1984

The Escape Artist

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"You can really... You can really interpret that many ways can't you? I really think it's something we shouldn't overlook."

"Maybe." Dr. W—leans back comfortably in the depths of the leather chair, fingers intertwined, head cocked and listening intently. He looks pleased. I've just made, in therapy, what my mother would have called: A step in the right direction. My last statement contained beautiful catharsis.

"Why do you want to be that? Why do you think?"

"What else would I be?"

"Anything! A doctor, a lawyer-- I don't think it's necessary to bring out the test results, do you?"

"No."

"Think of what you could change, how you could help people."

"I keep trying to tell you-- I can't reform anything. I don't feel a need to reform what I don't understand. As for helping people-- I don't know anyone who needs help more than I do."

"That's why you're here!" Both the doctor's voice, and mine began to elevate at this point.

"No, that is not why I'm here. I'm here because people are afraid of me. I'm here for your imaginary diagnosis, and my real problems. I'm here because nobody can rationalize like they used to."

"Your mother tells me you're a writer."

"I write."

"Well-- that's something you want to be, isn't it?"

"No."

"Why do you write then?" I decided not to answer. It was a bad question. Nobody likes bad questions. "Does writing make you happy?"

"No."

"Are you happy?"

"No."

"The conversation was growing monotonous. "I'm loveless. How could I write otherwise? How could I be happy?"

"People. People could make you happy."

"I'm going to tell you something. Something I've never said before. I think-- I honestly think that I gave something up. A long time ago. Something that was crucial to being with people. I gave up something to see. How I see."

"Can you get it back?"

"If I could, I wouldn't write like I do. Wouldn't think like I do. Anyway-- it wouldn't last."

"You said loveless before. I don't think you're loveless. I've spoken with your parents and they love you very much. Enough to bring you here."

"This place is love?"

"What about them? What about your parents?"

"They've always given me the best things."

"Do you resent their wealth?"

"Let me tell you a little story. I was once sitting around with this girl I knew. It was strange because, knowing how I felt about her, what was to follow seemed completely absurd. I felt as though she were the only person in the world who would understand me-- because she had no desire whatsoever to listen. Regardless, I told her things that up until then I could never have verbalized.
After minutes of listening to me, her face remained placid—unmoved. She said: "Poor __________. I really feel for you. With a swimming pool, and two staircases, and a refrigerator for when the mood hits you. Who knows suffering better than you?"

After she had gone, I went back to the spot where we had originally had our conversation. I thought she was right, but not in the way that she had in mind. Who better to suffer than the person who has everything? Everything but the essentials.

That night, I wandered into my mother's famous boudoir. She was sitting before her vast assortment of cosmetics, preparing for the evening ahead. Each time I've entered her room, I've thought the same thing. How well the room suits her. How well aware she is of the fact.

Photographers once came to do a layout of the room for a magazine. They asked her to be a part of the spread, because, though being complete strangers, they sensed a flaw in the decor without her. They were right.

Her reflection stands before every mirror without her presence. The hundreds of beautiful glass decanters, in unison, sing her name. It is the coldest room in the house—made of ice. It needs no one to be. It is. Everything within the room lives in testimony of the life that money gives to it. It laughs, and dares anyone to disparage its integrity. One cannot. It is the truest statement of life without depth. Of things which live without man.

I sat down on the bed, careful not to muss the spread because I know how such things affect her. I observe her before her magnificent lighted mirror. Hundreds of bulbs reflecting off flawless glass. She doesn't move— but glides. Her wrist dips into a drawer and readies an eyelash. A small tube exposes smooth white glue, applied to the prepared edge. This ritual is performed twice. The glue stings her eye slightly, and a tear plops down upon the glass.

When she is finished with the bottles and jars, she is perfection. It is then that I feel the strongest for her. Because she feels stunning, her smile is more than sweet. Angelic. She looks so demure. Though I already know what to expect, I go to her anyway. I am under her spell, like the rest of the world, irrevocable. For all of the bad that I've ever seen, her beauty is greater— it overcomes. I rush to her, to touch her, and tell her what she means. I am full of love for my mother, and from her smile, it is love that she seems to want. The minute I touch her she frowns. The charm disappears, and all that is left is shame at my audacity. I am defiling her and the room. I don't belong within either of them. You don't sit on the couch, you don't touch the glass, you don't embrace this woman.

I followed her downstairs to where my father was waiting in the foyer. His face appeared angry and apathetic. He placed a stole about her shoulders. The fur turned to ice. They're so good at going through the motions— infallible. He opens doors, rises when she rises, does obediently. She allows him the right to be her escort. It is a right. He takes her to the right places, and wherever they go, heads turn in acknowledgement that he is in the company of a right-looking woman.

One may scorn the two for many things, I realize. But perhaps the most incredible thing about the two is their truth. There is no pretense within my home. No love attempting to exist. Nothing to argue over. This is a business relationship, both parties mutually benefiting. For this you must respect them. You must respect what they've sold— respect their courage.
After my parents left, I decided to go back upstairs. I heard noise coming from Brock Nathan’s room, and went in to check. Brock Nathan was my oldest brother. He committed suicide when he was twenty-five years old. The noise coming from his room was the television. Stephen, my next oldest brother, was watching it. He always watched television in Brock Nathan’s room because he had the best T.V.

Stephen watches T.V. all the time, always in Brock Nathan’s room. Also, Stephen barely ever gets dressed. He stays in his pajamas all day long. I once asked why doesn’t he just take the T.V. into his own room, and he said that he couldn’t. He said he could never lift anything from the room. He said that all he could do was watch all of Brock Nathan’s things, and make sure that they didn’t disappear.

I sat down on the bed and watched T.V. with Stephen for a while. There was nothing much on though, so Stephen suggested that we watch a tape.

‘Which one?’ I said.

‘Harold and Maude.’ We’ve seen that one about a hundred times. When we first got a video machine, Brock Nathan ran out and bought that tape. He said that he saw it in Ann Arbor, and knew that we’d love it. We did. It’s the best movie I’ve ever seen. It was Brock Nathan’s favorite too.

‘I don’t really feel like watching a tape now, Stephen,’ I said. ‘I feel like talking.’ I could tell that that was okay with Stephen. Stephen is very intelligent, and nice to talk to. He’s got a good sense of humor, and incenses my father with how he stays in his pajamas all day. He doesn’t try to, though. At one time Stephen was my father’s favorite, you could tell. After Brock Nathan died, Stephen remained at Michigan-- like nothing ever happened. His grade point never faltered. 4.0. Then, at the very beginning of his junior year, he left school without an explanation. My father tried his best to convince him to go back, but he wouldn’t. Stephen was supposed to take over my father’s law practice, when he retired, but not now. My father doesn’t talk to him much. I don’t think it bothers Stephen. He just watches television, and Brock Nathan’s things.

‘Stephen, I’m going to be: The Greatest Escape Artist In The World,’ I said.

‘Second greatest. Somebody beat you to it,’ he said.

He meant Brock Nathan. ‘No,’ I said, ‘not like that. I mean, if something’s bad or sad, I’m going to know about it, and escape before it can catch me.’

‘What if you’re not fast enough?’

‘It won’t understand how to keep me, and it will have to let me go.’

‘You’re too egotistical.’

‘Maybe.’ Then Stephen got a look on his face which partly scared me, and partly made me listen more carefully.

‘Do you know what’s real?’ he said.

‘No.’

‘This house, and the thing in Dad which enabled him to get it.’

‘That’s why I’m going to be: The Greatest Escape Artist In The World.’

‘For how long?’

‘How long are we going to watch Brock Nathan’s things?’ I said.

‘Until I am moved.’

‘I’m waiting until I’m moved too.’ I said. We both sat silently for a long time afterwards. The sounds from Brock Nathan’s antique clock permeated the room-- demanding action.
"I can't help but think," Stephen said, "that it's us that should be doing the moving."

"Maybe," I echoed.

Dr. W— remained still, as he had been throughout my entire story. He stared raptly at my face for several minutes, showing no trace of thought or emotion.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Look, I think we really got something accomplished today. Would you—would you be willing to come in next week, same time?"