

On the Corner of Bellevue and 8th Street

“Listen to me. Listen to me. Listen to me. Do your work. Do your work.”

The parrot’s words are drumming inside my head, each squawk clawing at my concentration. Its feathers fluff out in a dazzling array of blue and yellow, flitting every now and then, the motion catching my eye, drawing my attention from the task at hand. It doesn’t care whether or not I actually absorb any of my history textbook. Its only concern is rupturing my attention to the point of no return.

“Shut up you incessant thing!” No use.

“Listen to me. Listen to me.”

The mostly empty porch offers me solace. It’s only resident, a satellite chair cradling a plush blue cushion, occupies the corner calling, “sit in me, just do it.”

“Celeste, why do I always find you sitting in this chair rather than doing your school work?” My roommate, Gillian, knows how to nag like a banana knows how to be yellow. The chair *is* my constant companion offering me comfort whenever Gillian’s parrot makes me want to slam my head into the wall.

“Well Gillian, me and this chair have a pact. As long as I don’t try as hard as you to be an overachiever it will allow me to occupy it any time I like.” Gillian smiles and walks inside, prattling on to her parrot as if it were a new born.

The street is empty. The wind blows a Pepsi can down towards the sewer drain. A whirlwind of leaves frolics in the street as the sun yawns over the top of the massive Victorian house across the street, the one with blue shutters.

Panic creeps in like a thick fog gathering around the cornfields when the moon is high. There are supposed to be people on this street.

“Hey Gilly! Gilly!”

She doesn't respond. Damn her and her dratted homework. Can't she ever just take a break?

“Do your work. Do your work. Listen to me.”

I hear police sirens fighting their way into downtown. They stop somewhere about 8th street if I would guess, the abrupt silence shaking me. I hop over the banister, cream paint flecks sticking to my hand.

I push the button. My neighbor's doorbell echoes, bouncing off the Spanish tile floor and sterile wood panel walls in his empty foyer.

“Why hello, Celeste. Why aren't you down yonder, rubber neckin at the tragedy goin on downtown. I figured all you youngins would be right in the midst of it, but if you ask me that boy ain't bluffin one bit and isa gonna pull that plug. Police ain't gonna do much for him, only agitate, they really should clear the scene if you ask me.”

Mr. Dullwood drinks up police scanner reports like a dog lapping water on a blazing hot day. He used to be a photographer for the newspaper, but he still doesn't miss a beat.

“Thanks Mr. D. I wasn't sure where all the people had gone, but I knew that you would know. I should really get over there and see what's going on.”

“Alright now munchkin, you can come on back after thangs clear up a bit, Mrs. D is makin a pot roast, I know that's yer favorite. She done cooked in that crock pot all day. Tell your roommate to come on too if she wants.”

I was backing down the steps as the last words were slipping from his mouth. My throat is closing in, my breath getting tight. Why don't I carry around paper bags?

I know it is Samuel before I ever reach the packed corner of Bellevue and 8th street. I see my peers and the people missing from my street. They don't want to give an inch to let me through. Samuel is in front of the library strapped up in that homemade thing. He taught me how to ride a bike. He taught me how to fish.

"I knew he was going to go crazy," says a girl wearing a green cardigan, it reminds me of my mother's split pea soup.

"I know. Losing a sister? Right after you leave dinner with her?" says a girl in a red shirt with blonde hair talking as if she actually knew the half of it. Her hair smells like apples, I fight off the urge to yank it.

I work my way up to the tape, using my elbows as tools, nudging, squeezing, getting caught on backpacks and bags, stumbling over shoes, and falling into people. The yellow caution tape is taut. He's standing there looking down, lost somewhere deep inside, in the corner of some dusky black crawl space. He kissed me in kindergarten after our Christmas pageant.

Standing next to a police officer with a gun pointed at Sammy, I hear our health teacher whisper,

"I always knew that kid was an odd ball."

The police officer chuckles, but doesn't look at him keeping his eye focused on Sammy, the pitcher in a baseball game, going to throw the ball at any second. There is no movement from either side of the field. Sammy is still stuck and doesn't look up.

The crowd behind sends a wave forward, I stumble and nearly fall through the tape. Using the health teacher's shoulder as a handrail, I keep from falling forward into a lake of chaos. The crowd murmuring behind me, the sound becomes magnified, the air becomes thick and tight around me. I remember to breathe. He helped me pass high school algebra.

“Samuel, will you please disengage the explosive device and turn yourself over to authorities. Doing so will decrease the severity of your punishment.”

I didn't think the megaphone was necessary. The cop was standing eight feet away from him. An outside voice would suffice.

Sammy took a few steps forward without looking up. His hand was still on the small metallic detonator attached to the side of the camo vest lined with homemade explosives neatly arranged in rows. Chemistry has always been his favorite subject. He doesn't surrender, he doesn't make threats.

“Samuel! Samuel! It's me Celeste. Come back to me Sammy, come out of that place. Wake up. You don't have to do this.”

“MILA IS GONE!” he roars.

The sound from the crowd evaporates. He still just looks down, his boots are dirty, his eyes sunken, dark circles give away his lack of sleep, his hair is frantic, and he doesn't move.

“Listen to me. Do your work.”

It flies low over my head, just low enough so I can reach out and grab it, but the second passes, my reflexes too slow. It's going to startle him. I leap forward, the tape breaking. A blue feather in my hand, a silhouette flies into the last sunrays. My balance lost, I am the agitator, a crack echoes off the library front and skitters down the boulevard. A pain like fire and ice streaks up and down my front, up and down. The pavement catches me, solid and unwelcoming, I smell rubber. I see Sammy look at me, he is awake now, he sees the girl he picks blackberries with fall away from him. He scampers backwards down 8th street away from the crowd. I hear the metal click. The orange invades my eyes.

“Listen to me. Listen to me.”