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Deprivation

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"Untitled," 35mm film photograph, [Wimpy AF](#)

"You may, at some point, feel rather uncomfortable."

Laila glanced over her partner's shoulder at the slight man pacing around the room, a slimy shudder of resentment raising the hair on her arms. Their guide for the day moved between the pairs of facing seats in gentle swoops, arms swaying just behind the pattern of his feet. Dressed in a black satin vest and red tie, his loose, dark combover lifted gently as he nodded slowly, reassuringly, at everyone and no one. He was relatively young and maybe, probably, ambiguously eastern European, though she couldn't be sure. He was bizarrely nondescript. His height, or lack thereof, was alarming when taken in combination with the fact that his limbs were so lithe that they looked long like the pale noodles of a whimsical willow tree. His name, Pietro, was vaguely Spanish? Or Portuguese? He had an accent one would associate with someone who sang German opera at an amateur theater for people with no appreciation for what they called true art; nails painted glittering, midnight blue. When Laila looked at him she had the instinct to try to pin him down in vision or at the very least through categorization, but he slipped just out of every box, dancing in and out of her line of sight.

She shook her head, pressure beating behind her eyebrows already. Why had she let herself be talked into this? What was she doing in this blank white hellscape of a room? Were the walls padded behind the drywall? If she threw herself into one, would she burst through or bounce back or get stuck somewhere in the middle, cut and scraped? Were the people staring into one another's eyes beside her and Jonathan self-reforming psychopaths or just a couple of poor saps who had at some point decided to take on a new "yes" attitude towards life, like her? One of them, by this point, was probably looking

at the white walls and attempting to play memories back on them like a projection, trying to discover where everything had gone wrong.

Had it been the robbery, petty but impactful? That time in middle school, with the sweatshirt and the ketchup and the sneering laughs? The move across the country or maybe the move back? Laila wondered if things — as a rule of all things, generally — go wrong in an instant, or if life rolls downhill since the moment it begins, everything on a downward slope. And what about before that? She wasn't religious but if there was ever a time to ask herself these things it might as well be now, in front of an eccentric ringleader who marketed this experience as sensory deprivation on one website and couple's therapy on another.

Laila felt eyes on her, but they weren't Jonathan's. Jonathan's eyes were a constant, gentle breeze — not in the sense of a refreshing gentle breeze on a hot day or in the sense that they were blue (because they were brown), but in the sense that they were so incessantly constant that she often forgot they were there.

Pietro stopped abruptly. This stillness, in contrast to his previous motions, which had been so seamless, continuous, fluid, created the effect of someone hitting pause in the middle of a song that had been playing for hours — jarring. He stood directly in the middle of the room, immobile, with his feet pointed outward like a devilish nutcracker and both hands folded together in something like supplication. Laila felt his gaze and its absence as it swooped away from her and on to another. His attention seemed to hit everyone in the room in an instant, a whirring ping pong ball that connected everyone with a string. He smiled widely

“The object of sensory deprivation is to disassociate your body from your thoughts, therefore uncovering the true ‘I,’ the ego. With your mind free from earthly shackles, it will be free to wander. All I ask is that you let it roam free.” Pietro was facing away from Laila, his tight black pants gripping his tiny flat behind. He spun around on his left toe, pinning her, like he knew what she was thinking (about his behind). She sat back and her chair whined in panic. “You,” he said, staring at her but talking to everyone (maybe), “and your partners are here to explore, unrestrained by the outside world. You can feel your connection without distraction. This room is all there is, and when you close your eyes and put on the headphones, the world will become smaller and smaller until it all exists only behind your eyelids.” His voice was fading, growing quieter and calmer by the word, soothing. “I will reintroduce your bodies to reality slowly, one sense at a time. Together with your partner, you will reawaken. Begin.”

Laila's eyes remained open. She scanned the faces of those turned towards her, watching as vision was shut off one by one, lights flickering out. She felt something cold in her chest as she observed these strangers settle into something akin to slumber, trusting that everyone else in the room would do the

same. It was unnatural. It was eerie. It kind of pissed her off. She glanced at Johnathan, who'd she'd been steadfastly but casually ignoring for some time now. She was unsurprised to find his eyelids already lowered, a slight smile lifting his fleshy cheeks upwards in anticipation for whatever was to come.

Laila would've like to say that she found this kind of open faith endearing, that she liked the way that he looked when he thought no one else was watching, that she was stirred by his childlike excitement for the unknown — but she couldn't say any of that. She might have liked to have been that sort of person, appreciated the idea of being that person someday, potentially. Laila's mother said that she would be a great mom, but only because she wanted grandchildren. Laila didn't want children. Laila didn't even like the childlike chubbiness of Jonathan's supple cheeks after he shaved.

Pietro was staring at her.

He bowed ever so slightly, right at the waist. Laila cringed and wanted to remind Pietro that this little performance only had a three-point-five-star rating on *Yelp* — she'd made sure to check before reluctantly agreeing to even be here — and that she had already paid a price she would consider overpriced no matter what insight she gained. She snapped the clumsy, padded headphones over her ears. The slight sounds of shuffling feet and hitched breathing abruptly cut off to be replaced by silence so complete it made her ears ring.

Pietro waited, unblinking but with air of lolling patience that infuriated Laila to her burning core. There was no clock in the room, no windows. This was all about trust, letting go, a suspension of disbelief, he'd said. This was all about making the room an extension of their mind, not the other way around. Laila hadn't been sure if that had made sense. She thought about this as she tried to relax enough to at least convincingly pretend that she was playing along. She squinted enough that it was almost as if her eyes were closed, but they weren't — not quite. She could just make out the blurred edges of the platform combat boots Pietro glided on so silently, spattered by the crisscross shadow of her eyelashes quivering to maintain the precise space in between seeing and not.

Then a velvet voice rang through the speakers.

"I'll start by setting your mind on a path. Then, I'll let you go on your own. Begin with a moment."

Pietro's feet moved out of her line of sight, and behind her straining lids Laila's eyes jerked around, not wanting to lose their shadow.

"A color, but just one. Imagine it."

Beside her.

“And a feeling on your skin. Try to recreate it. Burning? A chill?”

In the corner.

“In your lungs. Full or shallow breath?”

She imagined Jonathan exhaling, his chest rising and falling dramatically.

Laila wasn't imagining a color or a feeling or a moment. She was barely breathing. *She* was trying to imagine that her eyes were open. *That* was her perfect minute. But imagining things she'd only half seen, scarcely noticed, was like hanging off the edge of a cliff grasping at something barely remembered — not quite there. It made the space between her brows pound harder. She strained to think of who was in which chair, what kind of shirt the woman near the door was wearing. It seemed desperately important that she could recall this, to keep a grip on what was happening in the real world.

Her eyelids flickered. Was the room getting warmer? What if Pietro set the room on fire and everyone sat in their chairs with their eyes closed for the sake of an experience? Was an experience like this done for a thrill or for self-understanding? It probably depended which website the person had visited. Was Laila bonding with Johnathan right now? Did he think that Pietro was going to crack her icy exterior like an eggshell so he could finally see inside? She wondered which website *he* had visited.

Boots appeared in front of her and stopped. Biting the inside of her lip — hard — was the only thing that kept Laila from looking up at where Pietro's face should've been (though, at this point she wasn't sure if she could be sure of anything). How long had it been? Was she spiraling, already? She felt a tap in the middle of her forehead.

“What the —”

A band snapped around her head, darkness over her eyes, warmth at her ear as hot breath seeped through the crack where a headphone was lifted away. Pietro whispered just loudly enough that she could make out one word from another. “Just a sleep mask, darling. Get your money's worth.”

Another tap on her forehead, this time harder, more concentrated. She wasn't sure if it was the force or the darkness that made her see the point of contact as a red flash, incisive, ebbing. Laila felt her jaw drop open in outrage.

The breath moved to her other side, crawling down her neck as it swam like cinnamon in front of her. “Relax those muscles.”

She felt him leave. She didn't hear it or see it, she *felt* it. Silence. She felt that, too.

Jonathan was an archaeologist — a student of underwater archaeology, to be precise. He was starting his PhD at Columbia after six years of service in the Navy. Laila wasn't sure exactly why she had found this interesting or even appealing. Her normal taste in men had exclusively been sated by skinny, tall, tattooed former inmates (petty crimes only).

Maybe she'd had enough of having ten-dollar bills disappear from her jacket pockets. Maybe her mother's last inquiry about whether or not she'd be bringing anyone to Thanksgiving, ever, finally snapped something in her. Whatever it was, when she saw Jonathan's soft cheeks back in early July, his forearms spackled in brightly-inked, good-natured sailor's Americana, she'd given him a chance. He took a real interest in her. He, being an underwater archaeologist, thought it was cool that she swam regularly for exercise. He loved, seemingly understood, the rather dark, primitive art that she plastered on her bedroom walls because his degree required some amount of art history. He found the fact that she was taking some time off after her master's degree to wait tables exotic, bold. They had the world in common, really. She should have been dating someone like Jonathan all along.

When she brought him to Thanksgiving, he went out after dinner to fix the odd sound her dad's 1978 Ford pickup made when it started up. Jonathan had overindulged in neither food nor drink and was also incredibly handy. The next day he ran a 10K for charity, something having to do with autism research. Laila's cash accumulated because not only did he not steal her money, he also encouraged her to take on extra hours. He had so much work to do himself. He had a hieroglyphics test *and* a Latin exam in December that would decide the fate of his graduate career. He studied diligently but not obsessively, and only talked about his research incessantly after he'd had a glass of scotch or two. He insisted on going swimming with Laila, and he much improved her backstroke. Jonathan had the softest cheeks and said the sweetest things.

"Remember to feel. Go out and in. Out and in."

Oh. What was *that* feeling?

It was both a tenseness in her legs and a humming in her ears. Buzzing energy, crackling sound tearing through silence. It was, indeed, an uncomfortable sensation. Laila's eyes strained against the darkness. She shot her eyebrows up and down to try and budge the fabric mask discreetly. She wanted to look at Jonathan. What was he thinking? What could he *possibly* be thinking? What was behind the smile? The softness? Was he thinking about her or about Latin? He had been translating a fragment of Suetonius yesterday, which seemed to have taken up most of his headspace during the car ride over. Did it matter if he wasn't thinking about her even though she was thinking about him? Didn't she have anything else to think about other than Jonathan? She ran through her mind, frantically. She had been supposed to work that night but she'd gotten Frank to cover her shift because Jonathan wanted to take her out to dinner after this was over. Her favorite black sweater had gotten a hole in the right armpit and this

morning she'd taken it on and off and on and off and on and off until finally she threw it in the trashcan. Then she'd taken it out, scrambling for it desperately with a searing stain of regret, but one of the arms had slunk right into an empty carton of ice cream, smearing the residue on the inside of the slick white cardboard with its soft polyester-cotton blend and reemerging sticky. She'd thrown it back in, disgusted.

Was this it? Was this all she had?

She'd taken the trash bag out to the garbage can on the street before Jonathan had arrived to pick her up. If Jonathan saw the sweater lying there, he would've asked her about it. She would've told him that it had needed mending and he would've asked her why she hadn't just sewn it. She knew how to sew, didn't she? Everyone in the military could sew. If one stitch was out of place on his dress blues, then he would've gotten 750 pushups, at least. "I could've sewn it for you. All you have to do is ask, Laila. It would've been no problem. You shouldn't just throw things away."

Laila's face was turning red. She could feel it. The feeling was a color, vibrant and blossoming in the darkness, turning and churning over and over in little and big sunspots that pierced right into her temples. The ringing became louder.

When Laila got anxious, she tended to cry. There was no reason for this whatsoever. For what it was worth, Laila had broken three bones, two having been fairly major and one having been her pinky, and had barely shed a tear. She had two large tattoos and had been commended by her surly tattoo artist for "sitting so well" through the process of the searing needle etching lines across her back and shoulders.

She thought of her tears like the process of making mozzarella by hand. The curds — her innermost thoughts — would congeal together into something coherent, and, by many accounts, delicious. There is much squeezing in the congealing process, however, lots of wrangling and twisting and ripping in order to get the right amount of moisture out of the product in order to make it edible. The tears were the waste product. They were the leftovers. They seeped out on their own volition.

At first, Jonathan had found this endearing. In fact, he was positively thrilled that she cried so much because he oftentimes found her rather cold. She didn't like to hold hands or cuddle after sex. He could tell she had only reluctantly brought him to Thanksgiving. So when she cried and allowed him to wrap his arms around her, he was able to rationalize the nature of their relationship into something more conventional, which was what he preferred. He wanted to talk about her tears, have her explain her anxieties and give concrete reasons for why water would suddenly rush down her cheeks. He would always guess, and since Laila didn't know exactly *why* she cried — much less put the water into words — she would usually end up agreeing with him. She probably was *that* upset that her tire was

flat. She probably *did* need to drink more water and get more sleep and wear more sensible shoes while she was waiting tables. It all started to make perfect sense. Then the episode would end.

Jonathan liked to take care of things, and Laila, cheeks wet and bleeding into the fabric of his shirt, found that it wasn't so bad if her tears were seen as something more than worthless emotional residue. Maybe her tears *were* something — maybe they always had been. Maybe she was overwhelmed by all the little things she had let accumulate over the course of her life. Maybe her tears had been trying to tell her something all along, and she had simply been too stubborn to listen.

Skin met hers. She knew it was Jonathan's because of the sweat on his palm and the way his fingers curled around her wrist. Index met thumb in a warm shackle. He squeezed once, twice. She focused on the sensation. He had blisters on his hands from sanding down the door to her apartment. She'd mentioned it stuck and so, after he'd done his two hours of translation practice, he went to Home Depot, bought some sandpaper and a chisel, and scraped away at the layers of old paint until there was no more resistance.

Jonathan rubbed her wrist back and forth, finding her pulse and pressing there so he could feel her heartbeat. He teased her sometimes about being dead inside, so he would make a game of checking that her heart was doing its job. She knew this was a cute way he had of trying to get her to cheer up, but what he didn't seem to understand was that she wasn't sad. She was perhaps lethargic, tired, melancholic, but not sad. His hand shifted, flipping hers over so he could run a thumb across her palm. The motion forced her fingers to flex upwards, twitching like the legs of a spider. The line went across her vision in a streak of blue and green. She focused harder on the heat of his skin against hers. Did she feel connected to him? Maybe he did understand her. Maybe she was sad. She had cried just this morning when she'd thrown her sweater into the trashcan and imagined the ensuing conversation that hadn't even happened. Why had she done that? She put herself back in her kitchen. There was cracking linoleum floor, off-white with blue and yellow diamonds in between the generic square-sheets. Her cupboards were painted white but chipping at the corners to reveal splinters of beige particleboard. She had four cookbooks, three vegetarian but all unopened, sitting on top of the microwave she'd gotten at a garage sale for thirty dollars. The faucet dripped and the sink was rust-stained. These were all things Jonathan had noticed and wanted to fix. He simply hadn't said anything yet because he was planning on asking her to move into his apartment soon. With Laila in his home, there would be no more problems. His apartment was new and had shiny floors and countertops. He'd installed a little tub in his bathroom which, since he'd never taken a bath in his life, she had a feeling was all for her. Jonathan would make sure everything was running smoothly. For now, there were so many little mishaps in Laila's life that there was plenty to keep him occupied.

But why *hadn't* she fixed the sweater? Why, after finding that it had been dirtied, did she not throw it in the washer? It had been her favorite. She had worn that sweater on every first date she had been on

since college. It was both conservative and sexy, because the neck was so stretched out that if things went well, she would allow one shoulder to droop down to the middle of her arm like some sort of ornithological mating signal. She could feel — now and then — Jonathan's bewilderment, his exasperation, his amusement about her unwillingness to address small concerns. Was that it? She couldn't deny that his reactions were warranted. Even now, the feeling was throbbing up her arm, emanating from his skin in waves. She was still in the kitchen but rooted to his thoughts by just the one finger linking hers, twisting around it like a snake.

Jonathan called her silly, sometimes. He liked that she was intelligent on paper, but was delighted to discover that she was nearly incompetent in practical matters. They were the same age but he made allowances for her like she was younger because she hadn't "lived in the real world." She had probably only done 20 push-ups in her entire life and had never seen anyone — not one single person, including distant relatives — die. That meant something, but what?

Was she silly? Were her tears actually the physical manifestation of her unwitting sadness? Laila had an extremely logical mind and, therefore, had to consider these possibilities fully. But then *why* had she hidden the bag if she was giving Jonathan the full hypothetical benefit of being correct? Jonathan had no doubt that Laila was sad and silly, but he loved her for and/or despite both of those things, so what was there to hide?

The only answer to that question, unfortunately, was another question: What would he think if she was, in fact, neither sad nor silly but simply unwilling to fix things that were, strictly speaking, broken? What if she simply didn't care? Was that wasteful? Childish? Lazy? Incompetent? Would he still love her if she was any or none of these things? Did she care? She tried to think of her life before Jonathan. Her door had stuck and she missed trash day regularly. When she swam it was an action between frolicking and drowning, and she never carried much cash. She cried regularly. But she had never noticed or thought anything much of any of these things. Had Jonathan simply made her more self-aware?

Her hand was sweating now, too. Their sweat mingled. Her ears had graduated from ringing to extending into a vacuous gape, endless. She slowly slid her fingers away, leaving a trail of moisture. She opened her eyes against the cloth and light filtered in from the edges. Her vision was moldy and green. She reached up and pulled down the blindfold so it hung around her neck. Pietro was standing in the corner, heels together and toes pointed outwards. Laila's heart was racing. Jonathan sat stiffly across from her, his eyebrows flitting down just a hair and his eyes twitching restlessly back and forth behind their lids. His fingers stretched out towards her. Maybe he'd felt her pulse. Maybe he knew something was wrong. Laila took off the headphones and the subtle sounds of the quiet room assaulted her. The creaking chair and the labored breathing of the man to her left were sharp, distinct sounds that rasped and scratched. Everything was how it had always been but magnified.

Her head was pounding, the light made her eyes water and she couldn't tell if she was crying or if her pupils were simply adjusting to the world anew. Why did people do this? Why couldn't people just accept their senses as they were? She set her headphones down on her chair as she stood. Her limbs felt weak and slack. When she moved and took a step she had the feeling of missing a stair, falling. There was a flicker of thought in the back of her mind that she was being ridiculous, overdramatic. Everyone else looked perfectly at ease.

Pietro watched her, steady dark eyes and alert posture unwavering and expressionless. When she left, he did little else but nod. Nothing was wrong. Nothing at all had been wrong.

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