

Smoldering

1

We are standing on the sidewalk smoking a cigarette and watching our building burn to the ground. I don't think I've ever seen brick burn before and I'm wondering if I even knew brick could burn before now, so I ask Jonas if he had ever thought about that, and he burst into tears and hit me for being "unsensitive" (not a word). Through his tears, he says something about moving "finally."

It appears that the roof is collapsing, and that makes me laugh. It all feels fitting. I am thinking about the couch where I slept burning and am sad for a moment because that was a really comfortable couch, but then I think about Jonas' cat statue burning and my attitude evens out again.

2

As I laid on the couch and watched TV, the cat statue in the corner of the room stared at me skeptically as if it actually knew something about me. I continued to stare at it as the TV blared nonsense in some far-off place and it looked through me. I felt small and the cat statue smirked like it always did. Its stare dragged my mistakes and shortcomings out of me until they hung in the air like smoke.

Jonas broke my borderline manic breakdown with his delicate voice, which sounded like a child blowing on a dandelion puff. I wasn't in a place to tune in for a few minutes, but he eventually slapped me lightly because he knew I wasn't paying attention and asked me if I wanted to grab a cup of coffee.

3

We sat and drank hot coffee on a hot day, sweating in the air-conditioned nook. Coffee shops were an escape for us. The world was hectic, but here, everything seemed to move in slow motion. Words left people's mouths like the steam rising from the half-empty mug. People sitting at the same table with separate books interacted with occasional quips of "oh wow this is a pretty line," which was generally met with an exasperated eye roll and a halfhearted grin. The espresso machine eavesdropped on everyone's conversations and its hum butted in without invitation.

Jonas sat with his notebook that he wrote in when he was feeling inspired (I once heard a quote that inspiration was only for bad writers). For half a page, he had the phrase "I can be better" written over and over again. I asked him what he wanted to be better than, and he responded, "You."

4

I've read that notebook a few times while Jonas sleeps. His handwriting made me feel some type of way due to its elegance (there is something truly fascinating about being sexually attracted to penmanship). One time, he wrote about a dream he had. There was a large flowy title at the top that read "A Dream" beneath the date.

In the dream, Jonas said he was staring in a mirror. This didn't really surprise me because Jonas was always staring in mirrors. He loves looking at himself. He loves his hair and the way his eyebrows are always perfectly plucked and how cleanly shaven he always is.

Back in the dream, the mirrors multiplied as if he was in a hall of mirrors and there was an endless reflection of him, standing, staring into the mirror with the gold frame. He stood admiring his hair despite the oddity of the mirror situation until all at once, every mirror shattered, not enough that he couldn't see himself, but enough that his face was badly disfigured. I didn't feel like reading the rest because I felt like he made it up as some kind of existential message about vanity.

5

The mirror in the hall was crooked and Jonas bitched about it while we got ready for dinner. I say we, but realistically I sat on the couch and watched Food Network, for some reason working up my appetite and my inevitable hanger while Jonas fixed his hair in the mirror without straightening it. He was nervous about something about the meal, and I was not really inclined to listen. I normally didn't listen to Jonas when he was nervous because most of the time it was stupid or overblown. He said something about his boss being a Trump supporter and I dismissively advised to just not talk politics.

I hated Jonas' work dinners, but I did it because... why did I do it? I didn't do it because I loved him, love is fake. I don't even really think I did it because he wanted me to. Maybe I did like work dinners after all.

Jonas told me to behave tonight, and not to drink too much, and to not hit on the waiter.

"What if the waiter is David Beckham," I asked.

Jonas hit me on the shoulder. I got a boner.

6

The first time Jonas hit me during sex I didn't know how to react, so my body did for me.

"Did you just cum?" Jonas asked me, knowing full well the answer.

I rolled over on my side, pressing my cheek, warm from the pressure of the slap, against the pillow, warm with the sweat I worked up when I was on bottom. I could tell Jonas was staring at my naked back, but I didn't really care. He could stare all he wanted, but I needed a moment to come to grips with just how hot that really was. I giggled for a moment thinking about how Jonas probably thought I was ashamed or something stupid. Realistically, I was just excited he was getting aggressive with me so I had something to stick around for. I touched my

cheek and got a boner again, so I pushed him onto the bed and put a hand on his throat before biting his ear and telling him to fuck me like that all the time.

7

The first time we laid in a bed together was on a Saturday. It seemed as if the walls of his tiny apartment had long strings with Styrofoam cups on either side running a network of annoying noises throughout the home. Upstairs, his parents were yelling like they always were. It's truly amazing how two completely different dynamics can exist simultaneously in a single space. We laid flat as corpses with our shoulders touching lightly because the mortician was running out of room.

A glass shattered and there was a loud bang as Jonas' mother probably was pushed into the kitchen table again. In response, Jonas pushed his shoulder a little bit more aggressively up against mine and our warmths intertwined. When I turned my head, his eyes were already staring at me so deeply it felt like he was running his fingers through my hair; I kissed him so that maybe he could escape for a little while.

8

I sat at the bar and fantasized about a man coming up to me and running his fingers through my hair, but instead I looked up from my martini and saw Jonas. His eyes were so innocent and soft. He was drinking a vodka cranberry (the most basic drink) and I wanted to slap it out of his hand. I wanted him to stop telling the story I have not been listening to and instead yell at me for the three or four times I had flirtatiously touched the bartender's hand or held eye contact for far too long with the blond man sitting across the bar. I wanted him to flip the table, make a scene, tell me how terrible I was and how no one would ever truly love me.

The story ended, and I nodded slightly with an "mhm" while taking a deep swig of whiskey. He told me his mother was in town, and I told him I didn't give a shit. He took a long sip from his drink and went to the bathroom. I slid the bartender my number.

9

I sat in the bathroom during the eulogy doing nothing in particular. I simply could not deal with hearing positive words be spoken in memoriam about the piece of shit that was Jonas' dad. It took everything in my power to not spit in the coffin while "paying my respects" during the wake. I didn't even want to know who was doing the eulogy, so I wouldn't have to resent them. I flicked my lighter a few times with no intent before getting up from the toilet and wiping the back of my pants with a paper towel.

When I came out, the funeral was over, and family and friends were congregated in the lobby of the church. Jonas came up to me and kissed me unpleasantly (tears don't really make for pleasurable kisses) before thanking me for always being there for him and telling me he loved me. He had never said that before. Seven years and those words never left his lips.

"I love you, too," I lied.

10

I told Jonas I loved Walt Whitman so that he'd maybe stumble upon reading one of the oddly sexualized poems in *Leaves of Grass* that turned me on for a reason I could never really put my finger on. He sighed because he knew this charade but smirked because he loved watching me squirm while he read the bizarre lines. It only took a few before he found what I was looking for and I was feeling the reaction in my whole body that day.

I told him I needed him to suck me off right then or I was going to have a panic attack and he said he only would if it was one of those nice bathrooms that locks from the inside. I already knew it was and pulled him out of his seat like we were running from a nuclear explosion.

Jonas licked his lips as he went down on me, but I was not in the mood for sensuality. Almost immediately, I pushed his head so my cock was against the back of his throat and he slapped my thigh after a time because he needed some air. I ignored him. Eventually he pushed me off and there were tears forming in his fear-filled eyes. I buttoned my pants and left the bathroom before sitting back in the middle of the shop and picking the Whitman back up. I actually hated Whitman.

Jonas eventually found me and sheepishly sat across from me at the table. He told me he wanted to leave me.

11

The first time he told me he wanted to leave me was the same time we finally moved in together. We were in the subway station and I was hungover. I forget where we were going, which probably means it was somewhere for Jonas. While we were waiting for the train, Jonas was talking about his art or his dad's cancer or something. I saw the train's lights depart the station before ours and grabbed him by the shirt, pushing him to the edge of the platform. I told him I could end him if I wanted to. He started to cry.

I pulled him back as the train approached and laughed as I felt beady eyes boring holes in my flowered shirt and I imagined the things people thought of me. The doors opened, and I stepped through them, expecting Jonas to be by my side. Instead, he stood shell shocked ten feet away from the train, staring fearfully at the open doors. I sighed and went out to grab his arm, but before I even reached out he pulled away and told me he wanted me to stay away and that he wanted to leave me. I told him to get on the train then and go home, to which he responded, "It wouldn't be home without you." I was utterly confused by his shift in tone, but this was Jonas, the emotional gambling dice. Also, I knew if I moved in with him I could probably fuck him whenever I wanted.

12

He was the social butterfly of the two of us. He liked to invite friends over at least once a week to have game nights. One night we played Yahtzee and his friends came over. They were all hot and I had tried to fuck all of them at least once. They told me they could never do that to Jonas. I told them he didn't have to know. This all added up to at least a few awkward glances on game nights, so I eventually stopped participating and let Jonas have his fun.

Most nights I sat in our room and watched TV as I drank whiskey out of the bottle. That night, Jonas told me he would suck me off before bed if I played the game with them, though. I knew I could have gotten him to anyway, but I let him think he was doing something special. I had been drinking all day, and also it was an opportunity to try with his friends again.

When we started the game, I positioned myself on the opposite side of the table from Jonas next to the most attractive of his friends. A man whose hair I wanted to sleep under like a blanket and whose eyes I wanted to dissect me. I didn't stop drinking even though game night was normally sober, and about a half hour in I put my hand on his crotch. He didn't move it.

13

Jonas found us under a blanket in our bed a couple weeks later and this was the last straw for him. He sent me to the couch and put a lock on our bedroom door. I was pissed for a day and let him know it with my hands and my obvious flirting with waiters and baristas, but then I realized the couch was perfect and I completely forgot why I was mad. I liked sleeping alone more anyway.

The only problem about my near-perfect new "bedroom" was the cat statue that stood prominently next to the TV stand. I told Jonas I wanted to burn it probably four times a day and he slapped me every time. He told me if I burned it then he would burn my couch and anything else valuable to me. I laughed because he probably didn't even know what was valuable to me.

14

I never really cared about Jonas, but I used to be nicer to him. When we were in high school, I burned a CD for him that included some of his favorite artists because someone was bullying him. I was the one that always ended up defending him, which made me resent him, but he trusted me fairly unconditionally and it's stupid to squander an opportunity like that.

He kissed me in the hallway the day after I gave him the mixtape. When the boys that were bullying him realized he was with me, they never bothered him again. I was happy because he didn't need that. He got it enough at home. In those days I wished I could have stood up to his father, but instead we just kissed to forget about the screams and bangs coming from the room down the hall.

15

We got a new neighbor in the room down the hall and it became my only priority to sleep with him that first week because of the combination of Jonas having stopped putting out and the man's long blond hair. I imagined pulling it so hard he would scream, and Jonas could hear it from our apartment and cry. I tried to think of a way to meet him that didn't involve me standing outside of his apartment door with my dick out.

16

"Why can't you just keep your dick in your pants?" he screamed at me as I sat watching the TV and eating ramen. I told him monogamy was a waste of time and that we should burn the cat statue in a ritualistic endeavor to eliminate jealousy from our relationship. He hit me on the shoulder and told me I was being a pretentious douche again. I stood up from the couch and pushed him against the wall in the kitchen, simply not in the mood for his mosquito-like buzzing tonight.

He ran into the bedroom crying and I went back to the couch to see how much more of the whiskey I could finish from the bottle. The rush made my head spin as I was much more drunk than I had initially estimated, and the bottle clattered to the floor as I struggled to light a cigarette. The couch smelled like bad whiskey and sleep.