



APPETIZER

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BY THE BAR, SHE WAS TRYING TO FINALIZE THE title of her thesis, which had to do with existentialism, the problem of self-recursion, and a parrot named Gertrude. She'd gotten as far as 'The Squawk of Being: On Repetition, Irony, and Avian Dasein,' but worried it wasn't annoying enough to get published. Her professor, whom she had dated until recently, had taught her that a good title should charm and irritate in equal measure.

So when the server asked, "Just the ice cream right?" she blurted out, "Yeah, and also maybe—'A Phenomenology of Birdsong Under Capital.'" Then immediately corrected herself, "Sorry. Yes, I meant hojicha. Just hojicha." His laugh was silent, but spread loudly across his face. She noticed that he had a nice face, among other things.

'A Phenomenology of Birdsong Under Capital' came close, but it was too popular, too op-ed-y, she thought. You couldn't toss in 'capital' the way Americans scattered sprinkles on cupcakes. Hojicha ice cream came quickly, it was dark, woody in color, so dark almost looked solid. She remembered the first time she had it, at a teahouse in Hawai'i during a conference trip her professor took her. He told her

it was from Kyoto, where his mom was from—before moving to Massachusetts for art school and raising a kid with a husband, who eventually left her. These details were gathered over three courses, many dinners, and several drunk nights in his living room.

Existentialist philosophers believe in creating meanings for their own lives. Narration is a key tool. It's so mundane that people often forget how essential it is, how much of living depends on arranging the intangible into sentences. For instance, now the server was asking what she did, and she needed to give a response. It didn't need to be final, or even true, but it was her turn to expose herself. "I don't have a nine to five job." She did something common and usually annoying, answering a question by saying what it wasn't. He adjusted his glasses and suddenly looked even more like a model from *POPEYE!* magazine, his face delicately chiseled and hair the color of pale fire. It seemed novel to him, her job. "Wow, you must be really smart!" He was expectedly impressed—one thing about the server job was that they are paid to be impressed.

If customers kept coming back, it usually meant the server had done a great job.

She always ordered yuzu ginger ale, and he would pour her a beer, before pouring himself one. "So that you are not drinking alone." Between taking orders and running around, he monitored the playlist—surprisingly full of her generation's music, not his. Some Bill Evans, some Blur, some Nordic post-rock band she hadn't listened to in years, until her professor played their vinyl once, after gentle, almost innocent sex. She shed tears that felt foreign. A sudden, anonymous intimacy cradled her: she was accidentally seen through but immediately forgotten.

She knew as a customer, she could ask things of him, and he would do them for her. Maybe she hoped that he would do them more for her than for other people. Even if he was busy with ten things at once, he remembered her order, her music taste, and her hometown. "Taichung, am I right?" His vowels sounded mellow like Spanish, his eyes attentive. He said he wanted to visit one day. Because that's what people say to foreigners, after learning where they are from, to show interest. She should have said welcome, but it didn't feel right anymore, since she had barely been back in the past eight years. She

wanted to say something she remembered about her hometown other than the famous pineapple cake. Maybe the way motorbikers gather like a tide at every red light. Or how the air smells at dawn, humid and faintly metallic, like steamed rice left out overnight. But nothing came up in time, so she just smiled. "It's very hot."

She watched as he wove through the narrow space between stools and chairs, hips angled just enough to avoid brushing anyone. His hands worked with quiet certainty: reaching, lifting, pouring, wiping, each gesture folded into the next. He balanced three plates on one arm, adjusted a chair with his foot, folded a napkin mid-stride. His fingers danced between plates, arranging pansies and rose petals on top of the tarts. There was a rhythm to it all. A kind of elegantly executed urgency. Like a percussionist playing a chart by heart. She liked watching people do things well. She always had. But he was so good at it in a way that made her feel a little ridiculous about everything she'd ever studied. It occurred to her that philosophers spend their lives rehearsing how to live through logic and abstraction, but they are never quite washed by living itself. What about wiping more tables? Making someone a drink? Had Socrates ever thought of that?

After several martinis, she was curious if he'd ever gotten his body tattooed. If so, which color, what shape, which part of his skin, did it hurt? Does he care if it hurts? "Now you can't really see through the t-shirt, but it's here." He stretched his ivory shirt so thin to show the faintly inked skin under. She stared so hard it felt like touching. "It doesn't have any meaning." He said this to her, finally, and to her only. She stayed late enough to be the last person at the bar. She wondered if he had learned anything about meaning and existentialism. Most of her reading said the meaning isn't found, but made.

When she finally touched his tattoo, it was in her professor's friend's apartment, where she was staying over the summer. That's how people like her afford a view in the city. She lived with an acute awareness of the borrowedness of her own life, and was always ready to return it. The server smelled faintly of yuzu rind under her chin. The tattoo was on his lower stomach, just above the waistline, a bunny melting into gravel. Her fingers swam across the soft inked terrain. She traced the tattoo, her finger found his

pulse. It was light and syncopated, almost musical, reminding her how much she enjoyed watching him work behind the bar. He said, sounding a little sorry, "Ticklish." She gathered herself, sat up, adjusted her shirt. He was already halfway upright when he asked, "Hey, my homie's calling—can I use the room?" She nodded and ran to scrub her hands by the kitchen sink. She hadn't realized how badly she had needed to.

Two days later, Kōme, the izakaya, posted a picture of him holding a bottle of wine on Instagram, captioned "SUMMER!" in orange letters. She's always amazed by how much drama could be conjured by heat alone. How reluctant people become to go home before midnight, how fast fruits bruise, how ice blocks leave the factory to melt inside someone's body. Last summer, her professor drove her to a cottage well-stocked

with fresh flowers and stone fruits. As if it contained a secret season within the summer. On the right dose of antidepressant, he was pretty relaxed and even more tender. He played Mendelssohn's Sonata in D while she sat on the porch in his brown sweater, watching his head disappear and reappear behind the piano lid.

In the afternoon, her professor asked her how to pronounce a phrase in Mandarin from a paperback in the house. A book of translated essays by a scholar from the Qing Dynasty. He pointed to the characters from a line and handed it to her. She read it to him. He laughed, amused. "Wow, you make it sound angry." She blinked. "That's just how it's pronounced." "No, I know," he said, waving his hand, "it's just such a sharp-sounding language. With all the tones. You know what I mean?" She didn't answer. Not because she agreed, and not because

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she didn't know what he meant. But because she knew exactly what he meant, and how he would have preferred her to respond. The last time someone had said something similar, she said too bad she couldn't get angry in English. And she couldn't get angry at her professor right now, who was nice enough to drive her here and pick flowers for her. Who would read her thesis later.

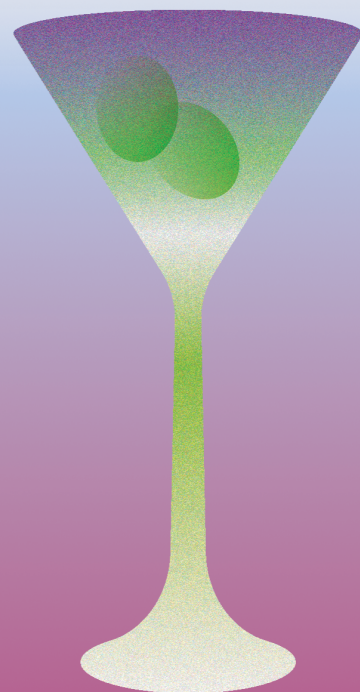
He was also the one who told her she was too obsessed with stylizing life, it's a "contemporary affliction." Everything is contemporary before it is historical, she retorted, separating her laundry from his in the guest room. She folded his cerulean shirt on top of his linen shorts, next to her sage lingerie. Now they'd carry the same scent. The thought gave her a shameful happiness.

It was fair for her to be surprised, when she learned that the server didn't really have a side hustle as an actor or singer. Maya does—she was a professional ballet dancer and worked afternoon shifts mostly. Yes, she had assumed, the way people assume about attractive servers, that this is temporary, a stepping stone to something more substantial. He must have a thing. Maybe fashion. A more sanctioned, explicit way of stylizing life. She noticed his Chrome Hearts necklace and stylish boots. She thought about asking him if he had a plan for the future. But she was scared that

he would ask it back, and would immediately find that she didn't have any.

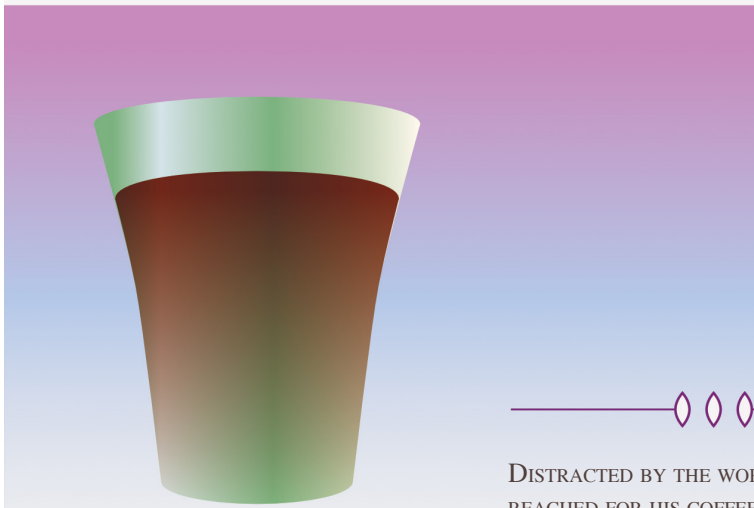
The more she stayed with him through his shifts, the more she caught herself wondering whether she could try restaurant work. It's mostly just serving and taking orders, right? He was drying a sake glass. "Most people don't really want anything," he said. "They just want to be asked." She started to question if she ever truly wanted yuzu ginger ale, if it just sounded sophisticated and vaguely Asian in a way that felt appropriate for who she was supposed to be there, if she was intentionally delaying the actual drinking in rounds of pre-cocktails. To be a server is to give people what they want, whether they know it or not.

Occasionally, Maya would gesture toward the kitchen with a flick of the wrist, and he'd nod back. They had a subtle, coded interaction across the room. He'd go to her, then return to the bar with more orders, more cups. They moved like a duo in a film she wasn't part of. Like him, Maya had a well-trained service enthusiasm, could strike up conversations with any customers, ranging from toddlers in bold-colored onesies to shy solo goers like her. "People think dance is about expression, but really it's about show-



ing up in your body completely. Every night." Maya made it sound simple, this idea of inhabiting yourself fully. The server echoed, "At this point, I don't think I'd want to do an office job. I gotta move my body... You know. Some people think it's mindless work, but I like that my hands know what to do without me having to think about it."

Instead of inhabiting her body in temporary lodgings, she was more skilled in translating herself. Someone who fought with her mom in one language and pleased her professor in another. She finished her yuzu ginger ale, tasting the last bit of watery alcohol. For once, she knew exactly what she wanted, which was to leave. "See you later!" The server said that to every customer. She felt like a faceless customer walking out of the restaurant, just like how she came in the first time. Tomorrow she was supposed to meet with her professor, to discuss whatever revisions would



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make her thesis more palatable.

She hadn't talked to her professor in months. The school break and her completion of coursework made it easier. She had logged off the chat with him because the silence could feel rueful at times. He could always email her, and she could too. The thinly-maintained professionalism eventually led to the thesis meeting that had felt impossible and inevitable. That was all she had now in her borrowed life, an over-edited Microsoft document that would have less than five readers in the world.

When she arrived, her lip shade felt almost wrong immediately, but her professor was already seated by the window in a linen blazer. She'd always thought it oxymoronic, or pretentious, depending on how judgmental you wanted to go. Why commit to the structure of a suit if you crave lightness? Suit suggests you have the decency to put up with discomfort. Before he could catch her staring, she sallied in and slid into the chair opposite him. He offered a smile calibrated to professional

warmth. They ordered together—green tea, café au lait. She said she wasn't hungry. He first asked how she was doing. He told her he had enjoyed reading her thesis, an “ambitious and novel project,” “playfully Heideggerian.” He sprinkled these terms with confidence.

Distracted by the words, she reached for his coffee instead of her tea. She apologized, wearing a foamy mustache. It seemed to make him really happy. So happy to the point of boyish. Something she tends to romanticize about. He set the cup down, the boyishness receding into a professorial facade. “‘The Squawk of Being’ nails the ironic juxtaposition, the avian Dasein. It’s... charmingly audacious.” Charming. The mellowness of this word almost removed its supposed glory, she thought. “But,” he continued, leaning forward slightly, “the problem lies in the self-recursion becoming a closed loop. Gertrude mirrors the human condition, yes—the repetition, the trapped performance—but does she interrogate it, or merely enact it? You risk aestheticizing

the existential trap without offering a way out, or even a clear critique of its mechanism. It’s a brilliant surface, but the depth feels performative.”

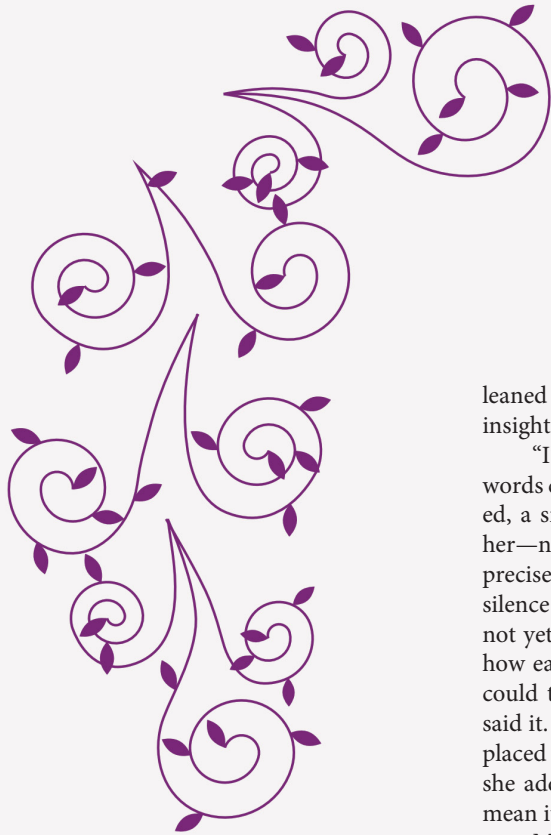
He asked her to reframe the parrot’s ironic repetition of Being, to position it as a lens onto the performative absurdity inherent in Being. Amplify the critique. He had said it was charmingly audacious, now he was saying it was a little too pristine. A little too satisfied with its own cleverness—so, like every philosopher? She didn’t understand how it could be a flaw if it’s inherent. He paused, waiting for her to speak. But she couldn’t seem to focus on her thesis anymore.

“How...” she started, then stopped, her eyes fixed on a knot in the wooden table, avoiding his. “How did you do it? Back then, your PhD years, I mean.” She finally looked up with a raw, searching confusion. “When it felt like philosophy... was just words circling words? Were you lost? Even slightly annoyed? Did you get sick of it? Disappointed? Did you also date your professor?” Her heart was racing with her own speech, which felt like a train driving itself off the rail. He looked down, feeling the sweat between his fingers. “It’s... a demanding process for everyone,” he began, his tone carefully neutral, resuming the mantle of Mentor. “There are periods of frustration, certainly. Doubt is part of the—”

She lost it mid-answer, thinking of the server’s intentionally meaningless tattoo. Gravel blooming into a bunny. She thought of the way he wiped a flute with a cloth, how he pronounced the name of her hometown, how he remembered many customers’ hometowns. Her professor continued his speech, and at some point, he went back to her thesis.

“The problem with Gertrude,” she said, cutting him off, “isn’t that she’s trapped in recursive loops. She says the same thing over and over because that’s what parrots do.”

He hadn’t been interrupted like this in a long time, and definitely not by her. He



leaned back slightly, “What you said can be insightful... If you developed that angle—”

“I’m not going to develop it,” the words coming out stronger than she intended, a small, unfamiliar fire igniting within her—not rage exactly, but something more precise, like the alignment of a joint. The silence that followed wasn’t uncomfortable, not yet. For a moment, she was startled by how easy it was to take back the floor. She could tell he wanted to pretend she never said it. The defiant spark soon dimmed, replaced by a familiar rush of shame. “Sorry,” she added quickly, looking away, “I didn’t mean it to come off that way. ESL issue.”

Maya invited all the regulars to her ballet showcase at Lincoln Center—Stravinsky’s Firebird Suite. “Hope to see familiar faces in the audience!” she wrote, with a red heart emoji and a swan. The message arrived while she was walking past Kōme. She hadn’t meant to, but the city had a way of folding you back to places you were trying to forget.

She texted the server asking if he wanted to go together. The message showed as

read, but he never responded. She bought a ticket anyway, sat in the back row of the theater. Maya moved across the stage like liquid fire. She guessed modern ballet truly was about inhabiting fully. During intermission, she scanned the lobby for his bleached hair, but he wasn’t there.

One day on her way home, she took the longer route by the waterfront. She walked on, past the takeout boxes stacked by the door, past a woman on her phone saying I’m sorry, sorry, I am, the woman kept repeating. The heat held its breath. A fruit truck beeped in reverse. In her bag, her printed thesis was folded under a baguette and a bottle of soap. The scent was ‘Peach Beach.’ She found herself in front of Kōme’s window again. The server was ladling hojicha ice cream into a small cup. A young boy, maybe seven or eight, pressed his face against the glass counter, pointing at different flavors. The server leaned down to the boy’s eye level and said something that made the child laugh. For a second, she could almost taste it again, the bitter-sweet grain of it dissolving on her tongue. ☹

