



*"We should go out sometime, maybe get some sushi."*

JENN SCOTT

---

NARRATIVE TIME

A day passed, and another day.<sup>1</sup> ■

---

<sup>1</sup> Morning coffee. The girl with the green scarf wrapped too tightly around her head drinks her coffee black. She wears the green scarf because she wakes each morning looking superficially like Einstein: electric hair, shock of white skin, dilated pupils. She wakes looking like a replica of herself in a grainy black and white photograph with sharp distinctions of shade; like a cardboard cutout in a store window, hovering against a pane of glass while children knock their fists against her two-dimensional knees.

In the cafe, she drinks her coffee black. She reads, glancing up between sentences, breaks of words, letters. She wonders why it's necessary, these breaks, such space. It is too easy to escape into the emptiness between things. She imagines herself crouched into the fat hollow of an *O*; imagines her back pressed against the rounded stomach of a *D* as if it is the glistening hood of a car, her pale chest beckoning the sun. She stares at Murray Avenue in the bright morning light, towards the dark interior of the as-yet unopened liquor store. She stares at the crazy woman, ostrich neck straining, letting the dog out of the illegally parked car while its owner leans into the cafe's granite

---

counter, purchases a pound of whole bean Sumatra. Beside him, Stripper Lawyer with his chest like Ken's holds the tiny handle of an espresso cup before bending over the girl with the green scarf's notes. He exclaims over her penmanship: "Such tiny, beautiful writing! Look at the way you fit two written lines inside each printed line. You should get that analyzed. Then again, maybe you shouldn't!" He laughs with closed lips, tilts his head back to suggest something uproariously funny.

"I'll refrain," the girl with the green scarf says.

"Back when I was in law school, stripping to pay my way through, I would have killed for writing like that!"

Behind Stripper Lawyer, the woman from the real estate office is suddenly interrupting, nudging the shoulder of Stripper Lawyer who has abandoned his espresso cup to tug at his slick ponytail. As if in response, the woman from the real estate office smooths her own hair, so forcibly blonde the girl in the green scarf waits for it to scatter like dandelion, abandon her scalp in a single gentle explosion. Brother Floyd, the crazed black man with his red bow tie and too-small suit, yells to the barista above the whirl of foam materializing. "I need money for deodorant! For the smell, Danielle, for the smell!"

The woman who wears the winter coat in summer heat sits in the girl with the green scarf's favorite seat (third seat from the door, closest to the counter and its pitchers of free tap water with swollen floating lemons). The woman who wears the winter coat in summer heat circles her hands around the warm comfort of a coffee cup, stares for hours at nothing in particular. Her winter coat resembles the floatation device found beneath the seat of a plane. She alternates her palms between the comfort of her coffee cup and

---

the squatness of her purse. Occasionally, lifting her hands from the sweaty brown leather, she glances at the girl with the green scarf triumphantly and this glance says plainly: *I am sitting in your seat.*

In the morning, coffee. The girl with the green scarf reads sentences twice, three times over. She flips to see how many pages are left in the chapter (thirteen), listens politely as people stop to speak to her. They bend over her table, her book, her coffee growing ever cooler. On the sound system, the *Braveheart* soundtrack begins anew.

Stripper Lawyer smooths the slickness of his ponytail, tells the girl with the green scarf about his experience with a psychic last week. "She said I had thirteen year old son! I thought she was crazy, until I remembered the woman from college who told me she'd had an abortion."

"Whoa," the girl with the green scarf forces herself to say.

"I'm serious," Stripper Lawyer says.

"Me, too," the girl with the green scarf says. "Whoa."

"We should go out sometime, maybe get some sushi."

"We should, except I'm really busy lately."

Stripper Lawyer swipes a renegade hair. "Aren't you unemployed?"

The woman who wears the turban slides too closely in the seat beside the girl with the green scarf. Her breath smells intensely of garlic. "Please, come over tonight! I make a lovely dish with fava beans!"

The girl with the green scarf says, "It's fall. Fava beans have been out of season for months, now."

The woman who wears the turban says, "I'm very handy with beets. Also, with potatoes. I make a very delicious apple and barley salad."

---

"I have a hard time, digesting grain."

"I've seen you," the woman who wears the turban says. "You eat far too much sugar. You have a pallor, like you're not getting enough B12."

The Philosophy PhD candidate with the yellow teeth says, "I'll mark these seventy papers today if it kills me. It will probably kill me. I stand a better chance against polio. Not sure what you people in the English Department are doing over there. These students can't construct sentences to save their lives. What have you been teaching them, besides nothing?"

"I am no longer actually, specifically, part of the English Department. Your insults no longer apply to me."

"And anyway, why are you reading that book? His ideas are vague, useless." The Philosophy PhD candidate's arms flutter up and away in a demonstration of uselessness.

The woman from Library Science drinks her third mocha. Her hair explodes like a nuclear burst above her head. She says, "I can't fight a two-front war. I can't fight a war at home and a war at work. I can't have a husband like that and a boss like this." She clacks a spoon inside her glass before standing to emphasize her point. "Do you understand?" she asks the girl with the green scarf, pounding the table to emphasize her words. "I can't have a husband like that and a boss like this!"

The insane mumbling man at the table beside them, drawing maps across an endless supply of napkins, stops drawing mid-line to say, "Woman! Stop complaining and get your body out of my face!"

Coffee. Cream and then sugar, raw, poured any way but carefully from the dispenser. The girl with the green scarf needs comfort, cream's fat rounding

---

coffee's sharpness to curves. She has found solace in the most startling allies: Leeza and the never-ending investigation into murder and rape. Montel and his obsession with paternity testing. ("This is ninety-nine percent accurate and admissible in a court of law.") The news. ("Traffic and weather together.") Sports with the sportscaster her gay friend had sex with.

"Terrible, absolutely terrible in bed!" her friend said. "Beer cans scattered everywhere, and the entire house smelled like piss!"

Now, when the sportscaster recounts football news, it all sounds curiously sexual: *going deep, tight end, penetration in the back field*. The girl with the green scarf believes the sportscaster squints his left eye at her. He knows that she knows that he's poor in bed, drinks too much alcohol. He knows that she knows the length of his afternoons, all that exhausted endlessness. She knows that he has sat across from a lover, wanting only to touch a strand of his hair, an earlobe. He has thought, mistakenly, that an earlobe could be enough. His lover has said to him, "You're too fragile," and the sportscaster slept with him anyway, knowing the comfort of this single night was something he might draw out like taffy. She considers telling his face projected in the television screen, his neck gawking, the pimple on his chin, his tie slightly askew: nights like that are akin to glass, too delicate and easy to break, moments containing nothing but the clarity of themselves.

The woman who wears the turban drinks tea and says, "Personally, I think it's easier to abstain from sex. Think of the trauma the vagina undergoes every time!"

The girl with the green scarf says, "No, please, I'd rather not."

Stripper Lawyer drinks espresso, stands laughing with the woman from

---

the real estate office. His laugh is too loud, the laugh of a crow. This morning, his ponytail is drawn back so tightly it gives his face the impression of a facelift.

"He has a line for everyone," the woman who wears the turban says, with a nod towards Stripper Lawyer. "He had a line for me, if you can believe it."

"He constantly wants to have sex," the woman from Library Science says.

"Your boss?" the girl with the green scarf asks.

"No," the woman from Library Science says. "My husband."

At home, the girl with the green scarf watches the newscaster bumble the Steelers' coverage. She suspects that he, too, eats peanut butter out of the jar for dinner because this is all he can muster. He, too, calls his mother who tells him, "I tell you all the time, not to call during *Dallas*. I can't talk during *Dallas*."

"*Dallas* ended years ago. It was a dream."

"I'm watching it now. Only one season was a dream. The rest was real. So don't call me."

The girl with the green scarf suspects the sportscaster's mother has heard him crying over the phone and asked, "And what is it you expect me to do?"

Morning coffee. The girl with the green scarf counts six pages until the end of the novel. She imagines what happens in the white spaces, those decided narrative pauses. She imagines the protagonist bored. She imagines her, watching too much television, eating too many donuts without brushing her teeth afterwards. Running the vacuum, taking baths with salts, visualizing success. The girl with the green scarf understands no one cares what happens to the protagonist in the white spaces. She understands that she is jealous of her, trapped inside her narrative with its convenient elision of time, its smoothing over of days and weeks and months to the decisive moment,

---

the place where the action unfolds.

"Lucky bitch!" the girl with the green scarf says to no one in particular, perhaps to the woman from Library Science, perhaps to Brother Floyd, perhaps to the woman who wears the turban whose turban she helps fold on the café's frozen patio with the tables and chairs piled high for winter. They fold the turban corner to corner, corner to corner, until it is a square the woman who wears the turban can shove inside her bag. The girl with the green scarf is not sure why they have folded the turban; the woman who wears the turban's shaved head stares up at her, demanding to be covered. There is snow.

The woman who wears the turban says, "Please don't say the word *bitch*. No woman deserves to be called a bitch."

Or maybe the girl with the green scarf says these words to Stripper Lawyer, standing beside her in a new suit with a dizzying array of pinstripes, a newspaper tucked into his armpit: *Lucky bitch!*

"Did you strip for that suit?" she asks, and is trying to make a joke. "Or litigate for it?"

"You used to be so attractive, even with the scarf. Now what? Too many books?"

The girl with the green scarf tries to discern: he is making a joke, he is not making a joke. Stripper lawyer steps closer, touches a finger to the hollow, dark spaces beneath her eyes that have come to resemble craters on a distant moon: first one, and then the other. She does not have the energy to tell him no, don't do that.

"Oh," she says, and it occurs to her: how long ago was it, that she might have said something different? How long ago was it, when she might have



---

chiseled out the sharpness of a response, hurled it at him like a discus?

Standing above the table third from the door, closest to the counter, Stripper Lawyer touches her lips. He smoothes their roughness with fingers that smell curiously of sardines and she believes, in this strange, startling moment, that he will kiss her. She lifts her chin towards him. Behind them, the *Braveheart* soundtrack crashes out a shrill crescendo. She imagines Stripper Lawyer pressing her against his ironed slacks and suit jacket and kissing her, right inside the café like a scene from some golden Hollywood movie. Some terrible and distant part of herself wills this. Some small and quivering part of her thinks, *please*.

"Hmm," he says, turning from her, before choosing instead espresso, the steady and dependable print of this morning's paper.