

## living statues

**Y**ou see him inside the subway station and feel the way you did when you gave him a dollar and he came alive. Startled, shy and elated. He's wearing a white t-shirt and jeans cut off at the knee, white grease paint on his face and white nylons under his cut-offs. His feathered wings are slung over his shoulder. Everything else—the halo, the robes, the offering jar—must be in his backpack. His hair is the color of orange rinds and his bare arms are almost as pale as his legs. You are two steps below him on the stairs leading up. You are one step below him, on the other side of the handrail, his wings arching over your head. He pulls ahead on the last flight. In the press of tourists and sidewalk evangelists, his wings flutter—he's moved them higher and closer to his body—and maybe it's because of this folding in that you somehow lose sight of him, finding yourself alone in the crowded square.

You are there to meet some college friends, to grab dinner at one of those awful places where you choose ingredients from an ingredient bar and then watch while the cooks sauté your food on a big open griddle. You are not comfortable enough with these friends to object to this

restaurant, which is their unanimous choice. As you'd anticipated, they have better ingredient intuitions than yours: they take full advantage of all-you-can-eat while you leave plate after plate of sour-tasting stir fry in the center of the table. The bill arrives, the careful six-way splitting of costs, and then, on the way to the movies, you tell the story, again, of the time that you saw a late-night talk show host at this movie theater. It was Thanksgiving weekend, some years ago. He'd been with a man and a woman who looked just like him, and who went in the side door while he stood across the street, wearing a trench coat, waiting to be sneaked in. You tell your friends how the celebrity saw your mouth move when you whispered his name to X. He had turned then, and pulled his hat down over his face. He is very tall in real life, you tell your friends. Taller, even, than X. When you speak this name, your friends look away.

Have you heard from him? asks one—the boldest.

Not lately, you say. It has been months since you last dialed information, months since you last failed to find him. His things still turn up in odd corners of your apartment. He has gone abroad, he has gone to school—he has gone, that's the upshot of it.

The group decides on a comedy. You sit through scenes you feel you've seen before. Afterward, over ice cream, your friends paraphrase reviews that you've read, too. You used to write stories in college; they ask your opinion and then don't like it. They are medical students now, or bankers, or management consultants. You are a secretary. In matters of taste, they seem to have achieved consensus: they are pleased with anything supposedly clever. Why is it that you are not?

The conversation turns eventually to the small college from which you all graduated. There are many people here in the city who went to your school; there are parties regularly in parts of town that you don't know.

Why don't you ever come out, they say. What are you up to all the time?

One friend nudges your shoe with hers. I can't believe you still have those! she says. Remember sophomore year when everybody had those?

I don't know, you say. Call me next time.

*I will*, says the bold one, and touches you, briefly. We'll go shopping, too.

She's the one you're most anxious to get away from.

Together, like tourists, the group of you wanders through the square. Street performers are everywhere, strings of lights, balloons. Pick a card, a magician says, and extends his empty hand toward you as though fanning a deck. You whisper in a stranger's ear—you've picked the seven of diamonds. The magician shuffles your invisible card back into his deck, then pulls your card, incarnate, from his breast pocket. You have no idea how he knew—everyone who witnesses puts some kind of bill into his top hat. Throughout the plaza, crowds obscure the better acts; you stand on your toes to see them. When you finally spot a tall white pillar, you draw your friends near. Have you ever seen those people, you ask, the ones who stand very still and then come to life? They think you're talking about mimes at first, but then one of your friends who's traveled in Europe says that what you are talking about are living statues, and that these are common in Europe's major cities, these are nothing special. He tells you about the silver and gold people he saw in Florence, and now you are hoping that no one will turn around, to see your angel in his attitude of perfect anguish, waiting for someone to bring him to life.

Your friends decide against beers because someone not present is running a marathon the next morning and they are all going to watch. Come along, they say, but you shake your head no: you have to work. Call in sick, they say, and

again, you say no—though already, you’ve decided that this is what you’ll do. Not to join them along the marathon route, but to have an extra day for yourself. In the afternoon, you will come into the city, keeping below ground, as you sometimes do. You will ride the train until it floods with thin bodies cloaked in tinfoil capes. Everyone with a seat will stand so they can sit. You will watch the wrecked runners as they tear into parcels of food. The smell of bananas will fill the car, and then the fusty non-smell of energy bars. The foil capes will keep the runners warm, but in the interval while they are warming, their collective shivering will make a sound like wind chimes.

You walk toward the subway with your friends. At the top of the stairs, you stop and say, What night is this? Sunday? You deplore Sunday night television, telling them that you’re just going to pop in to a bookstore—you’ll see all of them next time, hopefully soon. A book sounds good, says one of your friends, let me come with you. But then he realizes what time it is, and that he only has five minutes until his bus, which comes but once an hour on Sundays. You smile until all of your friends are out of sight, then turn and rush back to the bricked plaza where the statue stood.

He’s still there, moved only a few feet, a little bit closer to the crowd but still outside of the streetlights. He’s standing with his hands folded in front of him, and his face is perfectly blank—disinterested, as an angel’s should be. You take a bill from your purse and move toward him, very slowly. This is the difficult part, during which you feel like the performer. You are moving and he is still; you are the object of interest.

You stop just in front of him; he does not look down. His irises are like openings in the white of his face. You marvel at his unblinking eyes and wait, while slowly, his tears begin to well. A moment later, a miracle—they spill

over, like a statue's weeping blood. You put your dollar in the offering jar.

He bends toward you, stiff like a marionette and with his eyes now fixed to yours. He parts his white hands and lifts them, gesturing to include the whole square, all of the people. He turns his palms toward the ground and draws them slowly in a circle around him, as though running his hands across the heads of children. When his hands are in front of him, outstretched and inches from you, he turns his palms up, bends his arms, and draws his open hands in toward his body. You step forward—you are close enough to remark the creases in his white lipstick, the moist pinkness of the corner of his eye. But he has frozen again, his eyes fixed beyond yours, his breath barely lifting the breast of his long robe.

You have been given what you paid for. He has even cried; it is more than you'd expected. Still, you wait. You try to stand as quietly as he is standing, the two of you become a tableau. Then you note the tearstains running down his cheeks—imperfections that you have caused.

You lay another dollar in his jar, and you hurry away as he begins to move.

You do not go far. From the top floor of a nearby bookstore, you can see the plaza clearly. You watch as, with his back to the building, he animates for each tourist who adds to his jar. They tend to approach him slowly, as though they too are unfamiliar with Europe and its living statues. You notice that he does not pull any of the other spectators toward him, and you understand that it was special, for you, that last gesture. You think of his eyes engaging yours, his expression in which there is nothing and everything.

When the bookstore closes at eleven, the crowd in the square has thinned. People have gone home, or into bars and restaurants, and from the bookstore's basement exit,

you watch as the angel packs up his things. He collapses the stool on which he's been standing and places it in his backpack along with his robe and his halo and the offering jar. Stripped down to his t-shirt, he looks anemic, eccentric, with the wings over his shoulder and his glowing white face. You are at a magazine kiosk while he is at the bank—you can see him making a deposit in the vestibule, at the ATM. You shadow him down a side street, and when he sits on a slat-wood fence, you realize that you have reached his bus stop. The buses will stop running altogether in a half hour; his is not a bus route that you know.

You crouch behind a berried shrub. On the other side of town, your new roommate will be listening to music or talking on the phone, painting her toenails in a corner of the couch. She'll be baking bread or taking a bath, reading a novel or eating a snack. She'll be sure to ask, as soon as you've hung up your jacket, whether you had a nice time and how your friends are. Her day will have been good; her day, when detailed, will have been comprised of impeccable recreations. Looking at him now, you feel relieved of all of that. He is still and separate, sitting just yards away on the rail fence. The sight of him braces you against the rest of your life.

When his bus pulls up, you board in a rush, as though you haven't been waiting there with him. He takes a seat by the window, just past the section reserved for the elderly. You sit on the other side of the aisle, in the last seat by the back door. The bus leaves the square and crosses the river. You pass row houses and stockyards, paying more attention to him. His wings are upside-down, with their arches resting on the tops of his feet and the wingtips just poking his chest. His hands lie still in his lap until, the white paint turned yellow by the bus light, his left hand rises to press the indicator strip. He walks to the front of the moving bus, is

off as soon as it stops, so that you must vault from your seat and yell “back door” in order to keep up. The bus driver refuses to release the back door, since the bus is uncrowded, and by the time you’ve accepted this and made your way off the front, the angel is half a block ahead.

He leads you to a red brick apartment building with a name painted above its glass doors: The Crystal. You are outside, on the bottom step of his stoop, feigning a smoke while he checks his mail. The mailboxes are in the foyer; you can see which one he’s opened. He passes through a second glass door into the lobby. You watch him mount the stairs, his slow ascent with the wings held toward you, hiding his face.

You wait on the stoop until someone else walks up to the building. You smile at this person, a stumble-drunk. He obliges you by holding the door. On your way in, you glance at the mailboxes. It was number 14—just one name on the box, though you can’t stop to read it—the door is still being held.

You climb the stairs you watched him climb. The numbers lead you to the back of the building. Approaching his door, your legs begin to tingle, as if they are falling asleep still in motion. The corridor is quiet and empty, no neighbors to see how clumsy you’ve become, how haggard after this long evening. You will not be able to conceal these things from him.

Not a sound comes from his apartment—no voices, no music. Standing with your ear to his door, you hear nothing at all. You think: if you knock, he will surely speak. There is no other arena in which this might happen. It could never happen in the plaza, among strangers. It could never happen in costume. You imagine him close by—eye to peephole, even—willing you to take courage. You draw back your fist, and you knock.

You hear stirrings inside, slap of feet against floor. The door opens just wide enough for his head to wedge into the open space. His skin is pink and his hair is damp. He has dark eyebrows, many freckles. But his features are set in their familiar, resigned expression—and you are comforted to find that it is his natural one.

Hello, he says.

Hello, you say.

He watches you, waiting. You speak.

I'm your neighbor, you say. It comes to you quickly. I was wondering if I could borrow an egg.

After a moment, he nods. All right.

He closes the door. You think that he's left you in the hallway, but instead there is a scraping noise as he disengages the police lock. He opens the door all the way. You step inside the apartment. It's a studio—spare, as you would have guessed. Above the open futon hang his wings, a shade whiter than the wall. The kitchen is a narrow line of appliances. He crouches before the economy-sized refrigerator; its metal shelves reverberate as he shifts items around. His face is gaunt by refrigerator-light. He returns to you with a cool brown egg. His fingertips are warm when he places the egg in your palm.

I'm sorry to bother you so late, you say. I thought I had everything.

It's fine, he says. I just got in.

Thank you, you say. I'm making a cake. I'm making it now because I just got in, too. I thought I had enough eggs and then when I didn't, it was too late to go for more.

The supermarket's open 24 hours, he says. But maybe you don't like to walk at this hour.

No, you say. Not by myself.

I'm sorry to hear that. It's too bad when women feel afraid at night.

It's only sometimes, you say. You're kind to be concerned.



You glance around his bare room. I like your apartment, you say.

He raises his eyebrows. There are no chairs, no books, no pictures in the room behind him.

I like its simplicity, you say. I'm not materialistic, either.

Well, he says. My stuff's getting here next week.

You find that you do not recognize his face when his mouth is moving.

Did you just move in? you ask. I thought I'd seen you before.

He shrugs. I was traveling last fall, my things have been in storage—you know.

Oh, you say. Were you in Florence?

He smiles a little. I was a lot of places, he says. What kind of cake are you making?

You shake your head; you're finding it hard to breathe in this small room. Something from a box, you say. Duncan Hines.

But what flavor?

You panic. Devil's Food.

My favorite, he says, and he smiles wider. He looks younger than you and older, too. Did you need anything else?

No, you lie. You thank him. You thank him and move backward toward the door, only a few steps, and he's walking forward, so that you face each other like dance partners, paired, except that your hands are cupped in front of your sternum, cradling the egg.

Good night, he says. It was nice meeting you. You are in the hallway and he is in the apartment. I'll watch to make sure you get in okay.

There are four other red doors off this hallway; he believes that one of them is yours.

Oh no, you tell him, I live downstairs. No one was home on my floor, but I heard you walking. I can hear your footsteps, sometimes, through the ceiling.

I try to remember to take off my shoes.

Yes, you tell him. You're always very quiet.

Well . . . good luck with the cake. Maybe you'll bring me a slice when it's done.

Yes, you say, but you feel cheap for having lied. You paid him to come to life for you, and now you're lying while he listens. You edge toward him.

I don't really need this, you tell him. You hold it out to him. I'm not making a cake.

That's all right, he says, but his bowed body stiffens. Responsively, you lean forward.

I don't actually live here, you tell him.

Oh, he says. He frowns.

I took your bus, you say. I walked with you and when you got on, I did, too.

Is this a joke? He leans from the doorway, turns his head up and down the hall. Are you one of Jen's friends or something?

I wanted to see you tonight, you say. I thought it might help if I saw you.

I'm sorry, he says. I don't know you.

You do, you say. From earlier. I was the one who was alone—don't you remember? You cried.

His face is reddening. I'm sorry, he says. I think you're confused. I'm not . . . what you think I am.

You try to smile. I don't think you're an angel.

His expression doesn't change. Is there someone I could call to come get you?

No, you say. There isn't anyone.

He rubs his eyes. There is only the doorjamb between you. You reach for his hand, but he steps back.

A cab, he says. I can give you some money. Let me get my shoes and I'll walk you to the intersection.

Please, you say.

He does not look at you. You can't be here, he says. I'm sorry.

But you beckoned me, you say. It is a terrible word to have to say out loud.

He is shaking his head.

You did. Like this. You cannot look at him as you mime his movements, your hands outstretched, pulling him near.

He is very pale now. Your eyes burn from not blinking.

You drew me closer, you say. So I came.

You shouldn't have, he whispers.

Please, you say. Please.

He takes a deep breath. The air goes taut between you. He steps forward. His chest meets your fingers, curling them closed around the egg. His arms rotate in an arc abbreviated by the entryway. His hands fall cold on your shoulders. His eyes are bright and impassive, and yours shut as he bends toward you. In a moment, suspended, you feel insensate. Then his lips touch your forehead. Something turns over inside you like a boulder, dislodged and beginning to roll. You rise on your toes, reaching. But the air moves around you, the lock drops into place. When you open your eyes, you are alone again. The egg lies intact in your hand.

After a while, a radio begins on the other side of his door, wordless and lulling. It is late now—well after midnight. The buses have stopped. You've given away your last dollars. He'd offered you a cab—before he'd quite understood. You don't want it, now. The radio coughs, looking for a station; he knows that you are still there. You imagine him crouched in a corner, waiting. It's true that he is not what you thought he was—someone alone and open. But you can't blame him for that.

You secure the egg in your empty purse, and begin the long walk home.