

Riana Odin

The Smiler

*“But now there’s wrinkles around my baby’s eyes
And she cries herself to sleep at night”*

- Bruce Springsteen

Ted was a smiler. He grinned at the blare of his alarm, at the sun peeking through his tartan curtains, and while he brushed his Dentine Gum teeth. There was even a smirk present while he carefully twisted a windsor knot and pushed it up underneath his perfectly smooth-shaven Adam’s apple. Most of all, he smiled as he leaned down to kiss my still-in-bed forehead, before heading off to the fluorescent lights and cubicles where he, no doubt, beamed at colleagues and clients and janitorial staff.

I rise just before noon and try to mimic his delighted expression, but the muscles in my face are confused. My lips contort in a lopsided grimace, unsure what to do with the foreign request from my brain.

I look mean.

I look discontented when I brush my teeth, frowning into the mirror at the lines - so many lines - that were not there just a year ago. I grimace at the buttoning of my jeans, now suddenly so tight, and I relish the

thought of removing them later. I choose my bulkiest sweater and make sure that the hole that has formed in my chest is completely covered. It appears slightly larger than the week before, and much larger than when I first noticed it.

Some months ago, I had felt a peculiar breeze below my left collar bone. The not-yet-thawed air of a New York Spring seemed to blow through me. Upon closer examination, I saw that an empty space had formed where my ribs should be. It was about the size of a quarter at the time. I stuck a finger inside and could reach straight through until my fingernail poked out the other end. The skin around it was scarlet, angry, and raw.

I told no one, as it was easy to conceal then and only affected me at certain parts of the day: at night, in the cold, and when I would usually remove my clothes to sleep pressed up against Ted's warm bare skin. I refused to let on to Ted that something might be wrong with me, that I might dim his smile with the news of my deformity. I made sure we only had sex in the pure blackness of night, with curtains drawn to block out the haze of street lamps. I took every precaution.

But once I am dressed I can see Ted again, radiant as he unknowingly kisses my forehead. Unknowing and yet so sure- absolutely confident that *this* girl deserves the height of his affections.

I take a key from the hook and close the apartment door, leaving my vision of Ted back inside where he belongs. It was dangerous to let Ted loiter in my thoughts, that tempestuous space. He had no business following me around, especially where I was headed.

I kick a small stone as I make my way down the sidewalk. We have no set time after all. No rules in our arrangement. I let a small smile turn up the corners of my lips as I imagine how the next few hours of my afternoon will play out. But as I deal the rock one final blow and turn off into the entry of The Haven Coffee

Shop, I stop cold at the sight of him. It is Ted, again. He leans coolly against the store counter, awaiting my arrival. I shake my head and slam my eyes closed, but when I open them again he has not evaporated like I had hoped. The hole in my chest thumps and heaves with a pulsating ache, and I feel without looking that it has grown. The perimeter of skin sizzles until it is charred black into a melancholy dust that falls away. I try to collect myself.

I get in line and try not to make eye contact. He waits in line beside me as I order an iced Americano in the shop where he believes I will be writing all day, because I have told him so. I do sit, for a little while at least, and pull out the soft, grey notebook he gave me the night he asked me to move in.

He sits patiently as I fumble through words on a page, waiting for my inevitable genius to emerge. I sip furiously at my coffee, scratching my straw through the gritty, sugary depths, scraping and jabbing at the ice cubes, hoping to uncover the inspiration I lack. His earnest confidence in the work that I so frequently doubt is a diamond choker upon my neck; meant to be a glittering sign of love, but instead only suffocates.

It is time for Ted to go.

I fold limbs and bend him over and over until he is small enough to fit in my back pocket, where I tuck him away for the afternoon.

I am finally alone, strolling the floral Park Slope streets as if I have nowhere to be but in the gentle sunshine. Dogs on leather leashes pass me and I spend the next three blocks amusing myself at the notion of being a rich lady's dog. I think of the long afternoons spent lazing in the bay window of my brownstone, responsible for no one and not even myself. But my feet know the way, and I come to from my daydreams before a solid metal door and a buzzer lined with names. My fingers find 4C like all the times before.

“It’s happened again,” I say when the buzzer returns my call. I pull back the collar of my sweater and peer inside to find the hole has in fact devoured more of my chest, coming dangerously close to my left breast. I put my finger back to the buzzer and lean into it with all of my weight. There is a buzz in response then a click and the door is open.

Ted threatens to slip out of my back pocket as I bound the stairs two by two, but I shove him deep down until he is almost crushed between my hand and the seam. I don’t think of the crushing I am doing. I don’t think of his smile.

I don’t think at all as I fall, fully clothed, onto the bed. Hands grip at the hem of my jeans and I am already twisting, wrenching myself free. They are hastily tossed aside, onto a pile of another man’s clothes, and Ted slips out in the process. He unfolds and unfolds and unfolds, then ever so suddenly reinflates, like those emergency slides you see in the airplane safety videos. For a short moment I am reminded of all the travelling I did when I first moved to the city. Lately I have nowhere in mind to go and no energy to go there. I only seem to have energy here, in this apartment of unfinished oil paintings and crinkled story drafts acting as makeshift area rugs. It asks nothing of me, and expects even less. And when I leave, I always find that the hole has been taped over, if only with scotch tape. I know it will only be a temporary fix, but I chase it anyway.

But Ted does not and should not exist in this space, and now that he’s here, with us, between us, my mouth goes dry. I had forgotten to silence my phone, and now it is cracking the windshield I keep between my life there and my life here. I answer anyway.

“Hey there. Are you still at the coffee shop?” he asks.

“Yep,” I say, not wanting either side to hear my lies.

“How’s the next Great American Novel coming?”

“It’s coming.”

There is a great, lengthy pause where I have just enough time to see the water rush in under the bedroom door. Heavy, dark waters that fill the room until I have to tilt my chin up to keep my mouth exposed. They have washed my other him away and I find I am alone, naked, sitting with my back against the wall.

“I know you’re not at the coffee shop. I’m at the coffee shop. I also tried the apartment and you weren’t there either. I came home to surprise you.” Another wave surges at me and my whole head is overtaken. I breathe deeply and my lungs heave and sting. “Where are you Amelia?”

I look down at the diamond ring Ted had given me not six months ago. Had I smiled then? I can’t remember. The waves tossing overhead jostle my memory and my mind in general.

“Ted,” I say, in my smallest voice. The line goes dead. He had not waited for the excuse that we both knew I wasn’t going to make. I open my mouth and the entire sea rushes down my throat. I feel the turbulence of the waters slamming against the walls of my stomach as I run my fingers through my hair and wipe the old mascara from where it has settled under my eyelashes. I throw my tote over my shoulder and nearly run for the exit. He raises his hand in a silent, unbothered goodbye.

I make purposeful strides along the sidewalk back to our apartment. The sun has settled down behind buildings and its disappearance makes for a chilly journey, but I am hot with the fear of losing Ted.

The apartment is dark when I turn my key and push open the front door. I can make out the silhouette of Ted’s masculine jaw and long, straight nose sitting on the couch, watching a black tv screen.

“Ted!” I cry out as I hurry to his side and sink to my knees before him. I rest my head against his thighs and let my tears fall into puddles on his chinos. He does not look down at me. His hands find the knotted tie around his neck and yank until he is free of it. They move to the top button of his shirt - he always buttons the very top button - and slips it free as well. He continues like this, not saying a word and eyes glued steadfastly ahead, until he reaches the middle button. It is then that he pulls back the left side of his shirt to reveal a tiny gumball-sized hole just above his nipple. My hand flies to my mouth and from out of my own chest’s hole there seeps a timid feeling of relief. That Ted may finally know the ache that mine brings, and the subsequent desperation to fill up that space, comforts me. That even a smiler could be made to understand.

Our eyes meet and I pull my sweater up to finally reveal what I have been fighting to disguise. A big, full grin spreads so easily across my face. Ted stares at me with an emptiness in his eyes which I had never noticed before, his lips a pained, perfect line above that strong chin.

“I’ve known for a while now,” he says flatly. “You don’t hide it well. There are signs every day.” I consider this for a moment. “I thought the ring would help.”

“The ring did help. It was the exact right size to plug up the hole.”

“But then the hole grew.”

“Yes,” I say.

“So will mine grow?” he asks.

“I expect so, if you can’t find the right things to fill it. I haven’t figured that part out yet.” I had tried since the beginning to stuff the hole full and placate its desires. I bought a fox fur coat to warm it. I smoked

dime bags and sniffed at white lines to soothe it. I ran for miles each night hoping to impress it, but then it grew so much that all I could do was sleep and microwave my meals.

“And what if I don’t? What happens if the hole continues to grow and grow?”

“I suppose it will hollow you out until you are just a face.” I think of myself, already feeling like just a face bobbing through the crowds of the city, unknown to everyone around me and especially myself.

“And then?”

“And then the big emptiness of your body will win and you will be no more.” I smile at the thought.

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