemplating.

LANE

Care to share your wisdom?

DRIVE

I haven't got any.

LANE

Come on, you put new wrinkles in my brain everyday.

(pauses)

Sometimes you use big words, you know, that nobody uses, like, materialize.

DRIVE

Do I know that word?

LANE

Yeah.

One time I walked into your kitchen, and it smelled really nice.

I say, what you cooking there?

You say, there are muffins materializing in the oven.

I'm like, whoa, man.

A goddamn giant wrinkle you gave me there.

Pause.

Hey, you want to hear something interesting?

DRIVE

You know something interesting?

LANE

Somebody shot somebody.

DRIVE

Who shot who?

LANE

Wrench's wife shot him. In the stomach.

DRIVE
With what?

LANE
A shotgun.

DRIVE
Was it confiscated?

LANE
Nobody called the police.

DRIVE
Ambulance?

LANE
Nope.
They wrapped Wrench tight to stop the bleeding.
Used four blankets or something until his face turned all purple and blue.
He looked like a giant burrito.
And he was stinky in this heat.

DRIVE
Wrench was killed by his wife?

LANE
Yeah.

DRIVE
For what?

LANE
People were saying he hit her with an extension cord because her pancakes didn't
smell like butter.

They drink, thinking their own thoughts.
Moments pass.

LANE
Wrench was always being an asshole to me.
He hit me on the head with a frying pan once.
It was hurtful and, oily.
And I remembered he talked in rhyme on his wedding day.
Fry pan, trash can, there's a pretty girl named Suzanne, she's right in my minivan.

DRIVE
Where's Suzanne now?

LANE
I don't know.
I guess nobody knows.
Nobody went looking for her.
(pauses)
I want to watch TV.
Do you want to watch TV?

DRIVE
I don't really feel like moving my butt now.

LANE
I can move the television outside.

DRIVE
No, you can't.
I don't have extension cords.

LANE
I got batteries.

DRIVE
Seriously?

LANE exits into the house and comes back with two
batteries the size of a brick.

DRIVE
Holy shit.
Those are, like, the biggest batteries I've ever seen.

LANE
(reads off the label of the battery)
Long lasting power.

DRIVE
Where did you get them?

LANE
From 7-11.

DRIVE
I thought it shut down.

LANE

It just reopened last week.
But everything they got there is a bigger size so it's hard to shoplift now.
A coke bottle looks like a rocket.
You can only get that from the 7-11 in this neighborhood.
Quite a view.

DRIVE

God.

LANE

I'm putting them in the television.

DRIVE

And fetch me another beer.

LANE goes back into the house.
DRIVE drinks beer quietly.
Suddenly the sound of a big explosion.
DRIVE springs up from his chair.

DRIVE

The fuck-

LANE
(from inside the house)

The TV exploded!

DRIVE

Whaaaaat?!

A moment of silence.
LANE reappears behind the screen door.

LANE

The TV exploded!
And it left a fucking black hole in the wall.

DRIVE

Are they batteries or grenades?

LANE freezes.
DRIVE bursts out laughing.
LANE relaxes and laughs too.
LANE sits back in the chair.

LANE

No TV then. Bummer.

DRIVE

Why don't you go home?
Didn't your Dad leave you a television?

LANE

Yeah.
But I sold it last year.
And Mom doesn't allow drinking at home.
(remembers something)
Shit.
I forgot to water the ferns.

DRIVE

Ferns?

LANE

We got some ferns in front of the house and Mom asked me to water them to keep them alive.
It's been a week. I totally forgot about it.

DRIVE

What's the use of keeping ferns alive?

LANE

Mom said they smell nice.

DRIVE

Ferns?
Ferns smell like air.

LANE

Exactly!
But Mom said it's subtle.

DRIVE

God.

LANE

What?

DRIVE starts unraveling quietly.

DRIVE

Subtlety is a tricky thing.
Sometimes feelings can get, get...

LANE

Subtle?
Tricky?

Pause.

DRIVE

Both.

LANE

What are you talking about?
It's just a subtle smell.
It's a smell that's hard to catch.
If you miss it, you miss it.

DRIVE

Exactly.
Like feelings.

LANE

Now you remind me of a dream I had last night.

DRIVE

After you passed out on my couch?

LANE

Yeah.
I dreamed of beer.
I was drinking beer while watching TV.

DRIVE

In your dream?

LANE

Yep.

DRIVE

How can you tell it was a dream?

LANE

I had, like, seventeen bottles, in a row and was still sober.
And I kind of had a feeling. A feeling that was familiar but also kinda new.

But I couldn't put a name on it. I mean, I couldn't tease it out.
But it was right there, in my stomach, all muddled up with beer foam, and this weird soberness.

(Pauses)

Quite a dense dream. Like a big word that nobody uses.

LANE expects a chuckle from DRIVE, which does not come.

LANE

(tries a little harder to cheer DRIVE up)

There's more to Wrench's story.

Before he died, somebody asked him, Hey Wrench, how you feeling? What does it feel like being shot by your wife?

Wrench yelled, that's the dumbest question I've ever heard!

It feels like I just got shot by my wife!

LANE laughs.
DRIVE doesn't.

DRIVE

I know how that feels.

LANE stops laughing.

DRIVE

I was shot by my wife.

LANE

What?

DRIVE

Yep.

LANE

You never mentioned it.

And I've known you for, like, ten years.

DRIVE

That was before you were born.

I sat around all day and did nothing but eating, drinking, watching TV, shoplifting in 7-11 and being dickhead to my woman.

But she never said anything. She was a quiet woman. She made pancakes when I was watching TV and drinking beer.

I thought we were doing just fine until that day.

I was drinking a beer and talking shit to her.

She stood in the doorframe like a statue.
Sunlight landed on her hair like a halo.
She suddenly asked, *do you know how I feel?*
I said, *why don't you tell me?*
Then she shot me in my waist.
I heard something glassy shatter before I passed out.
I guess the bullet did something interesting after it left my body.
It was right on this porch.
Not much has changed.
I'm still sitting here, drinking beer.
Things have been quite stationary since then.

LANE

Stationary?

DRIVE

Should've let her kill me.

LANE

Come on, Drive.
You and Wrench are different.
Wrench was an asshole.
But you are...nice.
You're a nice guy, and really know words.

Pause.

DRIVE

Yeah, Wrench and I are different.
He didn't survive the bullet, but I did.
I'm still alive.
That is the only difference.

LANE

I'm so sorry, Drive.
I really am.

Pause.

Lane gets up from his seat.

LANE

(softly)

You want something from the kitchen?
Potato chips? Another beer?

Pause.

DRIVE

Go home, Lane.
You should go home and check on those ferns.
While they're still there.

LANE

Well, ferns are ferns, they're plants.
They aren't going anywhere-

DRIVE

It's time for you to go home.
(Pauses)
Happy birthday, kid.
Go home while the ferns are still there.

LANE stands at the screen door and remains still.
DRIVE turns to look at him.
They look at each other.

END OF PLAY

My Birthday Party

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Character

W: female, 30s, she is like a beautiful bird without feet that has flown over mountains and forests.

Setting

A bedroom:

A bed, a nightstand with drawers, a dresser, a closet for clothes, a window, magazines and books on the floor, a glass on the nightstand, etc.

Lights up.

The room looks like the hostess did a sloppy job of tidying and cleaning in the past week.

W enters. She is in sweatpants and a T-shirt, hair unbrushed and tied back casually.

She goes over to the closet and rummages distractedly. She removes a dress and fingers the fabric. She hangs it back. She removes another dress and holds it in front of her for a second then puts it back. She removes another dress and hangs it back immediately without looking.

She turns sharply and goes over to collect the magazines and books scattered on the floor and stacks them on the nightstand casually. She wipes the dust off the lamp with her hand then wipes her hand on her T-shirt. She nudges the tower of books she just deposited on the nightstand accidentally and they collapse back onto the floor. She looks at the books for a second.

She drops on the bed heavily and takes a breath.

She suddenly rises and hunts in the bottom drawer of the nightstand and comes up with a pack of cigarettes and an empty food can . She removes a cigarette and lights it. She takes a long pull and snuffs it out in the food can. She opens the top drawer of the nightstand and comes up with a pack of gum. She removes a stick and stuffs it in her mouth.

She goes over to open the window as she chews the gum. A breeze comes in. She sneezes.

She freezes.

She slowly lands back on the bed. She takes out the gum and drops it in the food can.

Imagine this.

It's one fine cool morning. You wake up in your bed. Your husband or wife has gone out.

You rub your eyes with the back of your hands. And immediately forget if you have slept or not. You smell the linen. Unfamiliar. Its fabric feels hard and dry.

At this moment, you say to yourself, oh my god, I don't know where I am and I feel like shit...No, no, no, don't say that. That's not how you feel. That's a cliché.

You have a very clear idea of where you are.

You're right there. You can't be anywhere else. You know that too well to tell yourself that what's going on in your life could be something else.

For a long time, you've been running away from a feeling, a feeling that knows you by your name. Then this morning, the second before you wake up, it catches you off guard. Then it takes part of you and leaves.

Now you open your eyes and find you're stuck with what is left behind of yourself.

She relights the cigarette and takes a long pull.

Today doesn't feel like a birthday at all.

This morning I woke up and looked at the clock on my nightstand to see what time it was.

But I couldn't read the numbers. I stared at the clock for a whole minute, but the moment I moved my eyes away I forgot what I'd just seen. The information just refused to sink in.

Strange.

I thought a woman gets more and more sensitive to numbers as her birthday ruthlessly comes back year after year.

But despite all that, today is still my birthday. And I have a party to prepare. My husband will bring home a big cake. I'm inviting all of you to share it. It's gonna be a big party, isn't it?

W rises from the bed suddenly and snuffs out the cigarette. She wanders on the floor restlessly.

I have a carpet to vacuum. No, I have to dust the furniture first. Then, then the kitchen! Scrub the sink! Take dishes out of the dishwasher! Oh, look at the bedroom. What a mess! And the air, smells like cigarettes. Hamilton doesn't like me smoking. Oh god, what have I been doing since I got up this morning?

What time is it?

W looks at her watch.

Oh, it's... (the real time)

The party won't start until midnight. Because that was when I was born.

So I still have a few hours.

W lets out a long breath.

I'm still thirty-five.

W sits back on the bed.

I know I've got a lot to do but I can't, I can't concentrate. I have to talk to you first. I want to tell you something about me. Something like, it always rains on my birthday.

So my personality drips water.

She considers.

She smiles apologetically.

Actually I'm not sure what that means.

But I'm sure I'm not going anywhere. At least I won't go anywhere before I'm done talking to you.

A woman who's not going anywhere is... vulnerable.

You know what kind of vulnerability it is. You see meaning everywhere, in everything. Every thought hits you as a feeling. You stay alert. Like a little girl in a yellow taxicab and she doesn't know where she's going.

She pauses.

When I was growing up, I was told to be a sweet heart at school and at home. I even continued being one for a couple of years after my twentieth birthday. I smiled hard at myself in the mirror, hard enough to see fifty percent of my teeth. They were white as icing.

Oh, I know, I was young and stupid.

I went out with a couple of boys my age but nothing was serious. Love was just a little slutty thing back then.

Then I met Hamilton at twenty-six, who later became my husband. He's ten years older than me, and very different from all the guys I had dated before. The age difference made him a simple sweet creature in my eyes, which means he had learned how to keep his desire within reach and make a relationship all about love.

He's not a difficult man to read. He tilts his head back if bored. And to the left when intrigued. He laughs at all my jokes.

I remember I got Novocain at the dentist the afternoon Hamilton and I first met.

My teeth and tongue are tripping over each other. My breath turns papery. I smile funny. Every color looks festive to me.

I'm sitting in a seat closest to the entrance. Hamilton pushes the door open and walks in. He takes a seat next to me. He takes out a book from his pocket, leans forward and starts reading.

I sit back and look at the fuzz on the back of his neck.

Sunlight reflects off the glass door and splashes into the room. A big, white, shiny drop lands on his head. It looks like he just stuck his head into a beautiful half-transparent cloud.

I sneeze.

(As HAMILTON)

Bless you.

(As W)

Thank you.

He goes back to his book.

Then I sneeze again.

(As HAMILTON)

God bless you.

(As W)

Thank you.

He turns a page and wrinkles the bridge of his nose.

Then, I sneeze again.

Hamilton looks up and turns to me. He's probably thinking I have a cold and regretting sitting next to me.

I always find these kind of people unpleasant.

(As HAMILTON)

Do you...

(As W)

No, no. It's not contagious.

(As HAMILTON)

No, no, I didn' mean...

(As W)

I'm just sitting in a draft. Kind of chilly. That's all.

I'm annoyed. But he cracks a smile. I smile back though I couldn't feel it because of the anesthetics. He smiles more and looks at my face with interest.

My face must be looking red and bright, as if the sun were approaching. I look at this man, who's probably ten years older than me, though there's a kind of playfulness to his character that makes him look younger.

I ask him what book he's reading. I've forgotten the name of the book. But I remember it was checked out from a library.

I bet you really want to meet Hamilton.

Well, you will. Very soon. As long as you stay till he comes home from work.

He will bring home a birthday cake.

I like maraschino cherries, apples and pears. Hmm. Citrus fruits. Also bananas and strawberries.

As for Hamilton, he doesn't care about fruit. He only asks for extra icing. He likes a birthday cake to be extra sweet. A celebration that's intense and overwhelming. So we would remember.

Memory is a tricky thing. It's a tiny sewing machine. It stitches time on your skin, across your lips, around your elbows. It's not your life that it's after. It's the process of turning you into a quiet, wrinkled, sweet-ass mummy.

This is what Jack said.

Jack was my friend. My best friend.

It's always weird that a man and a woman never sleep together when they get along so well. Well, that's me and Jack. But he was into me at one point. That's why he first approached me.

We met at a party. I didn't know many people there. He didn't know many people there. He hid in the shadow on the porch, smoking. I only saw a blink of red light. On and off. On and off. Like it was breathing.

That was a nice, quiet moment until he told me a story.

It was about a young man who touched a goat by accident and broke out in a rash all over his body.

(As JACK)

The young man starts scratching, all right? People who don't know why think he's making inappropriate gestures. So he goes to a doctor who recommends allergy testing. But the doctor can't test for goats, so he tests for other things. The young man takes off all his clothes and lies face-down on a hard bed. Only a thin starched bedsheet between his allergic skin and the steel tray. The doctor says, no scratching during the test. Then he fishes out from his pocket a syringe with a scary-looking needle. He slams the thing into the young man's thigh ten times. Ten bloody dots start

appearing among the irregular scratch marks. They look neat and artificial. The doctor says, this is metal. Then he produces a lunchbox of purplish mush and smears all over the young man's back. The doctor explains, this is Asian herbs. The young man says, My back feels itchy. The doctor says, good, now we're getting somewhere. Now turn over and face upward. The young man does what he's told to. The doctor holds the head of the young man's penis and starts rubbing. The young man's face is beaming, as if you could use it to light a candle. The doctor rubs some more.

Then he says, this is me.

The man asks if he can have a little scratch at his ankles and butt cheeks, because they're unbearably itchy. Then he starts scratching, though his face was still beaming.

The doctor thinks for a minute then says, I think you might be allergic to goat.

She lets the story sink in.

(As JACK)

That's it.

(As W)

Wow.

I didn't know another way to respond.

Jack dropped the butt of the cigarette and snuffed it out with his heel. Then he lit another one.

We kept quiet for a few minutes.

(As W)

Are you hitting on me?

She lets the joke sink in.

A brain is a creepy, erotic thing, isn't it?

After we became best friends, I asked Jack about the message that story delivered.

His answer was that it's hard to believe how painful it could be for one to learn a simple truth.

I asked him, what truth.

(As JACK)

That guy is allergic to goats!

Jack rolled his eyes.

But I thought there was something more to the story. And I was convinced Jack felt the same way. It was just neither of us would say it.

I guess that was why I liked being around him and always let him finish his stories.

I find it very hard to describe Jack's personality, or the air about him, in a straightforward way.

He was, was, like a sofa that has been used for three or four years. Worn, human oil stained, with a ball of a woman's long hair hiding in its folds. But still swollen with padding and tense with live springs.

Jack always drank like he had been through some real sorrow. So hanging out with him made me temporarily forget how yesterday becomes today and how today will become tomorrow.

Jack was glad to see me date Hamilton, which actually never alienated me from Jack. We entertained ourselves by watching lots of comedies and making spurts of little, cynical laughter. We watched pathetic characters fuck up their lives, then laughed at our own little, slightly corrupted selves like real adults. But also rest assured there was always time for us to do something to change our life, to make it better.

It's like, we could enjoy a play titled *The Comedy* that has no jokes in the text. At the end of the play, when we realized the only joke is in the title, we wouldn't be pissed. That was how confident and hopeful we were.

W removes a blue tie from the closet and puts it on.

I introduced Jack to Hamilton at a party.

Hamilton was wearing a blue tie. Jack was holding a bag of ice against his forehead the whole time since he had been in a fight. He had forgotten how he got into the fight in the first place when the party started.

Hamilton was suspicious about our friendship at the beginning, but very soon he started liking Jack. I think it was Jack's personality that was magical. Jack gave a piece of himself to people around him, sometimes two pieces if he really liked you.

At that party, Jack says to Hamilton:

W empties the food can and holds it against her forehead.

(As JACK)

Good-quality coffee makes me hyper. And CRY, cry at seeing the sunrise.

Hamilton smiles. He's showing his teeth. He's not touched.

Jack pours himself a drink.

W mimes it with the glass on the nightstand.

(As JACK)

Hey, Hamilton, you wanna have a sip from it?

Hamilton is confused.

That's just what Jack would do. Offering people his coffee cups, beer bottles, dinner plates, sometimes the key to his car.

(As HAMILTON)

That's okay.

I'm not surprised.

Jack takes a sip himself. But he's still sober.

(As JACK)

Hey, Hamilton, I once saw a squirrel. In a spin-top dumpster. Looking for food.

Jack has to take two sips from the drink to finish the sentence.

(As JACK)

You know bumblebees, right?

Hamilton nods. He starts getting curious where this is going.

(As JACK)

I once saw, this bumblebee, drowning, drowning in a pool of water. He was trying to crawl on this tiny tiny rod floating on the surface of the water. But the damn wood kept spinning. So the bug tried and tried, but he kept falling off back into the water.

Jack has tears in his eyes. He's drunk now.

Hamilton pours a drink. He looks at me and back at Jack then at me again.

I tell Hamilton Jack and I are simply good friends, our relationship never gets physical.

It's true.

Hamilton considers for a while.

(As HAMILTON)

Your friend, got an interesting mind.

Then he turns back to Jack.

(As HAMILTON)

Hey, Jack, let me tell you a story of mine. I once drove across the country from east coast to west. I had a pick-up truck back then.

Hamilton starts loosening up. Soon it'll be hard to tell him apart from Jack. I'm thrilled.

(As JACK)

I had seventeen cats when I was a little kid. They were all bonkers.

W laughs as JACK.

Hamilton laughs too. That's always how a good camaraderie begins taking shape.

(As JACK)

When my family moved to another state, my uncle volunteered to drive them up a few days after we moved. All seventeen of them, for thirteen hundred miles.

(As HAMILTON)

Wow.

(As JACK)

After thirty hours of driving, he arrived at our new house, released the cats. And left without saying a word.

W laughs hard as JACK.

They double over with laughter.

W, as HAMILTON, holds the glass and spills on the tie and starts sucking the water from it.

W puts the glass back on the nightstand and collects herself.

Three months later, Hamilton proposed to me. It was a windy day. Wind blew my hair all over my face. And I felt so young and hopeful. Then we got married soon after that.

The day before the wedding, Jack came to see me. He got a black eye from fighting with his girlfriend. She hit him with an extension cord.

(As JACK)

Is this what you want?

(As W)

I thought you liked him!

(As JACK)

I just think you're in love with something that may or may not be there.

(As W)

What do you mean?

(As JACK)

Hamilton is a great guy. I know you feel secure with him. Because he's simple and easy to be pleased.

(As W)

He is a great guy. He checks out a lot of books from the library. He knows a lot because he reads a lot. So we always have a lot to talk about.

(As JACK)

All right then.

Jack turns to leave.

(As W)

Hey, Jack!

(As JACK)

Yeah?

(As W)

It won't change anything between us. You know what I'm saying?

(As JACK)

You're saying we're best friends.

(As W)

Exactly. And...and you're not going anywhere, are you?

He turns back. His black eye keeps blinking.

(As JACK)

No, I'm not going anywhere. That's the problem. That's where the problem has always been.

W lights another cigarette.

Do you think the second half of a decade always feels shorter than the first?

Well, I do. But a couple of months before my thirtieth birthday, time suddenly slowed down.

It's like the feeling you have when you step into the muck on the bottom of a river. It sucks your feet in and stops you from whatever you're doing. To flee from the water or wade further. It makes you question, doubt, and think that it's all right to feel desperate.

Since thirty is a kind of a threshold and Hamilton had been there, he asked me a month before my birthday:

(As HAMILTON)

How do you wanna celebrate?

(As W)

I'm thinking doing something small and quiet, maybe?

(As HAMILTON)

Small and quiet? Why, why? This is your birthday and we should have a big celebration!

I tried to talk to Hamilton, but instead of articulating my thought, I made myself sound like something made entirely of flammable chemicals and was prepared to sparkle like fireworks on that special occasion.

(As W)

Let's go traveling. I'd like to travel westward.

W removes a suitcase from the closet and hauls it onto the bed.

The morning we left for our trip, when I woke up in my bed, Hamilton was already out to buy breakfast.

I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hand, and immediately forgot if I had slept or not.

W starts taking her clothes out of the closet and tosses them on the bed.

I had a very clear idea of where I had been and where I was at the moment, even where I would go if life continued like this. The idea was so clear, like a beam of light in which I could read a book at night.

So I didn't try to comfort myself by thinking what was going on in my life could be something else.

Jack was not there for me. He hitchhiked to a southern city to look for his girlfriend. She had an abortion and a breakdown and decided to get away from him.

W starts packing slowly. It looks like she doesn't know what she's doing.

Hamilton brought home a box of donuts for breakfast. I peeled myself off the bed and sat at the counter in the kitchen, sipping from a mug of coffee. Hamilton was flitting about and humming loud. Then he paused at one point and examined my face.

(As HAMILTON)

Are you all right, honey?

(As W)

I'm just trying not to pass out from the excitement....Honey, can I ask you a question?

(As HAMILTON)

Sure. What is it?

(As W)

What food, do you think, tastes like our love for each other?.

It's a stupid question, you must be thinking.

Actually it can be way more demonic and devastating than you're expecting.

Hamilton turned to me, assumed a serious expression.

(As HAMILTON)

Chocolate donuts, no doubt.

(As W)

Oh, honey, you know that's my favorite.

Hamilton opened the donut box and there was a brown sticky ring smeared on the inside of the paper lid. The topping of the only chocolate donut in the selection had come off. All the other donuts remained intact.

My jaw tightened. I started feeling stings on my gums.

Hamilton didn't say anything. He scraped the chocolate off with a table knife then started licking.

A sourness rose in my mouth and the stings grew intense.

And my tongue tasted like...I know this is weird. How is one supposed to know the taste of his tongue? But I found my tongue tasted like an old piece of chewing gum, that had lost its mint flavor days ago.

We traveled westward and landed in a different time zone. It was only nine here when it was already midnight back home. I recovered three hours by coming here.

On our way to pick up the luggage, I started shaking uncontrollably.

(As HAMILTON)

Are you all right? You're shaking.

He walked me to a wall and rubbed my shoulders.

I didn't know how to respond. Something was pulling away from my body. I just leaned against the wall with all my being.

Tides of people rushed by us. Nobody paid attention to us. We just stood there, me unraveling, Hamilton trying to stop it. There was only a tiny space between us that formed a peephole, through which I could see all the unstoppable steps.

W pauses.

One month after Hamilton and I got back from the trip, Jack came back too, with his girlfriend, and the residue of their little drama, something like one or two ounces of spleen and guts . He found her in a motel, throwing up the alcohol from the previous night into a toilet .

We went to a bar to catch up, to exchange feelings as if we could drift off somewhere else.

(As JACK)

Memory is a tiny sewing machine that stitches time on your skin, your elbows, whatever. It's a process of turning you into a quiet, wrinkled, sweet-ass mummy.

(As W)

Did you read some book, or join a cult on your trip to come up with that?

(As JACK)

What? No, no.

(As W)

Then where did you get that?

(As JACK)

Here.

W gestures in front of her chest.

(As W)

Your heart?

(As JACK)

No. Here. This is where the booze passes to get into my body and sometimes also out. Despite all the gloom and goo, Jack talked me out of divorcing Hamilton. Yes, that was what I'd been thinking.

(As JACK)

Let me tell you a story.

(As W)

Oh, God.

(As JACK)

Come on. This is my gift for your birthday.

(As W)

Really?

(As JACK)

So there's a woman.

(As W)

A woman like me?

(As JACK)

There's no woman like you, you're unique, sweetheart.

W makes a face.

(As JACK)

One day, this woman, I don't know how old she is. Maybe five years after her prime? An awkward age. Her gums start peeling away from her teeth because she's chewed too much gum. So she has surgery. The doctor stitches up her mouth halfway. She can only stick out her tongue through one corner of her mouth. Like she just ate something delicious. But it's not her fault, and that makes her feel even worse. She goes to a bar and orders a screwdriver. She takes a seat at the counter and starts showing her loneliness. A man lands on the stool beside her. He smells like soy sauce. He turns to her, How do you do? Before she replies, he orders two helpings of chicken wings. The woman thinks she knows what this guy is doing. But actually he means something else. She shouldn't have been drinking anyway. It's only three o'clock in the afternoon. She thinks she smells of apples, those that hide behind the leaves in the fall

and are left there through the winter. He doesn't share the bird wings with her. She hates the way he chews on them. Watching it makes her feel like an unknown hand is squeezing her nipples. Maybe that's what the man wants to do afterwards. She knows she looks like shit but she decides to say no if he makes a move. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, not without sharing your chicken wings!!! She calls her niece and asks for a ride home. Her niece is a teenager and makes gestures all over the place when talking. When her aunt calls, she's hanging out with her friends. Maybe drinking too. The woman doesn't want to wait in the bar. That would look like she's waiting for the man to buy her a drink. Instead of waiting outside the bar, she waits outside a pharmacy. She thinks it looks better.

She's a simpleton.

(As W)

I'm still thinking you were actually talking about me, Jack.

(As JACK)

No, no, of course not.

(As W)

Then what's the point of your story?

(As JACK)

Don't grow up to be a simpleton!

(As W)

Ah, I see.

I knew Jack was talking about something more than that. And he knew that I got it. Then we had a few drinks without saying anything. Then he said:

(As JACK)

You're still a girl. But you'll grow up.

After that, there were times when things did get better. On one of those good days, Hamilton and I invited Jack over to camp in our backyard. We built a small fire, drank beer and believed what we had been through could be explained away by singing catchy silly songs. Hamilton even came up with the idea of baking potatoes by burying them in the embers. Jack was surprisingly cheerful and sober. Hamilton fetched butter from the kitchen. Jack wiped the ash off a potato on his sleeve before handing it to me.

W folds the sleeves of a heavy coat and places it gingerly in the suitcase.

Two weeks ago, Jack came to me and told me that his girlfriend had another abortion. She did it behind his back. He couldn't even say the word. It shamed him like a crime.

(As JACK)

I'm so fucked up.

(As W)

You just fucked up a little bit.

I thought that would help.

Some bright light from outside landed on his hair. And it looked like, by some stupid process, his hair had turned white all of a sudden.

(As JACK)

Never ask me about my feelings. Never again.

When the girl was lying on the bed, Jack was sitting in a bar. Drinking hard to get himself into trouble. He got into a big fight after two days. Then another bigger one six hours after that.

W starts unraveling. She removes a drawer from the nightstand and empties it on the bed.

Then he called me and asked me if I wanted to hear a story. I asked him where he was and he hung up.

W stuffs everything she tossed on the bed into her suitcase.

A couple of hours after his call, I got a call from the hospital. Hamilton went with me.

Hamilton looked at Jack and breathed loud. It felt like he was not looking at a swollen and stitched face. But a fire that was going out. He was blowing on the embers to recover the light.

Hamilton was not looking at Jack. He was looking at himself. The other version of him that didn't survive his youth, didn't achieve the turn. The Hamilton I married was a survivor.

I had a feeling that I'd never been this close to him before.

Jack died at thirty five.

W pauses.

Actually two months ago, Jack came to me to borrow some money. He broke the news that his girlfriend got pregnant again. After they accused one another, begged of one another, fought, apologized, tried to wipe the hurt off each other's face, Jack made a decision.

Despite all the shit Jack had been through his whole life, he had never borrowed money from me before. So I wrote him a check immediately.

But instead of taking the girl to the hospital, he bought a lot of fruits and vegetables for her with the money and got himself a library card. Then he checked out a book.

(As W)

What you reading?

(As JACK)

A book.

(As W)

About what?

(As JACK)

Babies.

We were sitting on a bench in a park and ate chestnuts quietly from a brown paper bag. Jack wrinkled his forehead when reading the book. That day turned out to be one of the best days Jack had ever had. He was sober enough to read a book about babies. He meant every word he said and could make sense out of his feelings.

This man just turned thirty-five, the same age as Hamilton when we first met.

I sneezed.

W sneezes.

(As JACK)

Bless you.

(As W)

Thank you.

W freezes. It continues for a few moments. Then she carefully sneezes again.

(As JACK)

God bless you.

(As W)

Thanks.

W opens her mouth, ready to sneeze again.

(As JACK)

Is it the wind?

(As W)

...Could be. Kind of .

Jack took off his coat and handed it to me then returned to his book.

W takes a breath.

Then I realized... I was probably in love with this man all along.

But he died two weeks before my birthday.

W is lost in her thought.

She zips up her suitcase and quietly puts on a coat.

She looks at her watch.

Oh, Hamilton'll be back very soon.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I just...I wanted to invite all of you to my birthday party. There would be a cake, candles, a big celebration.

But, it looks like it's not gonna happen. You see, I have to leave. I'm going traveling.

I'm so sorry. We should have celebrated my birthday together, shared the cake. And I would make a wish.

I wish things were not like this.

Hamilton is coming home. There's not much time left. I'd better hurry.

W picks up the suitcase and is about to exit.

The sound of a key turning in a lock.

W freezes.

Lights fade to dark.

End of Play