

Ouroboros

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Some things have changed and some things haven't. Jean's way with the world has always been an ungainly grapple. Approaching forty, he thinks it's probably time to accept it as a constant.

When he used to paint, there was always something a little ugly to it, something distinctly *Jean* in the way the paint sat on the canvas, the way the colours blended together. His music, too, has crooked edges, a thing that he has to rip out of himself, a writhing mass that has to be smeared into existence. Every way he takes up space hovers just that side of incorrect.

When Jane had first brought it up, he had protested: yet he's at the party anyway, with a dinky glass of champagne and an expensive shirt. All of the guests are well-groomed, connoisseurs of art and elegant socialites. He imagines striking up a conversation with one of them. *Lovely weather we've been having. Say, do your clothes make you feel strange in your skin?*

Years ago, he would have begged for someone to tell him he was real, that he wasn't fading away. *Can you see me? Am I still here?* Only, the thought of asking Jane those questions is absurd. And he hasn't got anyone else, really, after everything. So it's starting to feel like a permanent state. *Can you see me? Am I still here? Does anyone know?*

Grant might. Sometimes he pictures it: picking up the phone, calling him, and maybe it rings a few times before the line is picked up. Maybe it's his voice, tinny and distant but unmistakable. *Jean?* Grant might say, and Jean would aim for casual and smooth, *yeah, it's me*, and it would be like nothing has changed and they're still seventeen, crammed onto a single bed, leaning on each other's guitars with their knees pressed together.

For Grant, this kind of scene is practically a natural habitat. Jean can almost hear his easy laughter, the ghost of that endearing wit that always found its rightful place in whichever conversation it lent itself to. But there's no superior half of their duo here to upstage him in charming the noble masses. Grant is a couple of thousand miles away: probably shearing sheep or something equally homely.

It's strange. As little as ten years ago, the distance would have driven them both mad. But it's nothing compared to what now sleeps between them, toothy and black.

Grant, who was always so selective, smooth and cool as a pane of enamel. He could choose or not choose to be someone, to have existed somewhere. He could erase the past through reformation, shed the skin of fame so easily that he might as well be a man without lines, insoluble, a pastel watercolour of a person. Then there's Jean, nothing if not jagged, lingering in the doorway of life with stubborn commitment.

"You're eating your own tail." Jane had informed him once, probably not long after he'd first shown her *No More*, the lyrics barbed and blood red. It made her go still and silent, every muscle coiled, like a rabbit sensing danger.

So, he bakes bread. He smokes less. He wanders in and out of their apartment and stops at the entrance to talk to every poor wretch who fancies having a conversation with him. Jane disapproves of the habit. He drinks some. She disapproves of that, too.

In the evenings, he stands by their sprawling bay window and watches the horizon bruise deeply, then recede, until it's just him, the impenetrable black sky, and the drooping orange tail of his cigarette. He gazes across the city like a princess in an ivory tower, wondering if Grant can see the stars from Berham Park. ("Course I can," the imaginary Grant usually answers. "It's the country, there's loads.") Bloody Grant. Can't even spare a single lousy star for the rest of them.

Jane appears by his side and grasps his arm, her knuckles squeezed white. She's resplendent tonight, her loveliness marred only by the crease between her eyebrows, which usually means, get ready, there's trouble, or maybe, get ready, you're in trouble. Both, if he's lucky.

"You're standing in the corner alone," she says crisply, reaching to fix his collar. "It's like you want people to think you're insane. Also, I just saw Grant."

"*Grant?*" It comes out louder, more frantic than he intended, causing a nearby couple to glance nervously in their direction. "But he hates New York." Even he can hear how weak it is. How flimsy it sounds over the sudden, crazed lurch of his heart.

Jane narrows her eyes at him, the silvery shimmer of her makeup catching the light like a wave. "This isn't exactly underground. There are a lot of important people here. And it's not as if he'd tell you. You two barely-"

"You don't need to remind me!" It seems suddenly, painfully obvious. Of *course*, Grant is here. It was ridiculous to believe that he wouldn't be. He always has the upper hand. Never mind that he lives in a different country, or that he hasn't put out so much as a single since 1968.

He can tell where Grant is in a room just by how people cluster around him, pink-cheeked and reverent. It used to make him adopt a suave demeanour, bat his eyes and say, *Carey Grant, so nice to meet you*. Now he watches where the worshippers congregate, then beelines in the opposite direction, vigilant for snatches of Grant's laughter and glimpses of his dark hair.

It almost works. He gets cornered by a fat, booming businessman. He's left nodding furiously at his blathering, shifting his weight from foot to foot, until someone touches his shoulder, lightly, like you would a sleeping animal.

"Jean?" Grant says, voice small, and Jean hates him. For faltering, for being here, for not even telling him that he was going to be in the country, and he knows that's unfair but still. Still, he turns on his heel and walks blindly through the nearest doorway.

It's a hall. There are no lights on, no people mingling. His blood is thundering so violently that it almost hurts. He speeds up because he can hear Grant's footsteps and he has to get rid of him, there's no other choice now.

Dimly, he is embarrassed for both of them, grown men, practically running down this dark corridor, Grant almost breathing down the back of his neck. He's saying Jean's name over and over in a horrible pleading tone, while Jean jiggles the knob of every forthcoming door, hoping for a closet, a bathroom, an escape. There are no connecting passageways to turn into, and Jean realises with sudden, sinking horror that the hallway must be built in some kind of circle. They're back exactly where they began, a sliver of light creeping from the doorframe, the distant tinkle of music and laughter audible again. Short of a desperate break for the window, there's nothing for it.

He turns around, taking in Grant, who is wide-eyed, a little uncertain. "Always such a class act," Jean hisses. "Does it look like I want to talk to you? For God's sake, can you just leave me *alone*." Then, before he can stop it: "We all know how good you are at it, anyway."

Something close to hurt flashes across Grant's face before it turns quickly into palpable anger as he steps closer. "I'm good at it? You're the one who moved to *America* just to get away from me." The lines beside his eyes deepen as he sets his jaw.

In the summer of '65, they were just starting to make it big. They'd spent a weekend at the seaside, where the white sand had stuck to their skin and their scalps for weeks afterwards. For a moment, he imagines he can still see some of it dusting Grant's hairline. A halo, making him boyish again.

"Why'd you follow me down here, if that's how it is?" He wants a cigarette desperately but his shaking hands would give him away. He settles for crossing his arms.

Grant looks at him, momentarily impassive, then softens. "Jeanie."

"Don't call me that." His chest aches.

"Alright. Jean. You hardly ever answer my calls. I just..." *I just wanted to see you.*

Grant holds his gaze. Maybe they have been eating each other's tails for years, for an eternity. Maybe there is a point where they could begin again. City skylines and distant countrysides and two kids on a beach somewhere, years ago.

Jean closes his eyes against it. "The two of us," he says. Whispers it like a confession, trying to smooth its bitter edges. "We really thought it would be that easy."

Grant gives him a slow smile, the one which had long since been the prelude to music, love, and misery. "Now we know, at least."

"At least," Jean echoes, and there in the dark, it sounds soft, almost fated.