

A Stolen Moment

The voice splits the air like the first ring of a fire alarm. I can't hear what it says—only the anger, the kind that comes from the lips of privilege. Eren lets go of my collar, my tie still caught under my jacket, his eyes sharing the shell-shocked realization I'm sure mine hold. The coolness of the tile behind my back returns, my moment of warmth lost.

Another set of hands is around my neck now, rougher, older. Mr. Bozkurt is attached to them, my field of view so wide and removed I can barely recognize him. The hands shove me into the side of the stall. My limp neck lets my head rattle against the plastic. One hand leaves, the rest of the figure turning with it, blocking a hazy and blurred view of Eren.

Other teachers and students flood in, and I lose sound. The back of my neck is slick. The fluorescent light reams faces into a mural of shifting halos. My eyes are fighting to take it in, to record the scene, but I allow them to surrender—no, order them to. My lips still hold the feeling of him, the firmness of his ceding to the softness of mine, the parting of them and heat shared between us. But that too fades, and I allow all else to go with it.

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I awaken on a sofa in the lobby. My eyes blink into a reality that now seems harsh and biting. Acerbic. Mrs. Eloise holds a wet cloth to my forehead and cradles my neck. She coos to me, reminding me to take it easy. I took a bad fall, you see. Vice Principal Plinthe nods, his stare confirming the story.

I see our covenant: secrecy for silence. My eyes sting, and I close them again. I feel the starchiness of my shirt, still itching apart from the sodden patch below the nape of my neck. My heart reaches down for fear and anxiety to guide it, but it finds nothing but a pulsing turning emptiness that has drawn in all the petty things that used to reside next to them.

When Eren's parents arrive, I close my eyes. I cannot trust them. I have taken a bad fall, of course. When mine arrive, I am no more inclined toward sight, but I grant it the floor through McWhorter/Stolen/2

slitted lids while the necessitation of my removal from the dance—so helpfully clear and laid out by the staff—spews from the mouths of my elders. A name is being said, my name, I realize, by a voice, my mother's voice, I realize.

“Are you okay, honey?”

I heave my gaze up to hers. I'm not sure I understand the question. I have taken a bad fall, this much is true. But I have no other reason to feel distress. They have taken care of me—I needed it, of course, because I have taken a bad fall. I am not crying. The pain is only so much, unworthy of such a bad fall, even.

I hear the pitiful snuffle as it escapes my mouth.

“I... I just took a bad fall.”

I am surprised to feel her arms around me, my head held delicately at her chest. It is an odd feeling.

“My poor boy...” she whispers. “Let's get you home.”

I am waddled to the minivan, where a seatbelt is clamped across my chest. We are moving. In the city. No. Now the highway. Streetlights blink over us. I took a bad fall, I tell them. I took a bad... I took a... I, I took.

I...

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I am not sure who bathed me, but I am clean. I am clean. The stickiness at the back of my neck has been replaced with gauzy cloth. My skin tingles across the underside of the sheets, every piece of flesh bare, a reminder of my corporeality. Hours have passed as I stared at the pattern of constellations. I have felt every second of them.

My phone chimes at my bedside. Eren. My body writhes into movement so my hands can swipe through to the message. *Can I come up?* He's never asked to do that. I've always snuck out, hopped into the tree across from my window, and slid down. I am the one who joins him. *Please* is typed, my fingers gliding to the send button, my eyes watching as it forms a bubble and pushes out into the log.

It is not long before a tap comes at my window, ginger, hesitant. I click open the latch, and he wriggles in. I close it behind him and find him staring at me. His eyes trace me, apologetic. I feel them as they travel, heat slackening my taut muscles underneath his rapture. Every piece of witness makes my body feel more my own. Finally, they move up across my clavicle, drift across my neck, brush at my cheek—meet at my eyes. Behind them I see the blankness of a missing speech, prepared and forgotten. I pull close to him.

“I want to—can we... dance?” I ask.

He swallows, nodding, trying to return to me from where his mind has taken him. I wrap my palms up under his shirt, nestling them under his shoulder blades, the banality of my request turning to an embrace. His confession, the words blurry, bubbles at my memory. The way it had overtaken him, as if it were the last thing he ever needed to say.

We sway, and now my lips are on his, as I remembered them, as I needed them, as the raging thing inside of me that fills the emptiness demands. He pulls away, offering me a twirl, and my feet catch on the air as I spin, stepping through to him. And we are floating.