

SEASON

CATHOLIC TASTE

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Catholic

Taste

I remember I could smell something burning. The curtains have gone and derailed themselves, which they always do for being leaden with guilt. I swat them when I wake up with bitterness, to be here, to be sentient at the crack of sparrow’s as they say. And beside me not her shape but this tepid depression—not icy like I can guess it will inevitably be, not quite the molten lack from when she first decided she could no longer share a hovel with me. In her own words, a hovel. The shrine we’d erected and cumulatively filled with lavender smelling bric-a-brac. I’d always been fond of florid ceramics and candles whose burning could garland an otherwise musty space with the illusion of fresh produce. Fill a modest apartment with the kinds of smells you’d expect of a place on the Riviera, replete with topiaries and hired help. I also liked things thrifted for their personality. ‘Statement pieces’ I would call them in my head. Never out loud. Just as I’d find them, brushing them in the shop, using livid fantasy to get a feel for what our lives might be like together—a water witch divining possible springs amidst unforgiving tundras. Could this lampshade bring more than a rose tint to a naked bulb—could it solve decades of psychological blind spots with its tender nightly service? They say a good painting can change your life, instilling by habit some new directive, a spiritual renewal through gradual curated exposure. Such edicts, in my opinion, had built this place up from its original threadbare listing to a temple of discarded romance languages.

Hovel. I would hate her forever.

I let the curtain dangle a bit—one ring suiciding off the pole, leaving its siblings with the burden of carrying on. I want a cigarette but as I reach for them I can hear her voice in my head telling me I’ll set us both alight while we sleep. But I’m not sleeping and I’ve already been set alight. So I reach for them and bump an old comb of hers. It’s something I bought for her. And in the buying it was tacitly agreed, as an object, it was never to be used. Its hulking dimensions

sit somewhere outside practicality in uncanny realms, brassy and beautiful but if put to the scalp for a rigorous untangling potentially lethal. Pretty, and vicious. I love it. Thus my reason for buying it for her. In the moment she seemed to mirror my affection for it, and I remember having almost teary palpitations watching her pet it like a small animal. Her excitement was my excitement. But if she meant even half of what she said then her excitement was anything but. Pity. Pity for a crone and her collectibles in this dusty pail of strange and forgotten things. Myself included.

I light up and sit up and exhale bluish smoke across a sideways inch of sunlight that’s cut my legs off at the knee. And when it’s time to put it out I drop my butt in a cold tea on the other bedside, and I let my fingers brush the supreme delicacy of this cup—a set that I had coveted for so long through the window of a boutique store between home and work, a set that had looked at me with as much longing as I had it. Until, like a righteous white woman of means but no womb perusing catalogues of refugee children, I had burst into the shop and emotionally charged the elderly clerk with wrapping them up so I could call them mine. The cup is pink, almost pinkly translucent as I imagine my organs might look if I squeezed them out of me, extricating their membranes from their bulkier functionalities—untangling and refining their divine aesthetics. With one hand resting on this cup and the other fitted snugly against my belly I picture a conversation, one soft centre relaying all the secrets of softness to this mimicking hardness, and all the soft it aspires to be. Almost, almost.

Maybe we should’ve got a puppy, I think to myself. The morning ages around me and I remain in timeless prisms. Auras of silence, charmed emissions from my little ornamental friends. When I finally get out of bed I will put on my kimono. There’s simply no other way to get from bed to kitchen with one’s dignity intact.

The kitchen is another small triumph for me and when I come out into it feeling the cool from the slightly ajar door—I’ve locked the screen—there’s autumnal exaltation tickling me where the kimono splits down my leg, from thigh to ankle. I might be fastidious but I’m no prude. I have my cigarette and lighter with me and as I grind coffee fresh, letting the machine’s turgid song burst my otherwise languid bubble with industrial cacophony, I light another. I imagine there’s someone sitting at the nook behind me waiting for me to fill the pot. Maybe her. I go to do so and realise I haven’t boiled any water. So I do this, leaving a lace of smoke through the air as I move. Deliberating whether or not to eat, I see a bird-gathering on the powerlines out there, idly scratch the counter and hone my ears to its daily greeting. Oddly harmonised this morning, I think to myself. Filling the pot. Suddenly high on the smell of coffee, which rises humidly across the bridge of my nose, dewing me. It’s wonderful. I almost forget her as I stick the plunger and feel that satisfying click that only a three-hundred-dollar specially imported French press gives. And then there’s the question of which cup I’ll use.

You’d think I’d have a favourite but I don’t. They’re all my favourites. As I open the cupboard and hover with delicious reservation, letting my eyes sink into my gilded collection, I’m thanking god and forgetting her. Soothing as a burn held under cold

water for the recommended ten to fifteen minutes. And I’m reaching out, with everything in me, finding there’s more to these trinkets than their prettiness, which as their custodian I already know well, feeling them giving back to my fingertips with sopping plushness. We bring each other flushed faces and flooded basements. My leg is almost quivering with it when I take the blue and gold-leaf, a number not bought as a set but acquired singly through a network of bespoke ceramicists in the area. I have connections. I still have my cigarette and it stings my eyes as I give the cup a two-hands cuddle. It’s roughing me through the kimono, catching my nipples and giving shivers. Its undying devotion to me resounds like gangbusters and I have to stop myself. At this rate we won’t even make it to the bedroom. And I do need coffee.

I add cream. But not before my latest indulgence—honey. You might think this strange, honey in the coffee. But when you frequent a local farmers market, insinuating single-origin goods where there’d normally be something crude and unquestionably carcinogenic is actually the moral thing to do. And here in this moment stirring honeyed-creamed coffee with a swish in my kimono, I feel very moral.

Forgetting her, forgetting her.

I pull the cards. I've been trying not to first thing in the morning, because when she left it was all I'd ever do, manically throw spreads, reading with skewed urgency for any doubling up, suturing patterns from noise, grabbing at glitches as winks and nods from The Other Side—anything that might replace her. Not even wanting her back—decidedly not in the cards—but maybe wanting a god-thing to fill the voided Her-shape in me now, and staunch its septic weeping. I remember the smell of burning. It's in the grain of these cards now, as I handle them. As they pass through my fingers and I stress their edges with reverent touch, halfway between the chicken-bone rattling of a wise-woman and furious pubescent jerking, my fingers unsettling tiny particles of smoke, which may or may not be in my head, and which I'm now imagining tickling my nose. I don't know why today of all mornings I'm doing this but here I am. Reaching out. My kimono is settled over the chair in aggressive symmetry.

My third cigarette smoulders in a whale-bone ashtray bought off the deep web. It lavishes my vision with pale curlicues, framing cards one two and three like dry ice in a B movie. I'm looking without looking as I settle the remaining deck and sit back, waiting, waiting, and then finally facing what's before me with the aplomb of a bloodthirsty pioneer meeting the disgruntled natives. And they are less than pleased.

There's The Lovers where they always appear. Next The Tower where it's been showing up with darkling regularity these subsequent months, tracking tragedy in brutal shorthand. And then something new. The Moon. I'm looking at the card with fatal longing.

I know its indicators, I know its energetic textures, the aromatic despair, the gestational miseries, everything watery and hidden. Between two pillars she rises, the three-faced maid, the silvered three-pronged she-devil. And in the foreground that dappled pool, from which comes crawling the enraged crab snapping its feeble claws at imaginary foes. I resume smoking. It's bitter.

When I used to give her readings she'd always request them coyly, like she didn't want them. But she would always push in that noncommittal way. And let me know through these games that she both respected my ability as a reader and feared the unknown and the potentially invasive reach of sensitive avatars—such as myself. But then perhaps, what with her last words, she always felt otherwise and was merely indulging me as a mother dotes the precocious child into monstrous self-importance. This thought stings and I throw a last card, an impulse defence. It's the Three of Swords. Vibrating with unholy coincidence. One bloody heart pierced thrice against a backdrop of nearly horizontal rain. The storm, when it was a storm, lasted days and nights. Now I'm sitting having a caffeine-nicotine breakfast in my kimono, wading through mysteries for some swaddling clarity. Sitting like typhoon survivors do in a washed out ruin. Desolate, but it's oh so quiet. I do not think I will love again. And these cards seem to drive this home like it's my new mantra. A bitter resolve. I light a fourth cigarette.

I remember everything. The cards sometimes work as a salve for the venom, a magnetic pulley to draw what lingers out of my system, the heavier metals, the worst of it—but there’s always a little left over from these purgative spreads, and those lingering germs make new batches of horror and grief overnight. As black mould in shitty rentals. As the kinds of cold no woollen can possibly insulate from. On both fronts, Wellington knows.

I remember coming home and finding that she had gone. But knowing before entering she’d be gone. That the house would be empty, except of course for all our trinkets, which in separation became my trinkets, and which might’ve always been solely mine—despite the intentions with which they were collected. Pearls on a string to bind us. I’d have been better off purchasing rope. I remember smelling burning before crossing the street. I remember smelling something burning a block away, and thinking with my hands clenching the wheel that coming round the bend I’d see not a house, just charred remains, just some gutted catacomb still smoking with Pompeii peace—littered with petrified forms. But it was all of this and also not.

Once inside everything foretold by the barren windows in their dusky dread-filled blinking was confirmed. She was nowhere. Every room had her stink but not her. I’m thinking about this now as I reshuffle the cards wanting some other confirmation, inwardly turning away from my fresh pull. Asking the unseen for something more, something better. Like, why did I smell burning? I remember running to the stove once my initial shock subsided and hot-wet streaked my face with benumbed automation. The thing to do. But everything in our little kitchen and its thrifty dressage was cold, unlit, every range flipped to powerless. And so I’d stood there in the middle of our kitchen, which was now solely my kitchen, reaching out with all my senses for the charring thing filling the air with putrid but invisible smoke.

My hands pass over the cards and pull at random, cleaving to the god-organ in me and hoping it guides me true, with the minutiae of muscle and tendon and nervous ganglions, channelling what it can. I flip the card. And there I am.

The Devil.

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