

Itsuke

I woke up this morning coming out of dreams that left the feeling of unwanted hands lingering on my body, like sweet syrup dried on my skin sticking my arm hair flat, matted on the soft body it grew from. I sat in the old, baggy underwear I slept in, on the edge of my bed for forty-eight minutes, rubbing the tips of my fingers together nervously and trying to see if I could hear my heartbeat. I walk downstairs to make breakfast.

Cooking food without burning it is a skill I still haven't grasped. It mostly happens because I can't keep my mind clear enough to remember what I'm doing. I always burn food thinking about everything except my food. This time, I burn my eggs thinking of Itsuke. Itsuke is a close friend. I don't know how fair it is to describe romantic partners as close friends, but this is what I call him in my head because for now, it makes the most sense to me.

The way my eggs move on the plate makes my stomach hurt. I cover my burnt eggs in ketchup and choke them down quickly before they get cold and more disgusting.

The first time Itsuke slept at my house, I spent more time watching him sleep than I did sleeping. I was interested but had convinced myself not to get involved with him then, apart from being friends, because I knew his emotional state was too permeable, caught in transition. He was a little like wet paint then. I also wanted very little to be touched in any capacity then -- still too sensitive. I was in the process of building a much-needed emotional wall for myself, but the foundation hadn't quite set, still just wet cement, so even the most impersonal touch was a tornado.

Itsuke never touched me. During any previous point in my life, I might have been offended or felt insecure but now, that was all I wanted to have to handle. It's strange how specific types of interactions you used to think would hurt you, and certain types of people who you once felt isolated around can become the small things you need the most.

Itsuke never touched me, but he found strange ways to attach himself to me. Sometimes when I came home, I would find him sitting on my porch, looking up with a shy and slightly

embarrassed smile that ,I-can't-admit-I-felt-lonely-and-didn't want-to-go-anywhere-else-so-let's-pretend-like-I'm-here-to-cheer-you-up kind of look. I would open the door and we would both walk in, get something to drink, and continue on as if we both lived there. Sometimes cooking meals together, sometimes working in separate rooms. Every so often he would come find me at work or a coffee shop to give me small gifts: a four leaf clover, a cookie from the bakery he worked at. He only did this with me because he knew it was something I always wanted -- a friend to feel romantic with, who didn't want anything more than someone to be near.

He was the type of man who was known, admired, and probably miserable. I didn't like him six years ago, when we first met. I didn't like that he knew how powerful he was and that he was comfortable with it. I didn't like his type of kindness, because I didn't think it was real.

As I got to know him better, I began to wonder, maybe he only expressed himself the way he did because he had never known non-obligatory care closely enough for it to grow inside him, and on some subconscious level in his being, he was aware of this, and this knowledge had begun digging the deepest holes in the most unseen parts of him.

Itsuke's presence was almost too much for me, and I think he was aware of how he made me feel, so he knew to be gentle, and he knew how. I didn't want to touch him. I didn't want to hear his secrets. I didn't want him to trust me, because I didn't want to feel obligated to trust him.

I didn't want to look deeply into his eyes to see the tiniest speck of the deepest part of his soul. I wanted to continue falling into his background while he fell into mine. I wanted to sit in a silent room with him, and maybe I would be reading a book, and maybe he would be writing a song, and I would be able to feel what I felt with the company of his presence without the interruption of expectation.

I couldn't tell him, though. The thought of telling him this felt more vulnerable saying this to him than almost anything. Somehow, what I wanted from him felt much more intimate. There was

no distraction of sexual attraction, emotional affirmation, creative, personal, or career-oriented validation; I just wanted to have the sense of him next to me, and this felt so much more personal.

Halfway through that first night, Itsuke started moving in his sleep — twitching and jerking, breathing unsteadily and whimpering. I shook his body to wake him, and asked what his dream had been about. Looking at me, tears collecting on top of puffs of skin under his eyes, he told me.

“You’re very strange to me,” He said. “Like a ghost. Not quite, though. Ghosts are more sure of themselves than you are, I think. You don’t drift away by choice; you just keep getting lost. You keep walking down the street, daydreaming. Before you know it, you find yourself at a corner you don’t recognize. I know it looks scary and dangerous, but it’s not. It’s really just an incredibly well-kept secret.

It’s a back entrance to the best place you could ever go. Even though you suspect this to be the truth, you’re already running in the opposite direction. And before you know it, you’ve already reached a place which doesn’t even exist. Not really, at least. You want someone --not necessarily me, but someone -- to come and get you, but it’s too difficult. Don’t you see how difficult you’ve made it? Because you can’t figure out where you are. There’s too much going on. It’s too crowded where you are.” His voice strained with urgency as he finished. Tears fell sideways across his face, and he turned his head over on the pillow and fell back asleep.

I looked down to find the skin on my arms covered in stains. I didn’t know where they were from or what they were — I couldn’t even tell what color the stains were. I went into the bathroom and took off my clothes. The stains were everywhere. I softly touch one with my finger, and quickly pulled back. They felt familiar. They felt just like Itsuke’s words. No, that doesn’t make sense, just a frightened and irrational thought. But there was no other obvious source.

I turned the sink on, rotating both faucet handles as much as I could, and started scrubbing my arms in the sink using a bar of soap and my hands. They wouldn’t come off. I scrubbed harder -- nothing. I turned steaming water on and stepped into the shower. I scrubbed every part of my skin

with a wet rag, but the results weren't any different. I couldn't hear anything over my manic heartbeat. Nothing was working.

When we ran out of hot water, I was still scrubbing. Kneeling in the bathtub, I started to scratch. Maybe they would peel off. What else could I do? I kept scratching. My skin was hot and stinging as ice cold water fell onto fresh scratch marks just deep enough for some of them to start to bleed. The stains hadn't decrease in size or severity; all that had changed was that now the stains were disrupted by scratch marks.

I finally gave up. I had to. I had my own skin stuck under my fingernails, I wasn't getting anywhere. When I put my clothes back on, the fabric clung to the open wounds; I wanted to scream. I walked back into the room and lied down again, falling asleep next to Itsuke, defeated, with skin covered in scratch marks and rubbed raw; My skin was shiny and sticky and covered in tiny red dots where my nails broke through to the surface of some of my blood vessels.

I accidentally let out a whimper loud enough to wake up Itsuke. Rubbing his eyes he turned to me. When he saw my face, I swear his eyes almost took over his entire head.

"What happened?!" He reached to grab me and hesitated mid-motion, slamming his hand down palm-flat on the bed, directly in front of me.