

Elise

By
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The most interesting people alive are frequently the ones who live the most miserable lives. I, for example, am nobody special, but people who know me love to hear me speak. I leave them in riots of laughter by sharing stories from my everyday life. Somehow, the most miserable things always happen to me, but the way I recall them with words is “just right” for a good tale.

I’ve had a few genuinely bright moments throughout my rather grey and tragic lifetime, but I’m always plunged back into the cool shade of dark regularity during these metaphoric daytime intervals, rather like being the only passenger on a long train ride, tucked neatly into my seat, staring out a window as the train winds through a shady, sunlight forest. The thing is, the sun is out, and you can see it in patches through the leaves, but the light never quite reaches the ground in most places, it stays too high up to warm your face.

Ah, yes, I do think that “train ride,” or even “train wreck” might describe my life perfectly to an outsider. Although, I would not say that the train has wrecked quite yet, since I am very much alive, as much so, anyway, as one would need to be to be considered “living.” I have a pulse. I take in air.

I have always felt as though I am removed the world around me, encased in glass, wrapped in the steely freight train of life, riding along through the scenery and backdrops—observing snippets of everything, but touching nothing. The clackety-clack, the gentle rocking of insanity, the constant change of the world around me is almost soothing now because it is the only thing that is steady, the only thing that is real enough for me to touch.

I was born to parents that neither wanted nor expected to be parents, and I was passed around from family member to family member for as long as I can remember. My “mother” and “father” were too strung out to do much more than casually collide into one another from time to time, though I have often heard whisperings of “other” children, siblings to me, who have been lost to the world. For all facts and figures, however, I have never known another child that sprung from the reckless loins of my parents, never seen one of them with my own eyes, and I consider myself an only child.

The two people who brought me into this world named me Elise, though neither of them has the class nor the composure to listen to classical music, as far as I can tell, so I have no idea how or why they constructed such an identity for me.

When I was quite young, maybe three or four at the most, my mother let slip that she had once been enamored with a concert pianist, and hinted that this might be the source of my namesake, but when I, in my young ignorance, recited bits of what Mother had told me while my biological father was present, she hit me so hard that my mouth had to be wired shut.

It was at the hospital that day that the rest of the family decided to shoulder the burden of keeping me, so that I would not be turned loose back into my mother’s care. Frankly, she seemed relieved, and I never saw her more than a glance at a time through a hallway or at a family

reunion after they took me from her. My father didn't stick around either, but he had always had an ally cat personality to begin with, and during the short periods of time when he and Cassie decided to play house, he always managed to disappear down the maze of streets and abandoned buildings behind our apartment whenever there was work to be done at home, leaving my mother to cry and chase after him.

The first stop after removal was to my aunt and uncle's home, until my aunt's first pregnancy. After she found out she was pregnant, she decided she needed room for the new baby, and I was shuffled from place to place, in a flood of different faces, depending on who had the time and spare room for me. I'm not bitter about any of this, I'm just grateful I had somewhere to be, though I have often joked that the sorrow of being left alone so often is what changed my eyes to grey, and sucked out my color, making my flesh the ash white that it is today. I was 5 "4" by the time I was fourteen, and I've grown not an inch since then.

I left my past behind as soon as I was able to, at the age of seventeen, the moment I saw my chance. I couch surfed, lived out of homeless shelters occasionally, stayed off drugs and booze. I did everything in my power to get a high school diploma, and I found a loophole that allowed me into college. Times were tough, but I lumbered on.

All along, I've often wondered if angels were real, questioned whether or not we all have a divine purpose in life, and I arrive back each time at the conclusion that I simply don't know anything about divinity, and I reassure myself that it is not my place to question anything.

I met my angel in a charming, but run-down coffee shop, not far from the college I was attending, in between classes. I'd often spent time there, but it was the first time either I or the employees had seen him. He looked around as if looking for something he had misplaced, and then looked at me. We struck up a conversation without hesitating, while he shook off the rain, his hand boldly fingering one of my drenched, fire-infused ringlets. I was smitten instantly.

Before we could even make it to our first date, Jon called me late one night by mistake, high on sleeping pills and brandy, to tell me that he'd been diagnosed with cancer that afternoon. He was angry suddenly, telling me that he didn't know me well enough to confess such intimate things, saying flatly in a stern voice that he understood if I didn't want to see him again.

Fortunately, Jon didn't seem to remember the conversation the next day, so I joked with him that he'd simply called me and spouted random things about nothing in particular. I never mentioned to him what he'd told me. His secret, as far as I was concerned, was safe.

A month later, Jon and I moved in together. Things were picking up speed.

"C'mon, tell my future, Miss Psychic!"

"Don't be an ass, Jon."

“Hey, camper, light the friggin’ fire! You’re the one with the cards!”

Jon and I had made a nighttime ritual of playing with a deck of Tarot cards that we’d found in a corner shop by the apartment. I’d loved the gold filigree edging and nude forms that graced each one. Jon said that, if he bought them for me, I would have to make use of them so that it wasn’t a waste of money. True to word, we used them to pass the time before bed, in between lovemaking sessions. With a sigh, I passed the deck to Jon.

“You know how this works,” I said, “You have to shuffle them first so I can read them.”

He took the cards from my hand, meticulously shuffling, concentrating hard on something.

“I have cancer,” he said, still looking down, focusing entirely on his own hands.

“I know.”

His face shot upwards, staring directly into mine.

“How did you know,” he demanded.

“You told me when you called me the night before our first date.”

His face turned crimson.

“You *lied* to me!”

“How do you mean,” I asked.

Sitting the cards in front of him calmly, he exploded the moment they were safely on the carpet.

“You told me I said random shit, nothing serious, *you fucking lied to me! Oh, God! I am so fucking humiliated* right now! This whole damn time you fucking *knew!*”

He jabbed a finger at me accusingly. I felt my cheeks turn red. My jaw worked, but no sound came out. I struggled to find my voice.

“What was I supposed to do,” I gasped finally. “Did you want me to blurt it out the next day? Why even keep it from me this long?”

Rage took him. His entire demeanor twisted onto itself, contorting into a demon scowl across his face. He started to shake, and stood up. For a moment, he ran around the room in circles, jabbing the air, wringing and shaking his hands, smoothing his hair, swearing loudly. I sat fixed in my position on the floor, mouth open, astonished.

Within the space of five minutes, it was over as quickly as it had begun, and Jon situated himself, without so much as a crinkle on his brow, back into place on the floor across from me, as if nothing had happened.

“Are you going to lay them out,” he asked with a sigh, gesturing to the cards.

“Do you want to tell me what kind of cancer it is?”

“None of your damn business,” he snapped.

Placing his hand on mine, he looked at me again and, softening his voice to a dreamy purr, he licked his lips and said, “Please, just do this for me. It doesn’t matter right now; I just need some time, that’s all.”

A few moments later, we were discussing the future, caught up on euphoric bliss, erupting into peals of laughter. Giggling like school children, he and I constructed a great conspiracy together, that we would need to use my body as the table for the next layout that Jon was to perform. When we finished the foreplay with cards, we got down to the real business. His appreciation of all my quirks and imperfections made me glow from the inside out. His fingers danced through the locks of my crimson-gold hair, while his lips praised each strand. He kissed every inch of me dutifully, down to the tips of my pale, sun-scorched toes, and held me so tight that I thought I might burst.

In retrospect, I think he knew every freckle on my body intimately, as if they had aligned just right for him to trace them in little shapes all over my shoulders and hips. He was light to my dark, gold to my copper, rain to my thirsty lips. Jon and I were in domestic bliss. I’d cook for him by day, and we would dress up in fortune-teller scarves and play with a deck of tarot cards by night, dreaming of our life together. There was nothing that could be more perfect.

He ravaged me that night like he never had before, until I passed into a fervent sleep. I woke to find him gone, and he did not come home for the next three days. I was frantic. I searched all the places we had been to, all the places I thought he might be, but turned up nothing.

As night approached on the fourth day, I got a call from a strange yet familiar voice. The man on the other end of the line identified himself as Jon’s brother, said he knew all about me, and told me that Jon was dead. My mind went blank, nothing made sense.

“How did he die,” I demanded, “Was it a car wreck? When did he die?”

Silence. Hesitation. The man cleared his throat.

“He killed himself,” he responded quietly.

The floor seemed to lunge at me, the room got tight.

“I don’t understand.”

“We found him yesterday in his Jeep. He used a hunting rifle. There was nothing left of his head except his bottom jaw. It’s a mess.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“We’re going to have him cremated and sent back to Mom in Oregon,” the man continued, “You can keep anything else that you like. We aren’t going to pick up any of his things, since the two of you lived together. It’s how he would have wanted it.”

“Can I see him,” I whispered.

“They already took the body,” he replied.

“Can I see the Jeep,” I grasped.

“Why?”

“I think I just need to get some closure. Please.”

I came home alone that night, after being hit on by Jon’s brother, having viewed the grainy bits of my former lover that were scattered across his Jeep ceiling, windows, steering wheel, and everything in between. I hated life.

On the way into the bedroom, our tarot deck caught my attention. Tears formed at the corners of my eyes, and my heart started to pound. Taking the deck from the kitchen shelf, I held it for a moment, then grabbed a dinner plate and took them both to the place where Jon and I always sat to read in our bedroom, just beneath the window.

I pulled hard on the drawstring to jerk the blinds upward, so that I could see outside. The light from a street lamp was the only light in the room when I began to pull the cards from the pack, one by one, to fold them in half and set each one on fire.

I watched as the paper lit up, curled, turned black, transforming to smoldering ash beneath my fingertips on my makeshift ashtray, creating a mosaic of dark and glowing hellfire.

“Baby, I would hold hands with you in the depths of hell,” I whispered aloud in a ragged voice, “Tell me when and where, and I’ll be there.”

The smoke that rose from the mess I had made turned itself into Cheshire cat grins and handlebar mustaches in the air around my face, making it hard to breathe. I gagged and nearly vomited as the pungent acrid fumes invaded my lungs and burned my eyes, but I stared back at it valiantly, refusing to blink away the sting. I stared hard at the plate, as if it might do something unexpected. Anger welled up inside me, followed by despair and utter hopeless, helpless emptiness. As the last card burned, I felt guilty at once. I had destroyed the last thing that he had

touched, other than me. On a whim, I had incinerated the last good memory I had of him before death took him from me.

Unable to control it anymore, I wretched violently. Since I hadn't eaten for a couple days, nothing but slimy clear strands of saliva came out. I watched it pool beside my makeshift doom altar, gasping like a fish on dry land. My head swam. I stood up to open the window for some fresh air. As much as I hated the intrusion, my lungs hurt too badly for me not to make a feeble, half-assed attempt at preservation.

Dizziness knocked me into the window pane and flung me backwards against the wall beside it. I collapsed as I slid down, curling myself into a fetal position, burning my hands and face on the plate as I drew myself down and forward on the floor.

I was pulling away from the station. I could feel the old familiar sensation of steel and glass around me, rocking me to sleep. The clickety-clack was beneath me again, singing me a song. I prayed that this time the train would pick up speed, roar me through the night, fast forward me past the feelings, but I knew that was never to be the case. I rocked myself as best I could, sobbing loudly, as the slow train of my life lumbered on through my bedroom, dragging the long line of baggage behind it through the night, onward toward the bloody dawn.