

Nilsa

Believe that the world is governed by an elaborate system of checks and measures, that life is meted out in a zero-sum game—every pleasure balanced by an equal and opposite pain, everything earned. This is what I used to feel when I was living scared in The City, when drum and bass was becoming a religion and I was taking what I could from every moment, more than I ever deserved, digging my own hole.

We started at Thomas', snorting a white powder we poured out of capsules and mashed smooth with a flashlight. He said it was something he'd been passed as e, but we knew it wasn't. Crank is what it probably was. We sucked it into our noses through a rolled dollar bill off a newspaper. And when I went outside I realized that the city had become as dark and as quiet as a diving bell.

A cab ride that took us through the streets underwater—just the tops of the light posts sticking into the air, their dim glow seeping down into our mire—and then we arrived at Twilo and made our way through the line. I saw her inside, in the wide-open first area, with the dance room on our left and the hall to everything else straight ahead of us, kids filing in all around us, screaming with their clothes who they wanted people to think they really were. Her friend talked to Thomas. She surprised me because she looked back, as if it was all right that I stared. Most times they never looked back, acted like I did something to them and walked in the other direction, but not her. She smiled.

Thomas slipped a white pill in my hand; he said, "This e comes on slow. Let me know when you're rolling and we'll take the a."

Looking at her, I took it, trying to decide what she was or who she thought I was, until she said, “Hi.”

“Hi.”

Her red lips spread wide, showing white teeth and a tiny gap in the middle. Her mouth might have been just like any other, but her smile was different, like then and there she knew how everything would happen between us and she didn’t hold it against me, not for a second, not for the world.

I told her my name and she said, “I’m Nilsa,” and she was still smiling, or maybe she was smiling again, but probably she never had stopped.

“What are you taking?” I said.

She brought her eyelids down and then up again, showed me her green eyes, and said, “Nothing.” She was clean and I was where I was—there was nothing I could do about it then.

All around us kids rode their highs, wearing baggy pants and tight tank tops. The music was bright basslines I couldn’t get my head around—looping beats pulling me in. Like she was touching a tender sunburn, Nilsa cupped her breast and laughed. She said, “I got this pierced today. It feels funny.”

Discoballs blazed patterns on the walls all around us and snapshots of colors exploded on the back of my eyelids in the minutes that elapsed while I blinked.

“Do you want to see it?” she said.

I nodded, moving into her eyes, feeling myself swimming in their green.

She held her shirt down from the neck and showed me there, in the middle of Twilo, surrounded by the streams of others: her nipple, as brown and red as any other,

erect with a curve of metal running through it to end in two silver balls. My face and glimpses of my future shimmered back in its small round circles; there were canyons reflected on that metal, divine heights and visions of red rivers. I tried to crawl back into her eyes when this was gone, but now I was on the outside with her, the two of us together, more comfortable than I could ever ask you to believe.

Thomas appeared, and I asked him, “Did you see that?”

“You’re rolling,” he said.

My hands had started moving with the bassline and I brought one up to show him. Steam seeped slowly from the walls around us, and lights in the dance room flashed across drag queens on stilts.

“She’s Nilsa,” I said.

“Cool.” Thomas passed me the acid and held it still in my palm as if to pull out all my apprehensions with his breathing, and he did. Or something had. At that moment, I wanted everything; I let go of believing in any future and hoped for divinity in what was around me, praying that everything I’d come to would change, that I’d be released forever from the system of measures and balances that I’d come to believe in; that I’d be saved.

I ate the tab, tasting the bitter, as Nilsa held my hand. I told her how I was a student in the Art Students’ League, and that I wanted to make beauty; she led me back into her eyes like it was my return to the womb.

And then later, with the a coming on strongest, Nilsa pressed a bottle of water in my hand and asked me how did I feel? Her eyes beamed green, like I already told you;

she smiled brighter than anyone I have ever met, like I told you as well; she did these things, and I told her, “I feel fine.”

We wound up on a couch in the danceroom. “Do you know what I studied in high school?” she asked.

I closed my eyes and saw melting checkerboards dripping into canyons of brilliant waterfalls following rainbows in front of my face.

“Massage,” said Nilsa. “I studied massage.”

She went to work on my back then, doing things I felt in seven different languages of feeling, things I knew even then would corrupt how I’d react to everything that ever existed after—in life. “Stop,” I begged. I turned around and put my lips against hers, kissed her, whispering, “It *can*’t be this good.”

She touched my eyelids with her fingertips and turned me around, kissing my neck and rubbing my back again, stretching the colors out of my muscles and away from my spine. I felt the strong in her hands and the story they were telling me: how she came to NYU from a small town in Japan called Toyohashi, about a three-hour drive south of Tokyo, and how her father was from Brazil—a man who’d come to work for Mazda and met her mother, gave her a daughter and left her alone to teach Nilsa Japanese and some English, a little Portuguese in case she ever caught up with her old man.

Believe me when I tell you, I knew all of this from her hands.

We were dancing when the DJ stopped. People cheered and we left into the cold gray sun. Everyone looked pale in the light, like just-born marsupials that hadn’t grown fur. Thomas handed me my sunglasses: colored yellow lenses that transformed the

world. Electric sidewalks gleamed in the sunlight, grains of glass in the concrete sparkling in the sun as if—tourists from Twilo—we had arrived and found the streets of New York paved with gold.

Thomas and the others filed into cabs, headed for more of his white capsules as Nilsa and I started walking, unsure where we were headed, but going downtown. On Seventh Avenue we stopped at a Rite Aid and she led me inside onto the soft blue carpet. A miracle of sensations greeted us under the brilliance of those fluorescent lightbulbs as we walked the beautiful aisles searching for sweets. The sad-faced cashier knew our names and our predicament; he winked his assurance of my visions. Everywhere around me were small packages with pictures; letters and products radiated from the shelves. The laundry detergents drew me into the red in a bottle of Tide, and I wasn't powerless, but I was held there. I knew then if I saw that much for the rest of my life I'd be crazy, but it'd be in every way worth it. The reds in that Tide were redder than the brightest tomatoes, Clorox blues glistened under those lights not brighter, but *more* than anything I have ever known; there was *more* in those colors than I've ever been aware of.

“Can we go?” Nilsa asked.

“It's just that I never stop to enjoy any of the colors like this,” I said. “Like they're all right here right now, and so vibrant. That's the perfect word to use for it,” I told her. “*Vibrant.*”

“Do you see all this?” I asked her.

She pulled my hand and put her lips up to my cheek. “Is it beautiful?” she asked.

How Nilsa led me home, I'll never understand, but it was when we were standing in my bedroom naked, but not touching, that I heard it start to rain. I knew then that the rain would last through the weekend, and I understood that the world would take back what I'd stolen with drugs in the night.

For hours afterwards, my mind was a knocked-down power line, flailing and churning out the remnants of break beats and rhythms, thinking in different directions, spouting out currents of thought.

Nilsa's body was hairless and small and gray, still cold from the walk and salt-lined from sweating, with ribs I could pinch between my fingers and a flat stomach that sloped to a small patch of hair. The silver hoop hung from her swollen red nipple.

Outside the rain fell louder and the sound of wet tires slashed clear from the street. My upstairs neighbor rose from his bed and walked to his bathroom above our heads. When he flushed, the water blasted through pipes in my walls. I touched Nilsa's shoulder and felt my fingers on her rubbery skin. Together we crawled into my bed, burrowing under the covers and moving against each other for warmth. As scientists run gentle fingers over specimens, we touched each other silently, browsing in solitude. I ran my fingers up her stomach and traced the curve of her breast, felt the tender pucker of her nipple and the place where the hoop ended in balls. Carefully, my fingertip just fit in between.

She rolled over, sliding her back against my chest and I wrapped my arms around her. With my eyes closed I could still see the checkerboards, but now melted further, their colors faded to darker than before.

I asked her would she let me draw the world on her back then, and though the rain persisted, as if to remind me that this all would end so soon, so suddenly, I pushed on, hoping. I pressed my lips against her shoulder, felt the soft of her skin—smooth like its purpose was to glide against mine, as if there should never be friction between us—and I believed I could give her something there that would help us from then on and forever, that she could be the one I would save.

I collected a few pens from what I could reach on the windowsill—two blues and a black—and I started slow, letting the little metal rollers find their way along her pores. The ink reached out like tiny blue hands, spreading into her skin’s valleys as I held the tip to her, and then, starting around her spine, I drew what I could of the visions, just a few boxes, but her contours transformed my lines into curves that became blades of grass spreading out toward her sides, not boxes or checkerboards, but organic fluid shapes. As if I were watching the pen lead my hand, I saw her skin become a blue-lined garden of liquid flowers. Blue daffodils blossomed on her back and down along her hips; her entire spine was a vine of plants and flowers created by God. Everything He created spread out toward her sides. What I beheld was amazing, more beauty than I could ever hope to imagine.

I lay looking at a single flower close to her elbow, its petals opened wide as if it were next to the sun, and I drew one there on her bone, as if this could be all that we needed: a sun.

“We’re OK now,” I said.

“It’s still raining.”

Nilsa was shivering and I cupped my hand over her stomach, feeling her breathing take my arm in and out. After a time, the long breaths began, and I asked her if she was asleep. She moved her head just a little and I knew she was crying, that she had wanted me to save her as much as I had wanted to be saved.

“I’m here,” I said. It was all I could do for either of us.

Some few days later, high on ketamine with the sky broken open above us, we sat in Washington Square Park watching the world tear itself to pieces, and she pulled her sleeve down to reveal a fresh-scabbed tattoo on her shoulder. It looked like sperm swimming end to end, touching together to make a letter from four little ribbons. This, in black ink on her shoulder, in the exact place I’d kissed her that first night, our beautiful morning. But the ink wasn’t mine, and this was something I’d never have done.

“What is this,” I said, running my finger over the scabs.

She said, “It’s everything. It’s us. It’s you.”

“It’s you?” I asked her. Her skin felt cold and my mind was blurry from the drugs. When she stayed quiet, I asked, “Is it made of sperm?”

She nodded. “It’s made of dreams,” she said. “Wishes of what we can have.”

“Who put this on you?” I said.

She looked up as if to witness the world, and I can believe she was watching angels dance love songs among the clouds, or she could have been watching nothing, the wind.

Across the park a man sat on the benches, disheveled and alone. He looked at the ground like he’d lost something, but he didn’t move. Like he knew it could never be

found, I saw him reach into his pockets and fish around, then blow his nose into an empty hand.

And when Nilsa touched my fingers I knew that what I'd had of her was gone, that, even if it had all been real in the beginning, it was far from true then. My fingers traced the lines that formed her little tattoo: four black sperm, one little letter. Even bumped on ketamine I couldn't believe what I saw.

She said my name then, and I thought of that first morning, how beautifully pure we had seemed, and I didn't cry, though I wish I could have. I didn't even cry for the world. I knew everything that was wrong with us, the list that stretched for miles up above me and into the heavens; I knew that I'd be out of her life before the scabs of her tattoo even healed. She wasn't going to save me and I couldn't save her; the two of us together couldn't even save that one morning.

But.

But still: if I told you I wouldn't do it all over, or that I never go back to Twilo or spend mornings in Washington Square Park just looking for her, you'd be wrong to believe me.