

## The Caterpillar

The bomb was stored in lieu of pages 12 to 183. When he set it off, the book burst and the shop quietly collapsed. The air was thin and the smoke ran fast. When the truck came, they found the shop owner's limbs gone. That is how he came to be known as the Caterpillar.

The nurse gave him a bag of morphine and the doctor gave him a headache.

"I need my smokes," he pleaded.

"I'm upping his dosage," the doctor replied to the nurse.

The nurse administered a pack of reds by his side which lay there on his bed agonizingly lame. The Caterpillar wept because he loved her and because the morphine was bad.

He died in a couple years. He knew this because he was there. He thought this because he was there. Alice told him this last Tuesday.

"You're going to die in a couple years."

"I expect as much. Will it be horrible?"

"Of course it will be. Death is always horrible," she huffed, inspecting the ruffles on her dress.

"And you know this how?" he asked, his interest begrudgingly piqued. Thanklessly, she elected not to respond.

What struck the Caterpillar about Alice was his own distaste for her. Her prime characteristic was her ability to spark within him deep-seated confusion and unbearable apathy. She depressed, bored, and torpidified him into a helpless stupor whenever she clocked into the shop. She was always late. He remembered picking her apart, one by one. First the toes, then the fingers. There would be a lot of blood. He dreamt about her often.

What struck Alice about the Caterpillar is that she knew she would die with him.

The Caterpillar died of a heart attack, as most males in the States do. It was a clear morning when he convulsed on his carpet for three minutes. The coroner found the back of his legs chafed. The Caterpillar thought he was having a panic attack for the first thirty seconds, hated the carpet. He realized within second forty that he was having a heart attack. The next two minutes and twenty seconds were free for him to think about anything his poor heart desired. He chose Alice.

2:20

Alice was in New York sticking her head in an oven.

"The oven, really?" her husband inquired from the doorway. He was flushed from his walk up the stairs.

Muffled, Alice shoed him to go away, her hand flapping behind her.

Inside the metal box: “It’s not tired because most people are too scared to kill themselves in the first place. An act of rebellion to the point of death is immune to critique because of its bravery. The only bravery I’ve ever witnessed was from the Caterpillar. Do you remember him? It was like lightning, some sight of God, I don’t know. He told me, after the explosion he told me he saved a book from his shop. I got it for him, and regretted what I did because it was predictable. I’ve lived my life scared to death of pastiche, waiting for some kind of emergence and nothing came. You know I never came with you? That doesn’t matter. The little death, they call it. Actually, could you come over?”

She beckoned by a hook of her index finger.

Her husband sidestepped to her and grabbed her hand. He brushed her hair to the side, admired how it strung around her neck like a golden chain. He thought about their kids eating cafeteria food a few blocks down, and flicked the lighter.

1:49

“Can’t flip pages.”

“Obviously,” she said, tracing the dusty cover.

“Don’t tease me, just light me one.” The Caterpillar peered up at her face under a furrowed brow.

She stuck a cigarette in her lips and brought the lighter up. The Caterpillar screeched and lunged for her. He could not reach her. She took a drag and placed it carefully in his foaming mouth.

“Did you know that fire can taste bad?” she smiled. “I’m sorry, I just needed to make sure it lit. I hope you understand that my motivations weren’t malicious.”

He took a drag unsuccessful. The cigarette had gone out.

“Do you need me to warm it again?” Alice asked, her brow now taking a turn at the furrow.

“No.”

She relit the end. He lunged again and moved a couple inches on his bed. She placed his sheets back onto him.

“I always think your motivations are malicious,” he said when he tired.

“They sometimes are,” she said, looking down.

“If it’s between sometimes and always, you’re a coward,” the Caterpillar looked sideways at her fingers. They were lacquered blue.

She joined him in inspecting her fingers. She hoped he wouldn’t notice the dirt under the paint. In an effort to distract him, she told him in a low voice she wasn’t a coward, why would a brave soul like him want a coward next to his bed. He didn’t hear her. He noticed the dirt. He was immediately distracted when the nurse walked by behind her. She winked at him, and he phantom waved. He needed to leave immediately.

“I need to leave immediately,” he said.

“I brought you your book. If you stay, I will read to you.”

“I will leave and you will do the same, just somewhere different.”

She felt sand in her lungs. Gathering herself:

“On the Eiffel Tower?”

“There.”

“In a gondola?”

“Too.”

“Beach?”

He stared at her.

“Don’t bring up the

:57

Beach: Years ago he was there and he had fingers—all of them, attached to the correct appendages. 54 seconds left. He had all the correct appendages, he was full. It walked and it 49 it walked and it talked. It was fully functional, a perfect remodel of a Frankensteinian make. He swam time swam time swam time he swam away, swam away, pumped his arms, arms he owned, carried, felt in it, felt the sea wrap around him tight, never let him go, he never let go and that’s why he had to lose his arms legs his grip always strained on his chest it beat he beat it out of himself wanted to stop beating heat stop beating, his knuckles his knuckles he missed his knuckles missed Aliceherf ingernails 32 It was under the sun that he 29 saw 28 that the race 27 26 He got a letter that day from my father he called him son, I need your help my father wrote him when he had limbs before he blew up the bomb burped burst. My father did not write to me, he wouldn’t dare when I told him what he dared to do he would not speak to me, said he would dare do whatever he pleased 27 He swam, he sank that letter turned it pulp 28 saw the race 19 opened his eyes to salt and algae saw amoeba see it go saw it went I raced with Jonathan and I won but he was right behind me I was faster than him I was the race goes not to 11 I learned to swim too late 9 sinko [REDACTED] ie765 He felt the carpet underneath his legs looked to the side up at her

You’re very young, you know.