

Caterpillar

Basil Wilcox

I'm supposed to remember that I have to care about getting better, but I can't remember. Something she said to me, but she said it while wearing the yellow dress. Will it always feel like this? Throat stuffed up with white wine. Annalise, wiping at my eyes.

"I hate seeing you like this."

"Shhh... No, you don't."

Later, outside by the ocean again. Midnight, but the moon. The white of her teeth. Canines, extra sharp. She grinded all the other teeth down. Clenching in her sleep. I like knowing that. Touch her face.

"You don't hate it. I'm fun when I'm like this."

Only, I don't think I said it aloud. We're in the waves and I remember. She's tall. I grab onto her. Steady. Angry. The ocean, it's angry. I like it when it's like this. Is she angry? Scratchy wet lace gritting against my thighs, the soft skin below my belly. Pink.

My underwear is still wet with salt water, so I know it's very early morning and I may still be drunk because my head isn't as much of a wreck as it should be. I think I would've forgotten about the ocean if it wasn't for the underwear. For the stickiness of salt on my skin. Annalise is in the other room, making coffee.

"Why am I wearing your pink underwear?" I ask her, standing in the bedroom doorway.

"Because you wanted to."

“I... What? Why did I want to?”

“You said you wanted to inherit my high femme powers, which you said are somehow linked to a person’s choice of underwear. Like, you said you get your butch powers from your briefs. It was kind of a convincing argument.” She has her back turned to me, frothing oat milk on the stove in pink slippers and a red silk robe.

“How is that a convincing argument? It makes no sense!”

“Okay then, explain it. Where do my high femme powers come from? Hmm?”

“Literally from anything else. I don’t know. Not from your underwear.”

“Well, I think they look good on you, and last night, so did you.” She turns to me then, pointing the metal whisker at me. “So, how much do you remember?”

I sigh and pull up a chair from the dining table. I hate that question.

“Was I okay?” I ask. Feeling small.

“Dez, you were okay. Nothing bad happened. You didn’t really get... Well, I didn’t even notice how drunk you were until everyone else had already left. So then, it was just you and me. And when we came back from the beach, you passed out before I could talk you into changing.”

I think for a while.

“Did I do anything bad?”

“No, Dez, you didn’t do anything bad. I promise.”

I wonder if she’d tell me if I did.

My therapist and I are trying out a new harm reduction technique. Basically, instead of quitting drinking altogether, I’m allowed to drink only with people who I can trust to keep me safe.

Never alone, and never in a bad situation. I think we're trying to be realistic. I come from a long line of folks who all drink as a coping mechanism. Generational curses like that don't just go away. Or I suppose they can, but I won't be the one to break it. I'm a hedonist with no willpower. It's good to be realistic.

Annalise joins me at the dining table, setting down two green mugs. I watch as the steam spindles in the air.

"You're quiet this morning," she says, eyeing me over the lip of her mug.

"I'm hungover," I say. What I mean is, I'm ashamed. But she's still here. And I can tell by her look that she still likes me. Might always like me. But who knows, we don't think of our future in those terms. Annalise doesn't think in terms of always. It's... challenging. But refreshing. She's with me because every day she chooses to be. And she's choosing to be today. So I relax, a little.

"I think the harm reduction thing is working, though," I say, "I mean, it's nice to wake up... To wake up..."

"Knowing where you are?"

I know she's just trying to help me. She does this when I drift off. Connects my dots for me.

But I don't like this one. This one hurts.

Still, I don't tell her she's wrong. She isn't wrong, not entirely.

"Knowing I'm safe," I try instead, "That you still like me. That you didn't let anyone hurt me."

So maybe I'm feeding her a line with that last one. And maybe that's okay. I know she likes to take care of me and likes that she does a good job at it.

“That’s what I’m here for, Dezzy.” She reaches for my hand. Smiles. Palm warm from where it wrapped around the mug.

I feel a little empty when Annalise leaves for work, and this is what my therapist would call a red flag. But I’m being self-aware, so I think that makes it more of an orange flag. Could be worse. The apartment is too quiet without her. I leave for the ocean, where it’s never quiet.

Even below the water, the ocean still rumbles in my ears. All of its sweet, angry sounds. The saltwater stings my eyes when I re-emerge, and something about this feels right. Feels like penance for the pleasure of being with her. The ocean, that is. I go under again, and a piece of seaweed tangles around my ankle.

I kick it away. Evan’s hands. The way he’d hold me under water after we drank too much. Always in jest, but I remember. The more I kicked at him, the longer he’d hold me under. I learned eventually to go limp in his arms until he stopped. Got bored and let me go. Self-preservation, but I hate it. I should have kept kicking. Should’ve thrashed, should’ve flailed, should’ve ripped at the soft bareness of his flesh. Instead, I went limp.

I go to where the seaweed has drifted away. Just to kick it again. It rips apart, forming two clusters. I watch them get caught in the white froth of a wave. Disappear.

When I emerge from the water, I’m wet and new. Caterpillars go liquid in their cocoons, melting away completely, before they turn into something else. I bet it feels good. The melting. I run my hands over my skin, skim them over my surface. It feels like I’m touching a new person. Like all the dregs of my old self were torn from me. Just clusters, caught up in the waves with the seaweed. A sudden urge to kiss this new skin, so I do. I press my fingers to my lips. They’re salty.

Annalise collapses on the couch next to me. The sweet, sour scent of her sweat fills my nose, and, weirdly, I sort of like it. God, I'm so fucking gay. I wrap both arms around her and squeeze a little. She works so hard.

“The kitchen was so damn hot today, you wouldn't believe. And the pizza boys were all stoned again and kept burning everything. Ira had a talk with us all after work, saying that she doesn't care what we do on our own time. That she doesn't drug test employees because really, she doesn't care. But she said the next time it seems like someone is high at work, they're fired on the spot. Afterwards, Joey and Nelson just laughed.”

I think about Annalise standing over a trashcan, scraping all the blackened bits off the pizza pans while Joey and Nelson giggle. I get angry.

But she's already untangled herself from me and is up, unbothered and bustling around in the other room. I amble after her, watching as she fumbles around in the fridge.

“Anyway, enough of that. What'd you do today, my little rose?”

I smile. God, she's so fucking gay, too.

A bottle of wine beside the Brita filter catches my eye. I want to ask for some, but I don't think it's the right moment. I just drank last night. But I've been feeling strange since the beach. Since thinking of Evan again. Maybe a glass or two would help me calm down. Just a little. Does Annalise ever think of Evan? About those nights by the ocean? The parties at his house? How does she think of them? Does she ever want to melt away, too? Ever get frustrated when she realizes we can't? That we're just stuck like this, forever? The fridge door closes. She's looking at me, expectantly.

Now isn't the right time to ask about the wine so I say, “I swam.”

“You swam?! That’s good!”

“It was nice, yeah.”

She pours each of us a cup of water. Good call.

She continues, “No really, though. I don’t mean to judge you when I say this, but I’m glad you got out of the apartment and got outside. I’m glad you’re swimming again. This feels big, Dezzzy.”

It’s true. I haven’t had much of a reason to leave the apartment lately, since my work realized that they could switch nearly everyone to remote. I’m thankful I no longer have to dress in the fuckery that is business casual, but it’s been hard to find the energy to leave my place. Unless it’s to go to Annalise’s. I spend days here sometimes. It’s like we’re roommates. Sort of. Only, when she needs her space, I’m able to leave and give it to her.

“Yeah, I guess it is pretty big.” It always excites me when Annalise gets excited for me. “Look at me, venturing out in the big, wide world without my partner in crime.”

“Look at you, being all brave!”

We laugh.

“Should we have a glass of wine to celebrate?” I ask.

“God, yeah. I could use a drink after work. And you could use some hair of the dog, I’m guessing, yeah?”

I exhale in relief. Not that Annalise ever makes a big deal out of my drinking. But sometimes she likes to check in, make sure I’m okay. I don’t know what I’d say if she asked today. I’m okay, mostly.

“What’re ya thinkin’ bout?” She asks me, slurring sweetly. I’m not used to being the more sober one, but two bottles of wine later, here we are. She’s cross-legged on the floor in her bra and underwear, looking a little petulant. Like she wants to kiss me, and is irritated that I’m elsewhere.

“I’m just thinking.”

She crosses her arms. “That’s not an answer.”

I sigh, and slide off onto the couch, joining her on the floor. She crawls over to me, presses her lips to my shoulder, then rests her head there. I bring my hand to her cheek, running my thumb over the soft skin.

“I know I’m tipsy,” she says, “but you can tell me anything. You know that.”

I wrap a finger in her long hair.

“I was thinking about Evan earlier today. At the beach.”

“Oh god, Evan...” she groans.

“Do you remember how aggressive he got when he was drunk?”

“Yesssss!!”

I choose my next words carefully.

“Do you remember how I would just... Let him do things to me? I would just let him hurt me?”

“Yeah, I do,” she says quietly.

A sudden want. I want so badly. So badly to ask her why she never stopped me. Why she just let things happen to me. Why she just let me. Why did she just let me?

“Why’re you thinkin’ ‘bout that, little rose?”

“I don’t know. Just am.”

We stay there for a moment, both of us lost in thought. Until finally, I lift her face to mine and kiss her. She kisses back, then sighs, as if relieved.

I swim, hard.

When I break, my lungs are scorched and my chest heaves. I rest my hands on the surface of the water, letting the ocean hold them. When my breathing becomes more regular, I lie on my back, letting the ocean hold me. An odd urge to scream, so I do. I flip around. Put my mouth under the water. And I scream.

After, I go to shore where I lay still for a long time. Sand shifts to make room for my weight. I’m grateful for it, until the wind kicks some of it in my mouth, between my thighs. Still, I don’t move.

I was still when Annalise found me the morning after the party. I wonder if she watched me sleep for a while before waking me. Wonder if I looked like someone else in my sleep. Someone new. Wonder if she thought for a minute about abandoning me there. Wonder what would happen if she had. Wonder if she traced a finger over my cheek, my lips, before that harsh shake of my shoulders.

“Dez.” It sounded more like a hiss than like my name.

“Dez, what are you doing out here like that?”

My body felt strange to me. Like someone else had been walking around in it all night, and had just dropped it there on the couch for me to pick back up. When it came back to me, became mine again, I realized, terribly, that I was naked under the blanket. Then, that my left arm throbbed.

Annalise grabbed me by that arm, and I winced. I wrapped the red blanket around myself and she led me out of the house in such a hurry she backed into a stranger's car on the way out. I laughed, and Annalise looked at me, surprised, before driving off.

She didn't ask what happened to me, and I was thankful because I wasn't quite sure. We'd return to Evan's house again the next night for another party. I'd have a bruise on my left arm that he'd poke and laugh at. We wouldn't talk about what happened the previous night. I wouldn't talk about it for another few years. Not until I realized. Then, not until I realized I loved Annalise. I'd tell her, and she would say only, "I know, I know, I know" over and over. I'd look desperately in her eyes, hungry for something I couldn't name and didn't find.

It's morning again, and I'm watching Annalise, naked and wielding a shoe, chase a cockroach around the bedroom.

"It's too early for this shit!" she's yelling at it.

As if in agreement, it stops and stares up at her. Accepting defeat? She slams the shoe, a gaudy purple floral clog. It cracks against brown exoskeleton.

"I got it!" she says to me, "See? I can be strong and butch, too."

"Yes. You're the strongest and butchiest butch there is."

"Shut up," she says, but she's smiling.

She's happy this morning. Meanwhile, I'm in agony. I always get the worse hangovers out of the two of us. But I've grown accustomed to them.

Maybe I even like them. The way everything seems so pretty, alongside the grim reality of myself. Annalise's auburn hair. Even the cockroach. Some species have wings. They just don't fly

often because it's hard. Their body mass is too large for the wings to fully support them. They're clumsy, really. But they can fly. I've seen it. It just takes effort.

I pull one of Annalise's green skirts over my hips, knowing it'll make her even cheerier to see me wearing it. She loves when I wear her things. I find my chest binder under the bed, where I must've kicked it after I pulled it off last night. I remember the first time Annalise saw me take it off.

She giggled.

My cheeks reddened.

She noticed.

"I'm sorry! It just... It takes a lot of effort, doesn't it?"

I don't tell her that I wear mine too small. That it shouldn't take this much effort. That I shouldn't really have to bend my arm quite like that. Shouldn't have to tug on it the way that I do.

I tug on it now, reaching back between my shoulder blades, pulling down over the skin of my back. Reaching around front to tug it over my chest.

Annalise has left for work, so I'm back at the beach. After my swim, I rest atop the pink towel I stole from the hall closet. The saltwater makes the sand stick to me in clumps. Little grits that freckle my arms.

In the water, a small group of people are having a chicken fight. I watch them shove at each other. Thighs draped over shoulders. Arms locked. Caterpillars and plants often co-evolve. Some plants produce foul-smelling toxins in an effort to prevent the little creatures from munching on them. Only, some caterpillars, like the monarch caterpillar, can absorb the toxins. Even after caterpil-

lar melts away in cocoon, the toxin remains in the new butterfly body. One person falls off another's shoulders. A loud splash, then the quiet.