

Lovely as the Day is Long

There's a deep, stagnant sort of sunlight that rears its toothy head near the tail end of June. It burns hotter than coals and scorches everything in sight, sends even the softest asphalt curling, turning its once gently shifting surface into long, flaking strips, peeling like the split, translucent skin of old women. This cowardly sun hides in the cracks between June and July, sends rays like thieves to pocket even the smallest bits of moisture left shrinking under garden fences or clutching the sides of potholes. It's the sort of sun that makes you wonder if that photosynthesis crap you learned in school really knew its p's and q's, hearing your crow's feet caw while you squint at the lunar landscape that was once your lawn. This is the kind of sun that tears, burrows, burns, and, if you angle a pocket mirror just right, the kind that allows no living thing on the scaling sidewalk a fighting chance.

Evangeline grinned as another ant shriveled like hot tinfoil under her deadly laser, crumbling in on itself until only a smoking black speck remained. Beside her, a pair of slightly scuffed but otherwise pristine Mary Jane's bubbled in the sunlight, acting as sole companion to her meaningless enjoyment, watching patiently as her pristinely painted nails clicked open and close the lipstick case turned weapon of slight destruction.

Latest foe defeated, Evangeline awkwardly rearranged her limbs to more comfortably accommodate the church clothes she still wore, as well as the slowly melting concrete beneath her floral butt. Auburn hair flowing freely beneath her wide, white sunhat, green eyes sparkling with perfect contentment, Evangeline grinned, all but combusting under the harsh light of noon as she spotted another foolish vassal wandering haplessly through her domain. Not bothering to suppress a girlish giggle escaping her bejeweled throat, Evangeline clicked open her lipstick case once again, checked her face for any discrepancies, then angled the device towards its prey, unfolding the sun's power upon the insect's concave flesh like Aphrodite upon Galatea.

Giggling and grinning and glowing, Evangeline wasn't aware that her silent sanctuary had been compromised, that another creature was plodding peacefully down the sidewalk, skin cracking like dry ceramic.

Another ant added to the heaping funeral pyre, Evangeline's childishly resplendent smile slowly drew sour as a thick, caustic scent filled the static air, turning her stomach and furrowing her brow. Without urgency, the girl wondered for a moment what such a stench could indicate until, with great, sweeping horror, she suddenly noticed no more subjects scurried through her idyllic barrow! Yes, every ant seemed to have dropped dead or unilaterally scarpered back to their den, and Evangeline burst into tears.

Polished head in polished hands, she wept bitterly, a sudden storm of misery billowing through her head and heart, rendering her utterly and completely at the mercy of this cruel, unfeeling world.

"Hey, you alright?"

Evangeline's head shot up, crystalline eyes swimming with tears. Above her, a man in his late 40's stood, looking concerned. In one sinewy hand he held a massive pole attached to a big beige backpack, in the other a pair of heavy, black gloves. His face was pinched, lined, and greying, his nose scabbed and red, his hair lank, his lips stained a permanent nicotine brown, and his smell astronomically unbearable. Evangeline puckered slightly and quickly took to her feet before he could offer a filthy hand, tears still flowing down her pale face.

"No!" She wailed, miserable and furious. "I'm not! I was doing fine out here, all by myself, and now look!" One thin, plaintive hand flung itself towards the now-empty executioners block, renewing in herself a fresh bout of gut-heaving sobs.

Spitting out a wad of tobacco, the man took a hesitant step forward, offering confused, vibrato words of comfort. "Hey! Hey, Evangeline, right? It's Michael Beam, you see? No? Well, calm down, calm down, nothing's the matter." Holding up one hand as though to shield himself from the glare of her swampy heaving, he continued trying to cease her inconsolable pain through a gale of snot-sucking tears. "It's alright!" He said, chapped voice crawling painfully through the thin, lifeless air; he carefully indicated the pole, his own weapon of destruction. "I just finished up here, that's all."

Tears ebbing, Evangeline looked over. "What?" she asked with soggy confusion, shapely brows twisted into what can only be described as a waterlogged snarl.

"I'm pest control." He explained, wiping a sheen of sweat from his forehead and once again indicating his tools, particularly the backpack which sported a massive logo of a tap-dancing cockroach in a top hat. "I've been gassing this whole street, just finished this block. What on earth's wrong?"

For a solid second nothing but the sun spoke, then Evangeline burst into tears with revitalizing misery, falling to the ground like a crushed tulip. "Y-you! You did this! H-ho-how c-could you-u!" And with that, as though dictated by some cosmic maestro, her wailing suddenly grew in both volume and pitch, making Michael suddenly extremely aware he was a grown man standing listlessly over a sobbing teenager. Wiping the sweat from his eyes, sun still beating a marimba through his skull, he crouched down like one might to a child and tried to explain that all he had done was his job, but the girl only continued to cry until eventually, Michael felt a prick of irritation stir his heart and he stood with a painful crick of the joints.

"Enough of this already! For God's sake Evangeline, you're almost 18! What's this about?"

"You killed the ants!" She choked between sobs. "I was having fun, and you ruined it! *And another thing!*" She added, suddenly flaring with irritation, bounding to her dainty, stocking-ed feet. "Don't you talk to me that way! I'll make sure my dad hears about this— don't you think I won't! You really think you can talk to me like that? How dare you!"

Evangeline smirked, fully aware she hit a chord even in the depths of despair. Like smog, a sudden, sickening heat rose in Michael's chest, one he was both embarrassed by and obedient of. He might not work for Max anymore, but he wasn't willing to test others' claims regarding the man's knack for vengeance. Sighing irritably, thinking of all the work he had yet to do, he spit another short, dark stream of chew on the road, ignored the girl's disgusted gag, and began rooting around his front pocket until he found a small piece of paper, the kind used to stick in doors when people weren't home. Evangeline ignored his efforts, instead plopped back down on the blistering sidewalk to demurely wipe away tears as though she hadn't been sobbing chin-up moments earlier.

"Here." Michael spat politely, extending his hand as low as possible without bending his back; in one creased, calloused, tobacco-stained palm lay a small, origami dove. Evangeline stopped sniffing.

"Don't mention anything to Mr. Richard's alright?" Michael said gently as the child slowly regained control. "Just don't mention me to your dad. I did my job and gave you a bird, I guess, that's all, that's it." Without any outward sign the pungent man's speech had been faithfully registered, she stared, utterly captivated, at the small creature, as though this thing contained more vain entertainment than anything the world could muster. Quick as a grease fire a thin, shapely hand shot out, aiming to snatch the paper doll away, but Michael suddenly pulled his own knotted hand back. "Listen." He said before she could launch into another tirade. "I'll give this to you if you never mention me to your dad, alright? Okay?"

It was a long shot that such a prissy teenager with a thousand better things to do might actually take him up on his offer, but Evangeline only tossed her product-laden hair and briskly stood up, snatching her shoes on the way. "Sure, whatever." And with that Michael nervously presented the dove and watched her grab it up and flounce off with one elegant turn, leaving him to his sweating, stinking business in merciful silence. He didn't know that halfway home, the dove suddenly lost its shine and found itself lying unceremoniously in the street, accompanied into oblivion by the sweet sound of Evangeline's idle humming.

"You awful girl!" Michael's voice boomed, echoing through the church foyer one sunny, stagnant morning. *"You awful, awful girl!"*

Evangeline looked over her gaggle of supporters to see Michael of all people striding angrily through a chirping throng of church goers towards an exponentially bewildered Evangeline, completely disregarding the gasping, affronted glares from both the scattered patrons as well as Evangeline herself. Still smelling distinctly of iodine and tobacco, he broke through her papery wall of teenagers to jab one, long, threatening finger into the princess' powdered face. "I'll have you know I've been getting hounded your father's lackeys for the past

week!” he shouted, wasting no time. “All this tripe I keep finding in the mail—you and that wretched, spoiled father of yours might well have cost me my livelihood!”

Lip-sticked mouth gaping, Evangeline watched silently, unexpectedly finding herself at a complete loss. Never before had she seen someone do something so publicly ridiculous, so *embarrassing*. Brain short circuiting slightly, Evangeline’s friends and associates clustered about her like flies to a fresh carcass, opening and closing their mouths like gasping fish as Michael fumed on the sidelines, simmering with barely contained rage, clearly waiting for Evangeline to say something. She remained unimaginatively silent.

“Fine.” Michael said shortly after a long moment, poison dripping from every breath. Without hesitation, he took another step forward into the pod of twittering boys and girls and, without so much as a warning, dislodged such a large wad of chew it bounced up and stained some of their shoes and ankles. Shrieking, they dispersed.

“You said you wouldn’t say anything.” Michael spat, tobacco juice dribbling down his chin. “All I did was my job that someone paid me to do and tried to help a screaming girl pro bono along the way. You know how your father is, you knew this would happen. You lied to me you conceited, ugly little girl.”

“All I did was tell him what happened! It’s not my fault! And anyway you—”

“No! God knows I’m used to kowtowing to your father, but I draw the line at you.” Michael’s lined, weather-beaten face twisted into a grimace, and for a shining, resplendently weary moment, every year he’d ever lived burned through his face as clear and harsh as the sun itself. “You’re going to fix this.” He said measuredly, aware he was spitting poison in the face of a teenager to a horrified, cowardly audience. “You’re going to stay true to your word and you’re going to fix this.”

Flicking one minute strand of hair from her face, the goddess sublime flashed a haughty glare at her assailant and sized him up thusly, extremely aware of all the snaking stares she was receiving from many a polished member of the congregation.

“Please.” She said, regaining her sense of direction. “Why should I? I told my dad what I remember happening, and whatever alright? I don’t owe you anything and besides, you’re causing a scene.”

“Don’t think you’re the only one with power here.” Michael spat, face contorting with quiet rage. “You might have your precious, stupid father under your thumb, and he might hold all of *my* cards, but he doesn’t hold all of yours. Don’t think you’re so immune.”

Suddenly, Michael’s face took on a slightly sardonic quality, as though he was trying to smile cruelly but his lips were too lived-in to properly accomplish the task. “Yeah, don’t think you’re so immune Ms. Richard’s. I know these people too,” one hand gestured flippantly towards the hordes of clean-cut, pious men and women whispering in the rafters. “I know what

it's like." Michael said quietly, the stench of soggy tobacco causing Evangeline to heave slightly. "The Reverend's no fool, he's on my side, and if the Reverend's on my side, then this church is, and if you're against me, then so are they." From the man's sneering mouth came a long, sticky stream of tobacco, bubbling down his chin and staining the collar of an already yellowed shirt.

"Seems to me," he continued, stretching his prematurely lined, prickly face into a taut grin, showing a few too many browning teeth, "that you're not willing to give all that up." In one long, languid motion he leaned over and shot a stream of tobacco juice onto the carpet, watery blue eyes never straying from Evangeline's. His grin seemed to grow wider, pulled sagging skin over boney features like putty over a wire frame.

Evangeline sniffed, turned away. Her community looked back. Breathing flat, hot air in a church foyer, feeling people kick agitatedly against one another like too many horses in a stable, sunlight soaking into the walls, she felt a bead of sweat work its way down the side of her nose, felt her lips suddenly chap underneath all that lipstick.

Michael laughed, a rough, raspy sound that rattled all the way through his sandpaper throat and shook the dust from his clicking joints. "You awful thing, thank you. Haven't felt this good in years."