

Echoes

The shame will outlive us – outlive our love, surely. The rain falls in sharp, silvery drops, each one pulsing in the darkness, regurgitating the neon outside. It will not falter.

Anna wears the same dress as always, the breakup dress, the kind you would put on to tell someone that a mutual friend has died, unobtrusive against the lurid colours of the real world. She is like this nowadays, as if our time together permitted a casualness that has since been destroyed. She strolls over, sits in the leather chair, and stares into my eyes that are so depleted of life, of enthusiasm. But then I am only imagining these things. Exiled from the busy, anonymous crowd at the bar, the rain becomes audible. Our booth lurches obscurely into the city street, protected only by a flimsy window and its stubble of shedding plasterwork.

‘Hey,’ I say, taking a long sip of my beer.

Anna sits patiently for a while, submerged in the chaos behind her.

‘How are you doing, Max?’ she says finally, in a faintly sarcastic tone.

‘Yeah I’m good. Just happy to see you.’ I take another drink – consider going to the bar again but it is too soon. ‘It seems the whole relationship thing isn’t quite working out for you. We’re alike in that way, I suppose.’

‘I wouldn’t flatter yourself. I sort of slipped out of it. You tend to end your romances in a more dramatic fashion.’

‘You’re loveless,’ I reply.

She is amused at this, nodding her head back while retaining a plain, almost ascetically bland smile. Her eyes are intent but distracted somehow. The autumnal light of the streetlamps outside splays across her face. ‘There was never much of it between us,’ she says, ‘and I don’t think that it was my fault – not entirely.’

‘What is this then?’

She says it coldly, shifting around in her seat: ‘A return.’

Behind her, the faces in the crowd blur as though they are rushing onto a moving train. Half dotingly, half sourly, I watch everyone I ever loved trail off into some bright oblivion. Turning, now, the colours of the flower shop over the road bleed in the rain. My vision provides only a dull excavation of their true form.

‘You’re reliable, Max. I know what I’m going to get.’

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Lightning flashed between the silhouettes of trees outside, briefly erasing the purple sky in a torrent of white. She hadn’t come back yet.

It felt like there was some strange creature knocking at my chest, infecting it with a visceral, paralysing stiffness. I sat on the wooden chair in the still unfurnished kitchen, waiting for a message or a surer sign that something had happened to her. At least I will have certainty, I thought.

Suddenly, Anna came knocking on the bolted door, her deep voice wailing in the darkness. Downpour sprayed against the concrete outside. ‘Let me in,’ she yelled. I could sense her anger rising as I fumbled about the handle. And then she burst in through the doorway, unleashing a surge of water onto the floorboards. ‘You twat,’ she said.

‘How long was I opening the door for?’

‘Too long. God, I thought I was going to die.’

She went into the bathroom to pick up a towel, brushing it against her braided black hair.

‘I thought so too.’ I raised my voice slightly: ‘I think I was just being dramatic though. Sometimes the inability to know a situation is scarier than being there.’

‘Yeah, I’m not sure in this case. Nevertheless, I’m home now – and really cold.’

‘I told you that you shouldn’t –’

‘Please, Max, what’s the point?’

We hugged and I held her for what seemed like an eternity. Then she went and sat on the sofa in the corner, lighting a cigarette and taking long, desperate drags. Her eyes darted around the room as if we didn’t live there at all.

One thing I disliked about Anna then was how excessive her innocence was, how it seemed to project guilt onto everyone else. It compounded my self-disgust. I began to blame her for my own flaws. Really, she was just a better, kinder person than I was; and I relied on her for the steps I should have taken to improve myself, alone.

When she left the house unannounced, never to come back, she had no money whatsoever – had to live on the sofa in her brother’s tiny apartment, an intruder upon the life that he too was trying to begin. I try to imagine her state of mind in this period sometimes, only I find it increasingly difficult, aside from the obvious fact: she must have found me unbearable. Still, I become nostalgic about it, trying to picture a life for us somewhere, in some other world.

Her face was pallid and expressionless. When she finished her cigarette, she ran up the old wooden stairs. I heard the door slam, the loud scattershot bounding through the tiny rooms of the house. These things gain a resonance now they did not have before. I slept on the sofa, staring down first at the depressed spot where she had sat. Drifting off, I smelt the damp ash of a distant field and heard the rain fall in a quiet, unceasing stream.

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‘Do you remember this place?’ I say, turning back as we reach the dim, lamplit exit of the bar.

‘No,’ she replies, softly but very surely grasping the palm of my hand.

‘We had a date here just after we met.’

‘You remember too much, Max. It’s a flaw. You don’t live in the present.’

Sometimes I try. But what is there that I can’t find elsewhere? City streets softening yellow under streetlamps. Puddles dissipating into reflective voids in the cracks of the pavement. Sometimes I think that I am in love with these things, but they only gain a significance once they are gone. ‘I think that’s why I check my watch all the time; I feel that the present is haunted somehow by its inevitable shift towards pastness. I wish I was more like you.’

The shrubs gain a definition in this light, rustling gently in the breeze.

We come to the park and decide to sit for a while, taking in the sunken, abyssal green of the place. The apartment blocks are tombstones, vaguely iridescent in moonlight.

‘What are we doing?’ I say.

‘You know what we’re doing. You just don’t know if it’s what you really want.’

‘Sure, but is it even what you want?’

‘Yes. Yes it is. I suppose it’s just the history, that makes it hard to go back, that makes it seem stupid. I’m not trying to coerce you. Just think about what you want – the pros and cons. I mean, there are no cons, of course.’

I stare back at her. She is looking down the main road, her eyes trailing off as a few cars go past. ‘There aren’t a great many pros either, Anna. I just feel lost.’

It is getting dark. The traffic fades, giving way to the hum of birds and distant voices.

‘You think –’ Anna starts. ‘You think that I’m some blank who has nothing to lose – no autonomy. You feel that the world is deeper for you than anyone else, and yet you have nothing to show for it. Also, not every hook-up is some distillation of our unstructured lives, Max. You just want to be unhappy.’

I wait for a while, not thinking about what she is saying. ‘You’re beautiful,’ I murmur.

‘Yeah, you look good too. It’s not such a shame that things have passed. It would be worse to pretend as if they were the same, to reconcile ourselves with falsehoods.’

She has an admirable indifference, a control over her desires. ‘But what does it mean to keep it alive rather than to avoid each other, to move on?’

‘Is that moving on?’ she says.

‘You feel like such a part of me. I feel lost.’

‘You too, Max. But let’s not get carried away. After all, you’re sometimes right about things. We’ll get another drink and then call it a day... return to life as friends, with an open door to something else. There’s no sense in souring what we’ve already lost.’

A few plump chairs sit scattered around the bare café. The tables are skeletal. I have visited so many times, but today it is colder, more stale than usual. The typical quiet, anonymous chatter has given way to absolute silence. I still carry a numb headache from that last drink with Anna. Reflecting a certain modernity, the sleek granite and immaculate floorboards become fainter and fainter towards the end of the place. The chair opposite mine remains empty. No one is here, though a few smiling faces litter the outside patio area, basking in the lucid sunlight.

My coffee becomes bitter and tepid. An overwhelming sense of boredom, a misanthropic dread infects my mind. I do not ever want to go outside.

After a few minutes, Anna texts me to let me know that she doesn’t wish to see me again – that I was right. She does not despise me anymore, but the dream has died. There can be no constancy to our projection of quiet, untroubled intimacy. We are together in our loneliness.

Straightening myself up to leave, I realise that this is where it has all been heading: an empty coffee shop, the memories of each other drifting softly away, the dregs accumulating in ugly, noxious clumps waiting to be discarded. Then, another text: *I'm sorry*.

I reply with a similar sentiment, glad that there is at least some kind of reconciliation. In the excessive, unrelenting brightness of the town square, the knowledge of her existence seems to provide a sense of calm. Nothing lingers except the vague hope this is shared somehow.