

The Underside of Charm

Ava sat in bed with Gretchen, a woman she'd met the day before in an AA meeting. Gretchen had been sober for eight years and it was her bed, her story.

"The bigger fear was that I wouldn't die," she said with a glazed look, closely monitoring Ava's responses. "It was sick, to manage and control this thing—drinking—like it was God. To prove that I was God over it." Gretchen ran one hand over her tawny crew cut and sighed. It was a story she had told many times, a story she liked to tell. There was the version she told in AA meetings and the version she told to lovers, but both framed her as a macho street urchin, staggering through life swigging from a flask and having epiphanies. She had an aura of smugness, even as she strode across the room to open a window, she bore the expression of someone receiving a compliment and finding it to be absolutely true. Her face was broad and German, olive toned with a spattering of pale freckles. One of her eyes twitched occasionally, a consequence of abusing speed.

It had been three months since Ava's last drink, a vulnerable

time. Many warned against dating but she found herself completely pulled to Gretchen: her ease, her obscene self-confidence.

"Do you believe in God?" Ava asked.

"I do."

"And you feel really sure?"

Gretchen paused, tipping her head to one side. "There will always be periods of unknowing. But I think you should let go at that point."

"What do you mean let go?"

"Don't *arm* yourself with belief," Gretchen instructed. "Say I don't know. Throw your hands up. Meet people there."

Ava nodded. "So you go to church and everything?"

"I do," Gretchen said. "Really I go to be alone. It's one of the only private places left in the world right now."

Ava nodded. This seemed entirely true. "I like to pray," she said. "Maybe *because* it's so unpleasant." She began to fidget and looked down at her fingers. "It feels like some humiliating sex act. Like giving a gross guy a blow job."

"Well," Gretchen grinned, "it's no coincidence you're on your knees."

Ava smiled embarrassedly. Pink hues flooded to her cheeks. Since getting sober, she felt skinned, tender as a teenager.

"My parents were atheists," Gretchen said. "And it never made any sense to me. Why put so much effort into slaying something?" She eyed Ava, who appeared captivated. "I've always loved to pray. I feel like something hears my attempts. Not just to be good, but to be *clear*." She assumed a serious expression. "I got to a point where I knew I was gonna die. I remember thinking, *I've got nothing*. All I could do was pray for help." Gretchen brushed some imaginary crumbs off the bed. "I gambled too," she

admitted with a distinct note of pleasure. "Actually, I probably gambled more than I drank. It's like drinking but it's all blackout," she reflected. "You're falling right away."

Ava looked past Gretchen and noticed a squirrel on the fire escape, peering from the other side of the glass. She pointed. "Look!"

"Oh yeah." Gretchen smiled broadly. Her teeth were white and sharky. "He used to put walnuts under my pillow. I think I didn't have a screen."

"No he didn't."

"He *did*," Gretchen said, smiling, addicted to her own charm. "The first time I saw him, he looked into my eyes so directly. I'm sure I had a hangover. It was like I was in a cartoon with him and he was the dominant species."

Ava laughed and Gretchen touched her leg. She looked up with a thrill that somewhat resembled terror. Gretchen was calm as a cat, her gaze steady and electric.

They pounced and the two made out athletically, wide-mouthed and groping. For dinner, they had eaten roast beef and vegetables, an oniony dish, and Ava hoped her mouth wasn't the onionier mouth. They stopped kissing and looked at each other.

"Do I have really bad breath?" Ava asked, a laugh in her voice.

"I think we both do." Gretchen grinned. "We could brush our teeth."

"I don't have a toothbrush."

"I have a new one you could use. Still in the package."

They brushed their teeth, hip to hip, and spat green foam into the sink. Both wiped their mouths, smiling. They returned to the bed and resumed kissing. The kissing became a laugh.

"I still taste onion," Gretchen said.

"But mint too."

"Yeah, it's like a little mint messenger carrying an onion."

They laughed heartily and smashed their mouths back together, tugging out of their clothes. Heat came off Ava in great waves, while Gretchen's energy remained cool and mechanistic. A pure chill.

Later it rained. It was a violent fall rain, knocking tree branches to the pavement out front. The two lay naked with the lights on, Ava half under a sheet, Gretchen fully exposed, legs crossed, a pillow behind her back. She got up and removed the screen to close the window. Rain pelted the glass. A clap of thunder lit the room and Ava pulled the sheet up over her breasts.

Gretchen brought a glass of water to bed. She reached for her newspaper and spread it wide in front of her. Another bolt of thunder turned the room white and she flipped her newspaper over with a closed expression. Ava looked around the room. It was sparsely decorated, with a small television, several shelves of graying books, and some free weights rowed by the wall. She felt suddenly, incredibly lonely.

Though she sensed no invitation, Ava rolled near Gretchen and kissed her shoulder, a fearful smile on her lips. Gretchen pulled slightly back and gave Ava a pat on the head, as one would a little purring cat that is bothering them. Ava lay back down and folded her arms in amazement. Gretchen continued reading her newspaper as if she were alone. There was evil glittering in her beauty, Ava observed. Gretchen looked almost cadaverous. She had taken the most ordinary act in the world and injected it with malice.

A pained silence entered the room but Gretchen seemed

unscathed, newspaper in hand. *Charm is a creepy, scary thing*, Ava thought. *The light shifts slightly and she looks maniacal.*

"Do you want me to leave?" Ava said finally.

To this, Gretchen looked up from her newspaper, still naked. She made a face of mock guilt and said, "Well maybe. Yeah."

Ava was jarred. She felt her eyes moisten, if only from astonishment. She considered saying something frank like, "Oh, so you're a *bastard*," but it seemed no use. Gretchen appeared impenetrable. *Responding would be like pissing into a rainstorm*, Ava thought. She got up and dressed, hating to be naked, however momentarily.

"You should take an umbrella," Gretchen said as Ava approached the door.

Ava paused. A smile of acute pain spread across her face. "Thanks," she said and bent down, seizing a small black umbrella with a hook handle. "Bye."

"Bye." Gretchen smiled mildly. It was the smile of a priest or a friendly stranger on a subway platform. *Not the smile of someone who just bought you dinner and fucked you and is now sending you out into a downpour*, Ava thought.

Outside the streets were empty. The umbrella was broken so she had to hold it open. After a couple blocks her arm hurt so she threw it away. The rain had become more of a mist. Ava wanted to drink. *But more than that she wanted to vanish, to linger in some way station between life and death. A ghost, she thought, or a gas.*

By the sixth block of walking, Ava was convinced that she wasn't an alcoholic after all. *I'm just lonely*, she thought, *craving some culty community*. She imagined brown liquor in a glass on a wood tabletop and her body softened. It seemed like the most normal thing in the world, to pick it up and drink. *I'm just a*

masochist, she decided. *And that has nothing to do with drinking.* It had stopped raining but Ava was soaked. "Fuck you, Gretchen," she said aloud. "And fuck God."

Ava walked through her front door and instantly felt disgusted by her apartment: her faded black couch with the broken springs, her groaning refrigerator. She wanted to catapult herself somewhere, *anywhere*. To be in that soft, familiar spaceship, a drink in hand, ice cubes rattling as she raised it to her mouth. Ava peeled her clothes off and let them slap to the floor, thoughts of brown liquor blazing in her mind. She imagined slowly sipping the dark drink, although her drinking had never been slow. Ava had been an Olympic drunk, careening throughout the East Village from bar to bar, shouting things she wouldn't remember. Those nights always ended predictably, with her sprawled under a stranger in a strange bed, tipping into a void-like sleep.

Ava remembered waking up and seeing a stranger's naked backside, their cats walking around meowing. She remembered her dread, her fear of who the person would be when they turned around. *But that was better*, she thought. *Better than all this consciousness.*

Ava toasted a slice of raisin bread and spread butter over it, then took a bite and threw it out. Food was sickening. *I am an alcoholic*, she thought. She ran a bath and tested the temperature with her fingers, hot. She climbed in and wondered if it was possible for someone to drown themselves in a bathtub, holding their body down with pure will alone. *Probably not*, she concluded, *because the creature wants to live.* A friend of hers had hanged himself and she often pictured the act of his departure. The thought she couldn't shake was that, undoubtedly, when he kicked the chair away, he wriggled. *The body fought to live*, she thought. *And while he was wriggling like that, he must have known*

it was a mistake. The creature said no and the creature was him. She sank down, her knees jutting up out of the water. *But maybe not*, she considered. Hair raised around the sad island of her face, eyes closed. *Maybe it is possible to end your life unambivalently.* It seemed entirely possible at the moment. With her ears under water, Ava heard her pulse. She raised herself up and stood before the mirror, steam rising around her naked body.

In bed, she wore an oversized T-shirt with palm trees on it. *All I do is talk to myself*, she thought. She wanted to believe that God was glowing inside her. But it seemed that where God might be, there was a batch of whispering goblins, taking turns convincing her of crazy things. The sea of devilish voices occupied most periods of silence. They were like her family: menacing and enduring. She wanted to choke them all with booze before one took over.

Ava strained, inside of herself, to tunnel through the dark verbal smog, clasping her hands together. She looked about the room and asked a chair for help. Then the closet door. *Help*. Next the ceiling fan, its slow, maniacal turn. *Help me*. The window. The tree in streetlight, rain dripping off its leaves. *Let me out.*