

Nassau Avenue

“Dance on, you pigs, what have I got to do with it?”

– Kafka, *Diaries*

The dumbest joke of life is when you do everything right on paper and still want to stab yourself in the jugular. Pathetic, if you ask me. Everything’s pathetic, now that I think about it – *everything* being life itself, the way time slides downhill, slips away faster and faster until it’s suddenly August of the year after the year you think it is. Of course that’s a part of getting older, everyone says so, and I’m already 32 – *Jesus!* – but I’m under no obligation to like or accept it. Who gives a fuck that “your thirties are the new twenties” when life feels like nothing more than a cruel, endless expanse?

And, well, right now I’m teetering on the precipice of becoming a complete social pariah because I’ve given up on hiding my unhappiness, on pretending that all is well. No one wants to face it, of course, but nothing is going “well” for anyone anyways, there is no “well” anymore, I saw the way Catherine looked at her CoStar update the other day, the briefest flicker of pure despondency moving across her face before she closed the app and said “oh my god, they’re literally always wrong about everything.” She can at least suck it up, do her best to hide it, pretend that life’s great, that stuff is fine with Matt and so on. But the curtain she hides it behind is made of the thinnest gauze, and I can see right through it. I can see through everyone’s. I’m not stupid.

My first thought upon leaving my apartment is *oh god, fuck this weather*. The humidity is excruciating, thick dirty water hanging in the air, beads of sweat rapidly forming on my forehead, and I know my sweat is going to soak through this shirt, the one I paid a bunch of money for like a fucking idiot. I’d promised Catherine that I’d meet her at this recently-opened ice cream place in Greenpoint – she loves gimmicky shit like that – according to the website it’s all dairy-free, made with oat or cashew milk. Disgusting. But I’d promised I’d go, and Catherine is already annoyed that I’ve been blowing her off, she’s taking it personally, unwilling to open the can of worms that is the fact that I am, at this point, hardly functional most days.

I accidentally take the train for two stops in the wrong direction and fall fifteen minutes behind. I could text Catherine letting her know, but I don’t. She’s halfway through the snaking line when I get there, pursing her lips and whipping her head around in an obvious lookout for my approach. My hand hesitates for a moment before I tap her on the shoulder. “Catherine. Hey.”

“Oh my god, there you are. Okay, so someone literally just said they’re almost out of pretty much all the flavors, should we just go somewhere else? Have you had lunch yet?”

It’s all I can do not to bang my head furiously on the concrete sidewalk – I came all the way to Greenpoint for a dumbass organic ice cream and there isn’t even any left. Fuck off. I feel anger rise up in my throat, a great ugly energy that I desperately try to tamp down by breathing slowly through my nose. *Don’t flip out, don’t flip out.* “No, I haven’t eaten yet,” I say, aware that my voice has dulled, flattened into a monotone. “Should we go somewhere around here?”

“Sure, where should we go?”

I don't give a shit, so throw out the name of a restaurant I'd walked by earlier. Catherine says that oh yeah she'd heard that that place is really good, the wine list is great, apparently. Okay. I wonder to myself if maybe it's a good day to get day-drunk. I keep breaking my rule of not starting until 4.

I spend another half an hour breathing tensely through my nose as we wait in a slow and noisy line outside the restaurant, my thoughts chopped into pieces by the voices of two guys behind us in polo shirts talking loudly about Bitcoin prices. The thought *shut the fuck up* is short enough, though, to slip through, and soon it becomes a looping mantra that I have to shove out of the way – *shut the fuck up, shut the fuck up, shut the fuck up* – in an attempt to carry on a basic conversation with Catherine. Matt is fine, she says, he's going to Mexico City next month which, you know, everyone's going there, it's supposed to be kind of lame now, same with Berlin, all the popular travel destinations are getting watered-down and kind of contrived nowadays, don't you think? *No*, I think to myself as I tell her "yeah, totally." I don't have the energy to disagree.

Before I can spiral into another ouroboros of self-hatred we're called up to the front of the line and led to a table near the back of the restaurant. I take stock of my surroundings as Catherine reads the menu: simple light-wood tables, scrubbed white walls and high ceilings, meticulously curated crockery and silverware that strike the perfect balance between visual intrigue and functionality. People dressed in crisp outfits, hair slicked back, bags and shoes pristine, all of them delicately put together in a way I know I will never be. *You pieces of shit all have great credit scores, don't you*, I think to myself as I look at the wine list. *God, I need to die.*

Just as I'm thinking this, Catherine gently touches my hand and leans across the table to speak into my ear. *Now what*, I think to myself, before hearing her ask me "would you want to split a carafe of something? Maybe the Malbec?"

I do my best to not let my eyebrows shoot up to my forehead: Catherine isn't a big drinker, never has been, and I'm not sure I can picture what she'll be like after the equivalent of however-many glasses of red wine. I know the good and pure response would be an expression of concern: *are you sure you want that much wine right now?* But I am not feeling good or pure, do not care as much as I should, want only what's fun for myself. I look at my phone, see that it's 1:56PM. Pros and cons remaining un-weighed, I don't hesitate before saying "yeah, that sounds good": selfishly, crudely, I want someone else to get drunk with for once.

We are on our third carafe and the wine is burning acrid in my throat when Catherine leans towards me and whispers "I need to tell you something." *Yesss*, I think, *she's fucking sloshed*. "Let's hear it," I say, actively trying to quell my excitement.

She does a cursory look around the restaurant – who knows who might be lurking around, I get it – and motions for me to come closer. "I cheated on Matt."

Oh, thank god, I think: I've always disliked Matt, found him to be dull and a try-hard. The wine is rushing rapidly to my head, making my thoughts thick and muddled, and I hear myself say "um, oh shit, what happened?"

Another frantic look around the restaurant. "I was at this party a couple of weeks ago and met this girl... and, uhh... she was like... I don't know, we got along so well and she was so hot and I was, like, really fucked up... and we ended up hooking up. I don't know." She stares down at her plate of soggy squid-ink pasta, purses her lips. "She added me on Insta but I'm afraid to follow her back because..." her

sentence trails off and she sighs loudly before slamming her fork into her pasta, droplets of sauce flying up into the air.

“I mean...”

“Mean what?”

“How do you feel about it?”

Catherine purses her lips. “I feel bad but also kind of not? Like, I never thought I was the type of person to just do that, but like...” She grabs her glass and slugs the rest of the wine, wiping up a dark rivulet that trickles down her chin. “Fuck. I don’t get why I did it. But I mean, like... I also kind of do?”

I’m drunk now, stupid-drunk, and have no idea what to say. Catherine interprets this as me patiently letting her continue talking. “This feels literally so bad to say, but I’ve been kind of bored with Matt lately. Or, like, our relationship. All we fucking do is watch TV and hang out with his friends and it’s like... it’s been six months and if this is all it’s going to be then I don’t even know why I’m doing it anymore.”

The wine, my fourth or fifth glass, moves me to say “you could always break up with him” – a stupid move, I realize, as I watch Catherine’s eyes well up with tears.

“But like...”

“You already cheated on him!”

“*Shut up!*” she hisses. She leans closer to me, close enough that I can smell the thick, heady scent of wine on her breath. “I like... I mean... I dunno, I *should* break up with him, but I don’t know how to do it.”

I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes back into my head. “Catherine, literally just tell him it’s been good but you’re not feeling it anymore. Like, I’m sorry, but he’s always been a fucking loser.”

Catherine’s lower lip begins to tremble. *Oh, God, Catherine, please don’t cry in public*, I think, *not right now*. “You really think so?” she asks me, her voice cracking.

“Honestly, yeah,” I say, unrepentant.

“Why didn’t you say that earlier?”

“Because you would’ve gotten mad! You always do! And–” I feel myself beginning to cry too – I forgot that red wine makes me cry, *shit* – “no one ever even fucking listens to me anyways. Like, sorry, but I think we all know that’s true.”

“Oh, okay, well thanks for making it about you.”

I don’t know what to say to that, feeling a pang of humiliation redden my cheeks. “I have to pee,” I tell her, which is not a lie at this point. “I’ll be right back. Do you know where the bathroom is?” I’ve also just remembered that I have the remnants of a vial of coke in my purse.

The bathroom is obnoxiously pristine: hexagonal white floor tile, visible metal piping for the sink faucets, Aesop hand soap. I prop myself up against the wall as the wine pumps through me, tilts me here and there with dizziness. “Okay,” I say out loud.

No one else is in here. I am alone.

In the mirror I see a pallid wraith with wine-stained lips, still-teary eyes, hair like a rat’s nest from the humidity. *Ugly piece of shit*, I mouth to my reflection. A sickening feeling plunges through me: Catherine may have fucked up, but at least she had someone to fuck up with; I haven’t dated anyone for a good two years, I’m gnarled and disgusting, who’d want to touch me, anyways? No one will even fuck me, good for Catherine for meeting someone at a party and going home and fucking her, congrats, congrats, I’m practically an incel over here, I’ll always be alone – my thoughts begin to spiral out like

fractals, becoming more and more brutal – *I’ve alienated everyone because I’m a depressive little bitch, nothing is fun anymore, I just sit there every time I see someone and make them feel worse about everything, my whole life has been a waste, it’s never going to get better, it’s always going to be like this –*

I may as well just die, I think as I test out the hand soap. It smells bitter in an expensive way, like pine sap. “Ew.”

“I need to pee,” I hear myself say out loud again. I head over to a toilet stall and shove the thick wooden door open. There is no toilet there. There is just a large hole in the wall.

“Wait, what,” I say. “That’s—”

I peer closer.

The hole is perfectly rounded, like a sewer pipe, and deep, so deep I feel a lump rise in my throat, and there is light coming from far inside, soft and warm, flickering back and forth like candlelight. *Is this – is there some sort of fire in another room? Why the fuck aren’t they doing anything about it? Do I go back out and tell someone?* I peer out of the stall: I’m still alone in the bathroom. Where is everyone?

My first instinct is to do a bump of coke. I fish a pen cap out of my bag and dip it into the tiny vial and shove a large pile of blow up my nose, expecting the sharp, crystalline cocaine euphoria to make me feel better. Instead, though, I feel a roar of anger push through my chest, feel an urge to punch a hole in the brick wall behind the –

Go ahead and take another look, I hear myself think. *Don’t be a pussy.*

But I can feel my heartbeat quickening, rising quickly up through my chest into my throat – it can’t be just the cocaine – what the fuck is going on? *Why is there a fucking three-foot-wide hole in the wall of this fucking bathroom stall? Where is the fucking toilet? What the fuck is in there? Has no one in this entire restaurant noticed this?*

I picture myself grabbing a waiter, a hostess, anyone, and telling them “there’s a giant hole in the bathroom with something weird in it, can you come check it out?” Stupid. I can’t do that. They’d just think I’m drunk and on drugs, which I am, but whatever. That’s not the point.

A bubble of thought, dark and murky, rises through my mind and bursts: *you could be the only one seeing this.* Immediately the thought is eclipsed by a wave of fear, my heart dropping so intensely I feel dizzy: *what is wrong with me? Where is that light coming from? What the fuck am I even supposed to do?*

An idea comes to me then, and without questioning it I briskly turn around and walk out of the bathroom back into the restaurant. Catherine is sitting at our table still, scrolling through TikTok on her phone with a deadened look on her face. “Can I grab you for a sec?”, I say.

“What’s up?”

“Can you come with me really quick? I’m just—”

“Is everything ok?”

“No, yeah,” I say, feeling myself begin to shake. *Is this even a good idea? What if I’m hallucinating? But if I am then I can, like, 5150 myself or something.* “Just, like, could you come into the bathroom with me? No big deal, I just need some help with something, really quick, I promise.”

Catherine lowers her voice. “If you need a tampon I have one.”

“No, it’s not that, just— like— please?” I feel disgusted with myself: here I am, begging. But I need someone else to see what I’m seeing, need to know that I’m not fully losing my mind.

Her voice still low, Catherine looks me dead in the eye and says “are you drunk?”

“Bitch, we’re both drunk. Just come with me.”

—
Catherine's kitten heels make a satisfying *clack* on the tiled bathroom floor. "Okay," she says, clearly pissed off, "what's going on?"

Before I can answer I feel bile rising in my throat, bitter and acidic – *fuck!* – I'm about to throw up, the wine and cocaine have hit in tandem, *well this is what you get for day-drinking again, dumbass*, and I rush over to a sink and puke so hard into the cool white porcelain that I see stars. The vomit is a mixture of wine and the terrible couscous salad I ate fifteen minutes ago and, my hands shaking, I turn the faucet on to wash it down the drain.

"Sorry," I say, tears welling up yet again, angry thoughts of self-hatred filtering rapidly back into my brain.

Catherine's face softens. "Babe, are you okay?"

I begin to cry, fully, not just tears leaking out but my whole face scrunching up red and ugly, humiliating, so humiliating, I'm such a loser and now she can see – but still – no one has asked me that in so, so long –

"No," I say, choking down a bellowing sob, "I feel so bad, I feel so bad all the time, I feel so lonely, no one gets it, no one cares!" Warm snot leaks out my nose and I search for a paper towel only to realize that the bathroom only has hand driers. "Fuck!"

"Do you need a tissue?"

"Sure," I say, embarrassed at how timid my voice has suddenly become.

Before I can stop her, though, I watch Catherine push the door open to the same stall I saw the hole in – *oh my fucking god* – a strange, bracing feeling rushes through me then: *this is the moment of truth, this is when you find out if you're going crazy or if something fucked up is actually going down* –

"Oh, wait."

I am afraid to turn around, stare blankly at the wall, but I know exactly what is going on. "What is it?"

"There's, like, no toilet there. That's funny."

Piercing, ice-cold fear shoots through my heart then like a lathe: she sees it too, *she sees it too*, there is something really fucking weird going on, is this a trick, is this a dual hallucination, what the fuck—
Just look—

I move slowly towards the stall and – *three, two, one* – peer in. The hole is still there, the light inside still flickering.

"I, uh, that's actually why I brought you in here."

"What do you mean?"

"I saw it and thought I was losing my shit."

"What?"

"Like I was afraid I was hallucinating or something. It just looks, like, or I don't know, feels fake."

"You're not hallucinating. Why did you think you were hallucinating? It's, like, right here."

My cheeks burn. "I don't know," I hear myself say.

Because I'm already fucking crazy and maybe this was more proof.

Catherine turns to me. "I mean, I guess it's kind of weird, but I'm pretty sure it's just a sewer pipe they're fixing or something."

"Would you just *listen* to me?" I say, my voice suddenly shrill. "Something feels so fucking *off* – I don't know – is it not weird to you?"

“Babe,” Catherine says, staring me dead in the eye, “it is construction. It’s a pipe. Chill the fuck out. *Please.*”

Her *please* sends me careening over the edge once again, sickened and heavy with guilt and hatred, and I realize then that I’m not crazy because I’m hallucinating, I’m crazy because I’m having a panic attack about nothing more than a pipe – *fucking idiot, maybe you really should 5150 yourself, you can’t handle jack shit, this is pathetic, this is –*

“You look upset,” I hear Catherine say.

“No fucking shit.”

“Do you want to go somewhere else?”

“Not really.”

“I mean, we’re basically done eating. We should at least get the check.”

“I don’t even care.”

“What do you mean *you don’t even care*? Girl, I am—” she hesitates, exhales, about to say something cruel, it is obvious to me – “I’m sorry, but all of today you’ve been so depressing, you’re drunk as fuck right now, you literally *threw up* – it’s getting – I don’t know – it’s getting kind of... no offense, but, like, *really* intense being around you. Like, I get you’re depressed and everything, but you need to do something about it because this is getting to be kind of like... I don’t know, a lot to handle.”

I begin to cry again, like a child, hot burning tears of humiliation and sore downturned mouth and a gulp that hiccups into a sob, too loud, I’m sure everyone in the restaurant can hear me crying, and I feel the wine rush straight through my throat and into my cheeks and then before I can stop myself I tell Catherine through a trembling *sotto voce* “well if that’s how you feel you can fuck off, I guess.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Yes,” I say, feeling a sudden spike of bitterness, of hatred, “I am *fucking serious*, Catherine, I’m honestly about to fucking kill myself and you’re like *oh, boo hoo, stop being sad*, like I’m sorry it’s so fucking annoying to you but I am straight up suffering here and all you can talk about is how you literally cheated on your fucking boyfriend like I’m supposed to support you or—”

“You know what,” I hear Catherine say through my increasingly deafening tinnitus, “I’ll Venmo request you. Bye.” Her shoes click rapidly as she leaves the bathroom, the heavy wooden door booming behind her.

I can’t follow Catherine: too humiliating, too shameful, *wait, wait, Catherine, wait* – no, fuck that – I wipe away the thick, heavy snot streaming out of my nose and let the deathly silence of the bathroom envelop me before being hit, suddenly, brutally, with a need to see the hole in the wall again.

Go look.

I go look.

There it is, still. Catherine was right: I’m not hallucinating, it exists—

But I know, too, just as sure as I know that I was born and am alive, that it is not simply a sewer pipe, and this knowledge comes not from a place of logic but a kernel of understanding in my still-sour stomach, visceral, so very *there* that I cannot ignore it – a physical manifestation of deepest truth, a lump in my throat—

I have to do something, I think, but I can’t just go tell someone else about it because they’ll say the same thing as Catherine did.

But then what do I do?

I think, then, of my grandmother's fervent prayers to God, wailing for the forgiveness of Jesus Christ; I think of almost drowning in the ocean, being violently whipped around by waves grabbing me and scraping me across the sand under the water, my skin clawed red and raw; I think of the great arching darkness of my childhood house, groaning at night as it settled into the ground, and the violent nightmares I would have – I think of the sick, viscous murk of my past, how dead it is, how flat and nightmarish it has all turned out to be, and I know what I have to do –

There is a euphoria to it, shot through with power, fragrant almost, a sweet crackling energy better than the purest MDMA, and as I approach the hole in the wall I feel it building up in me, from my feet all the way to the tips of my fingers, more powerful than an orgasm, so glorious, so good, yes, this is right, this is the most *right* thing I have felt for a long time, possibly ever, and I feel myself pulled towards it, *into* it, as if it were some sort of escape–

But it is an escape, I think to myself, peacefully.

You don't have to do any of this bullshit. The thought crosses my mind and feels so wonderfully good and true. *Fuck everyone else. Fuck everything else. You never do anything for yourself. Now is the time. Nike motto.*

The inside of the hole is sloped down ever so slightly, obscuring the source of the golden, still-flickering light in its depths. I put my palm against the inside and feel a gentle warmth radiating from the cement. *That's nice. It's so cozy. How did I not notice this before?*

You have to do it. No. You want to do it.

Head first or legs first?

Deciding on head-first, I bend down and slowly, gently place my hands into the hole, put one knee up onto the lower edge and propel myself forward. There is no claustrophobia: though the hole is hardly three or so feet high, its low ceiling feels unoppressive – far from it – the closeness of warm cement to skin, in fact, feels good, womblike, almost – I feel a softly sucking force, pulling me in deeper –

Yes, this is good. This is the right thing to do. I have to leave.

I am not that sorry.

I continue crawling into the hole, towards the light.

Catherine's voice echoing off of the bathroom tile, far away now, calling my name. "Are you still in here? Hello?" A pause. "Okay." The door slams shut behind her. – No, I am not "in here" – that much is clear – I am nowhere, I am nowhere, I am gone – my chest swells with joy – how good it is to leave, to get out finally – *goodbye!*, I whisper, *at last! Finally! Goodbye!*