

Tanks at the Zoo

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As the great writer Bernard Malamud demonstrates, stories are best told during a break of routine. Here I sit in the Bronson dining hall, sitting as I always sit, the sun setting on a warm autumn day. My puffy black jacket is zipped up, in part because I'm cold and in part because I'd feel vulnerable otherwise. My hands rest on the table in front of me grasping fork and knife. I have earplugs in, taking loud sounds and conforming them to a single hyper buzz. My right leg shakes up and down. I watch her stand again.

Until this moment, I hadn't had anything to eat. I'd just been gazing at a woman existing in the animal habitat around her. Her name? I had no idea. She was the most interesting and beautiful person in the room.

Stand.

Up.

Stand. Up. Zac.

Go. Meet. Her.

I can't.

I drink some water, instead. It's 4/5th tap water and 1/5th Dasani Sparkling Berry. I bet it's bad for me, but at least it gets me to drink more water.

I watch her return with a plate of salad. Later, french fries. These are full, towering plates of food. She eats these over the course of two or three hours. Every so often, she rises, and much like her towering plates, she holds her head high while approaching the buffet area. This woman walks with such grace that one would expect servants to appear beside her, rolling out a golden carpet. Her eyes, almond-shaped and brown, beam forward without acknowledging anyone. Her shoulder-length hair bobs with her gait.

My curiosity never wanders too far with her in the room. I could sit for hours sneaking looks, with no single glance offering any information. Her way of life is hidden deeply in her unreadable face, her constant solitude, and her earbuds. Her fashion is perhaps the most curious thing. She blends in with a yellow sweatshirt and grey pants. Normal, one would think, until they see her striking boots. They are jet black and blocky: Boots of warfare. They are designed to trample enemies and send them into mass graves filled with screaming allies.

The people around us are conversing at their tables. I can understand them easily. They are driven by social desires, the same desires that eat at me through dinners like this. We all want to be

accepted. We want people to care about who we are and what we're doing in this world. As for this woman, I wonder who accepts her. Does she accept herself?

I observe myself in the environment she has created. Her essence, in any environment, with any clothes, changes the entire image. A boot can become a tank; a dining room a zoo.

I'm so deep inside my thoughts that my personality feels at least three feet back from my face, which is chewing some shredded beef. I take some time to enjoy the food and the people around me. They all seem happy, sitting in brown chairs at brown tables eating brown dinners with their friends. Not one of them has a pure life. Every one of them has something wrong with them. They've all faced some unknown trauma begging to be shoveled up. The woman, I want to know how she got that way. Who did those things to her? Who fucked her up? Maybe we aren't so different. I shovel more food into my mouth.

This mysterious woman does not recognize me—I could introduce myself to her and be a completely different person. She remains seated as I waver. I could eat my plate clean and return to my room and curse myself for not meeting her that night, just like all the nights I'd seen her in the dining room this past week. Why introduce myself now? Do I not enjoy filling in the blanks, immersing myself in the mystery of her beauty? Why ruin a perfect person with a swing at romance? I feel like giving up.

She stands once more. I watch myself as if on a jumbotron. I pick up my cup because I guess I need more water. I turn the corner and she has cornered the salad bar. I fill up my water and she is still there. And I'm next to her, silent. She does not notice me; I'm nothing but another animal in the zoo. Her earbud stares at me from her sculpture-like profile, lodged there like an untouched artifact. I'm scared to make her remove it. I shift my weight. Her beauty is overwhelming me, and she's just getting a fucking salad.

I reach into her aura and poke her yellow sweater where her shoulder should be. She turns, and seeing my touch is not an accident, removes her earbuds. I remove my earplugs. Cafeteria noise fills the room and we are awake, two anxious humans staring at each other at the salad bar. From the jumbotron in my head, I command a smile and slide forward into myself. "Hey," I offer, flying high in her eyes, "I wanted to say, I think your boots are amazing."

Expressionless, she looks down at her boots and, in a surprisingly soft and warm tone, she responds, "Yeah? You should get them."

"Oh, you think I'd look good in them?"

"Well, they are great. I just have been walking around in them for a month or so trying to, you know..." The language barrier closes her lips as she glances back at me.

"Break them in?"

"Yeah," She trails off, looking in the distance, escaping somewhere for a moment.

"What's your name by the way?"

"An."

“Nice to meet you, my name is Zac. I’ve seen you around here a bit, do you live here?”

“No, I live in Towers, but come here to eat.”

“Yeah, I can understand why. You can get tons of food.” We look at her salad nearly spilling over her plate and both laugh. I watch as her expression transitions to a full, glimmering smile. Not in my entire life have I ever caused such a beautiful phenomenon to occur. I capture the moment in my mind. We pause.

“Well, it was nice meeting you,” I say as I begin towards the barking and howling mass.

“Nice meeting you, too.”

I throw the rest of my food away and beeline to my dorm room, thinking.

Àn. So that’s her name, all along. Àn. Àn. ÀN!

I want to cry or give myself a high-five. I just did something that no other version of me could do. I beat routine.

I unlock my dorm room and flip the closet light on, since the overhead light makes my eyes hurt. I take my shoes off with either foot. I put my earplugs back in and turn on my white noise machine. I put my phone in my drawer and wrap myself in my covers, in part because I’m cold and in part because I feel vulnerable. The jumbotron plays back her smile.

But only her smile appears. And then her nose. And then one beautiful eye. It’s as if Picasso is assembling the image of her in my mind, piece by piece. To have her eyes pointed at me, interacting with me, jostles my mind so much that I forget her entire face. Perhaps I focused too hard on the social interaction as it happened. I lost the cover to the puzzle I just opened.

Her jawline appears, faceless. Then a single full eyebrow. I’m not sure what I can offer her. I could be her friend and help her practice English, but I’m not sure she wants that. And talking to introverts can be somewhat difficult. I just want to stop thinking about it so much and go with the flow next time we cross paths. But the flow will almost certainly be that she is wearing earbuds again and it might be awkward to say hi. But I’ll try. Because she seems cool. And I’d really like to see her smiling face again, every part of it.

As the night pushes forward, I stare into complete darkness and map out ten thousand scenarios with Àn. I’m scared to rewrite the rule I’ve set in my mind that beautiful women don’t want to talk to me. This rule has been reinforced for at least eight years running.

It started in middle school. I’m sitting in a performance next to a family friend, a popular girl named Marissa. You know she’s popular because she’s pretty and has a loud laugh. So, I’m looking around, seeing my classmates talking to each other, and notice that throughout the whole practice and the real performance that Marissa barely says a word to me. We have one short conversation about a teacher we think is strange, and that’s it. The rest of the time, she stares towards the popular guys who are sitting a couple rows ahead of us. They’re fighting and making jokes to get her attention. She doesn’t look at me again. No “Hey, Zac, what’s going on? Did you see the…” or anything like that.

Later that week, I get a lunch table and call Marissa and some friends over, but they wave me off. No surprise there. I sit for a while in silence with a classmate who I know happens to get social skills therapy from my mother. As he bites into his mother's homemade sandwich, I turn to him and say, "I feel degraded." I don't know what a good friendship is or how to earn it. And I sure as hell don't know how to keep a beautiful girl's attention.

Since then, I've learned how to make close friends with just about anybody, but romance is still an uphill battle. It's become pattern of going for emotionally unavailable women that reject me and then turning around to reject the emotionally available ones. Rejection has added up like a summation equation that ends with me in my room at night thinking about my loneliness way too often. For Àn to accept me with her smile, that changes things. God, I hope it changes things.

Àn is still a mystery to me. She is an elegant woman who walks in her blocky black boots around the Bronson dining room getting mile-high plates of food. But to me, it's as if she's an angel blending in with perfect camouflage and commanding tanks around a zoo of wild animals. She simply exists while everything and everyone changes around her.

I have a strange feeling I'll look at the mirror in a few months wearing my puffy black jacket and find myself gazing at a different person altogether.