

THE QUIET UNDERWATER

(View 2 of 2)

Like a greyhound peering between the gates. Heartbeat palpitating in the burning cartilage and dissipating into the sticky kitchen air. An animal trapped in a cage will gnaw off its own limb to escape. What will you do?

The night hangs like a tarp over the restaurant. The scene within is reflected on its windows in two dimensions, Hopper's rendition of a Halal takeout. The boss pouring ice over one grill. Crackle and sizzle. You see his daughter, Marion, still in her school uniform, texting behind the counter. And yourself, meeting the eyes of a faceless viewer. The second hand crawls forward. Four more minutes.

"Can you check the dates on the veggies?"

What date is it? All you know is that it's Wednesday, so you knock off at eight. Identical, transparent containers of tomato slices and lettuce, facing one way. You work in two dimensions, like the Flash games you used to play in the computer room with your friends. You throw out the onions just to look like you're doing something.

The boss sighs. "It's okay, you can go. Early mark."

Two minutes. How magnanimous. You tug the strings of your apron behind you. You're a marionette. An animal trapped in a cage will gnaw its own limb off to escape. "See you tomorrow," says Marion. Scooting through orange plastic chairs and tables. Before the boss realises, they still need to be wiped down.

Turning onto your street after the bus stop, through the gate then through the door. *Family Feud* on TV. Mum asleep on the couch. Dad asks if you've made it home, in Chinese.

The answer is obvious, so you don't respond. An animal stuck in a trap will gnaw off its own limb to escape. Cling-wrapped dinner on the counter. It sheens under the kitchen lights like an outline. Press "E" to pick it up. These are all the nights.

"Name something you do to show someone you love them."

It's Thursday night, so you're waiting for eleven. Seated behind the counter while the boss pours ice over the grill. Bubbly and white like seafoam on the summer holidays. The doner kebabs are pirouetting. It's making you dizzy.

“Fix yourself dinner before you go,” the boss calls over the fizzle. No need, you know Mum’s cooked food at home.

A car drifts through the main street. This night is different, somehow. Passing parked cars and shop fronts with their shutters down and locked. The council building is deserted. Men and women in dress shirts absent, with laptop bags and empty lunchboxes. It all looks flat to me. Unreal. I’m jolted into a round of CS2. The map is quiet and deserted. A set of 3D graphics projected onto a two-dimensional screen.

A girl is walking in front of me, with raven hair that glows purple as she passes under each streetlight, like a bioluminescent creature drifting on the sea floor. She’s glanced back at me a few times, maybe teasingly. I want a closer look. Gaining ground now, closing in. She threads between two parked cars before crossing the street.

“Back off, creep!”

An animal stuck in a cage will chew its own limb off to escape.

Someone laughs. It’s the TV. “Look how much easier it handles than the other mop! Seriously, call in now. The Spin-Easy mop will change your life!”

Dad asks if you’re home.

What will you do?

Mum left a bowl of dinner on the counter covered in cling wrap. I skip microwaving and head towards the stairs. The TV is on at a low volume. “Call in now and get your Spin-Easy Mop for just forty-four ninety-nine!” I slip into my room.

You squint against the blue light from your phone. Ten-thirty. Damn. You’ve already missed fifteen minutes of her stream.

But she’s just saying hello. Look at her there. Lying down in your bed pulling her face closer to your own. Cute cat ears on her headphones.

“Hi guys,” Nikki giggles, a little shy. “My day’s been nice. How was yours?”

A donation would get her attention. How much to not seem cheap? Donating thirty would mean she would get thirty after the platform’s cut. I’ll go with fifty.

“Really bad, but good now you’re live.”

“Aw, sorry to hear that.” Her smile so sweet under her daffodil fairy-lights. A Klimtian beauty in her golden light. “Hope this can cheer you guys up. Thank you for the donation!”

How to get closer. How to close the distance. The ache in your chest. She is here and not here. You know her name is Nikki and her birthday and her hobbies. Her bachelor’s degree in economics. You’re still stuck in after-high-school. But at least you both like gaming.

“Do you play CS2?”

“Thanks for another donation, TheQuietUnderwater! No, I’m not that into first-person shooters.”

What games does she like? She’s been working on something that looks like an RPG, but there’s no story yet.

Your card declines for fifty. You offer the rest of your balance. Payday two weeks away.

“Do you play Skyrim?”

Your attentions go unechoed, unreturned. Unanswered. Was there something wrong with your message? Was \$18.75 not enough for a fucking response?

“My econ prelim is tomorrow.” Marion’s collecting her schoolbag.

“Don’t worry, nothing you do in high school matters.”

She somehow finds this funny. Her eyes flash. Her hair falls over her face. She takes the rag and spray bottle from under the counter, and swipes crumbs into her cupped hand to escape a secret tension.

“My dad is more stressed out than me. He’s making me study a lot.”

He’s outside switching the gas cylinders. Sweet smiles.

“An animal stuck in a cage will gnaw off its own limb to escape.”

“Oh, Dune! I liked that movie, too.”

Is that really where it’s from?

She’s approaching, still smiling shyly. You grab her arm, closing in.

Her lips are warm. Marion pulls away.

“I’ve gotta go,” she stammers, and retreats into the night.

“Get on home,” your boss says. Your muscles jolt. He shuffles in, smiling. animal trapped in a cage will gnaw off its own leg to escape. What will you do?

Weave through the orange plastic seats. Marion’s sixteen. Striding past the orange bench at the bus stop. Her dad was right there. Your dad is snoring in the living room. How are you already twenty-six? What will you do? “Visit Anderson and Partners, 209 Canterbury Road, and claim your justice today.” Marion knows why you did it, right? Why did you do it?

What did you just do?

Marion’s stressed and takes the week off to focus just on her exams. You sit at the counter in her place, in a daze, watching noon run set the asphalt ablaze and trying to keep your hands from shaking. Another girl avoiding you.

Her dad smiles at you. Leans over you to open the register and collect his cash. Not knowing what he knows is chilling, but he hasn’t fired you yet. A kid walks in wearing his Saturday footy jersey, darkened by sweat. Pointing to the menu overhead at he tells his order to his mum. You remember being that young, seafoam on the water in the summer holidays. Wishing you could go back, take back everything.

“Hey, can you get the pickle jar from the top shelf?” says Marion’s dad. “I threw out my back sleeping last night.” Chuckling. Gesturing to the customers. “I’ll take this.

“You better enjoy being young, kid. Having your whole life ahead of you.”