
Jungle Love

Jalene Otto

We're all grown up now. At least that's the theory we operate on. All of us. The escape artists. I'm looking at all my friends wondering how we got here, wondering how many rivers we could have filled with the amount of alcohol we've collectively consumed. Most of all I'm wondering what the point of all this is. I know that is not very descriptive, but in my alcoholic haze, that's about all I can grasp. So now I've got you here and you're listening, but I still haven't told you anything, except for that I'm a drunk. But that's the problem with telling people things.

Humans are such liars. That is the beauty of the plants and animals. They don't cheat or lie. A lion is honest about taking down a zebra. There is no reform school or rehabilitation center for the king of the jungle. A lion knows his place, his job, his mission. Plants don't complicate their lives with desires like ascension of the corporate ladder, or the acquisition of stuff that is useless but nice to look at. You never see a dogwood tree driving a brand new BMW off the lot, or a rosebush comparison-shopping for a big screen TV.

Humans on the other hand; constantly buying, constantly wanting, constantly selling. We bury ourselves in a million different tasks, all with one goal, escape. You can argue with me if you want. Draw me out. Prove me wrong. Just blame it on my cynicism, and tell yourself I'm a bitter soul. Tell yourself your life is full of meaning and I just didn't reach out in time to catch the brass ring. Tell yourself you have nothing to do with me. We are separate autonomous entities. Excuse yourself from caring about what I have to say, simply because we've never met, and we probably never will.

Escape.

* * *

Hannah is giving me one of those looks again. I'm tired. She keeps sidling over, interrupting my game of pool. Her boyfriend is ignoring her, she says. But he's not. I can see him watching her. Watching this sultry gypsy goddess control the crowd. There isn't a man in here who doesn't want her, doesn't want to read their fortune in her brilliant green eyes. She knows it. I know she does. They know she does, too. But it doesn't stop her from pouting and she passes all of them by, her long brown curls caressing the small of her thin back. I think about telling her she probably drools with a glamorous flair while she sleeps, but I don't say anything. It would be rude, even if was sort of a compliment.

Instead we stare at each other, and I read my future. I see us, older, still playing this stupid game. Still coming to this same worthless bar, only now our kids are older, so we can get out whenever we want. I see TV dinners and keys on necklace chains so they don't get lost. I see wrinkles and lines that should have been caused by laughter, but they weren't. I break up the

balls on the pool table and they scatter like my hopes, my fears. I pretend I'm happy. I tell her it will all be fine. We both know I'm lying. We both see how we gave up on ourselves a long time ago. There is no point in being sad about it now, after the fact. This is the life we chose, after all, after various rehabilitative choices didn't stick.

In fifteen minutes her boyfriend will go outside to get high. In a half an hour he'll come back inside and she'll kiss me in an attempt to get his attention, or mine, or someone's, and her and I will pretend like this is the stuff that matters, these moments. It will be in our kiss, the honesty, as for one brief moment we devour each other like mirror images released into physical form, but not quite sure how to proceed. First she'll look at him to make sure he's noticing, and I'll pretend like I'm not a voyeur in this process. Like I'm not watching myself, watching her, watching him, watch her. It's ridiculous, but it's my reality, and hers and his, mostly. It's the game we play, at least.

Next weekend I'll hear from my latest acquisition how her and I made out again. Some guy I bring home, he'll tell me about how her and I always make out. And the following weekend some guy at the bar, someone else, will make some lurid remark about Hannah and I. That is when I'll get honest. I'll fall into a blank stare about how it's a process of using each other. How we are simply practicing a rebellion of Kantian theory, a denial of motherhood. I'll break into a song and dance into the momentum that carries me through my charade, as I tell my secrets. A lyric here about how we use each other as a means to an end. A tender twist to convey no harm, no foul. And this guy, pretending to grasp some greater truth, will lean forward and whisper in my ear about how he wants to take me to the movies.

I'll say yes, I'd like that. But we both know I'm going nowhere. Not with him, not with her, not with anyone. And I'll dance away as vocals from the jukebox pine loudly over some lost beauty, some praise for the serenity of unrequited love. And he won't follow me. And the bartender will watch me and think impure thoughts, and I'll pretend to ignore him, because we both know we should have never crossed any lines between friends and other than that which is friendship, even though I'm dancing for him, and even though he knows that. Even though I have a rule about bartenders, even if he was my friend before he got the job, I'll pretend like it's fine that we can't look each other in the eyes anymore. I'll pretend like it's fine he pretends not to understand me.

I'll gracefully walk up to him, my place in front of the bar, and graciously accept the poison he offers me. I'll pay for the elixir of denial, gratefully, not thinking about how I'll pay my rent, or get the things done that I should be doing instead of being here, drinking, dancing, playing pool, every weekend. I'll try to find him through his thick glasses, either the ones over his eyes or the ones he's washing from behind the bar,

so he can fill them again for all the kids who come here, pushing through the cigarette smoke and clamoring for liquid liberation. But he'll slip away. It's how things go sometimes.

I'll say over the din of inebriation how being thirty in this town is the same thing as being eighteen and he'll cock one eyebrow up and laugh with his mouth closed as he walks away telling himself he's not in love with me, that he never was, and never will be. And then Sarah will walk in fat and draped in black clothes almost too small for her. She'll tell me about her week and I'll be too tired, too weak, too drunk, to tell her I hate her. Instead I'll listen and then I'll tell her about my week. I'll tell her how mediation was fine, and my son's father is fine, and my life is fine. And we'll clink our glasses together, her gin spilling into my vodka, our limes communing for a moment, and we'll drink to our *friendship*. And she'll go home with the bartender, and I'll go home...

I'll wake up in the morning, or the afternoon, thanking God for grandparents, and that I get to be a *kid* on the weekends, and I'll pretend not to mind when the guy I woke up next to turns down the TV I just turned up. I'll pretend it's not a warning sign, a red flag. I'll wipe it away because he looked nice against the white pillowcase and the backdrop of the crisp white sheets, or because he sounded good singing opera earlier from the bathroom. Mostly, I'll pretend like all of this is fiction. I'll make believe that you don't know me, or judge me, or try to figure out who these people are.

I'll escape into these words, a lion taking down a zebra, and I'll look you in the eyes as I tell you I love my life. I'll tell my son's father I'm the best mother that ever lived. I'll tell him how I always put our son first, but I'll leave out the part about going out to the bar. Instead I'll focus on the ladybugs crawling across my walls. I'll search for deeper meaning in the swarm that parades outside my door, asking my neighbor about her take on the symbolism of thirty red and black winged creatures lining my porch, telling her I've heard that when one lands on you it's supposed to mean you are lucky. And she'll turn real on me, and say maybe it's because I left my porch light on – all day.

Just when I've convinced myself there is no meaning to anything anymore, I'll hear my son wake up, dazed from that bit of sleep that takes a while to shake off. I'll hear him pawing at the blinds that look out onto the porch where I go to hide from him, while he rests. I'll hear him say my name, *mommie*, and all of it will mean something. All of the lying, the pretending, will culminate into truth as I step inside and he hugs me and my heart fills, and I hope. Together we'll do the simple things that make life what it is. He'll cling to me as I try to make dinner, but when the dishes are cleared he'll run through the apartment to find the Rubbermaid container I turned into a bathtub, as he enjoys his time in the shower stall he used to hate. And I'll look at him and laugh, and mean it, because he is the most beautiful sight I've ever seen, wet, and splashing about in a storage crate. I'll breathe a sigh of relief and contentment because I want to learn all he

has to teach me about the subtle art of transformation.

I'll tell myself that thirty and eighteen really are different ages, and that all of the pretending I do, all of the escaping is fine, because I really *do* love my life. And so what if some guy ignores me, and some guy turns down the TV, and some girl kisses me with no real desire, because my son just woke up and I need him as much as he needs me. Mostly, I'll feel full because I know all of that stuff that happens on the weekends is just killing time, letting my parents be grandparents, so everyone is happy. And I escape, a zebra bending to the will of the lion, and I hear my son roar. And everyone is happy as I turn on cartoons for him, so he can escape, and I can do my homework, because this is how the rent gets paid. This is the job that never ends. This is the moment I know who I am, and I know where I'm going.



Kelly M. Woods