

EVERYTHING YOU TOUCH

By Sheila Callaghan

Prologue.

JESS appears in her office, typing on a computer. She is chubby, contemporary, likable, forgettable. She receives a disturbing email. She reacts.

ESME appears, in silhouette, or in a ghostly light. She is a slim female protégé with a feathered haircut from the 70's and tons of black eyeliner. She is gorgeous and full of drama.

JESS watches ESME. ESME does not see JESS.

ESME'S VOICE

I had a dream of you on safari
Your jeep perched at the edge of a huge open plain
Exotic long-beaked birds alighting on the backs of fat lead-colored hippos
Four legged beasts with stripes and dots in navy and olive and mocha
Bending their muscular necks to drink from the stream
Or licking one another's massive heads
It went on for a while
And soon
You realized they weren't animals you were looking at
They were PEOPLE
Average people running through the tundra
With your garments on their backs
You were weeping
As though it was breaking your heart
The driver was this gorgeous anemic nymph
Her eyes were huge with terror and elation
You leaned over to her and whispered
"We all should be our most wild, vivid, fantastical selves
Running free on open land
With sumptuous fabrics covering our hides
As others watch from jeeps with envy and admiration"

JESS approaches her. Reaches out her hand,
slowly. Then...

SLAM. Lights up on 1975. JESS and ESME disappear.

We witness an amazing fashion show. Models in impossibly high heels totter by, wearing furs, leathers, and animal prints. The look is a fusion of low street and high glamour. It is rugged and elegant, and perverse.

The final model struts down the runway. She trips and falls.

Lights up on VICTOR talking to the model who fell. He is skinny, odd, dramatic. He chain-smokes.

VICTOR

Piper

I am tired of your pretty, lyrical, thought-provoking face.

When I'm sitting elbow to elbow at a runway show

I want to see what television and film and a book and poetry can't deliver.

Immediacy. Fervor. Wreckage.

When the model spits with rage, I want to feel that spittle.

I want to smell your sweat.

I want to taste your bile.

I want my blood to boil.

And I want to feel too overwhelmed after the experience to speak.

This, to me, is the power of fashion.

It's ugly.

It's furious.

It creeps into my thoughts long after I've gone.

That's why I design.

I make clothes that are obsessive, anxiety-ridden, fast-talking.

I don't make antiques.

I don't sew for history books.

I love confusion.

I love to watch people flail with passionate intention.

I love to watch bodies fabricate themselves.

This is life.

It's a grotesque, furious, freakish pageant.

The model looks away. Victor snaps his fingers in her face.

Pay attention please.

I see my profession as

the fraught dialogue of a naked woman with all the hexes and spells of my fabric

It's a lover's quarrel that ends in murder

Piper.

Piper.

Are you listening to me?

Are your big blinking eyes soaking this in?

Do you know what inspires me?

Poverty.

Terrible terrible poverty.

I spent time in Guatemala

They exist on avocados

They live in shacks with tin roofs

Buildings crumbling apart

Naked babies squatting in the road

Donkeys

But even there in the muck of mortal despair

There's an indefatigable humanity

It claws from the depths of pure anguish

THAT inspires me

THAT is what drives my impulses

THAT is what feeds my soul.

THAT is what you lack.

You are not a ruin.

You are youth and sex and butter

But I want gristle and grime.

Barbaric elegance.

You, Piper.

You are not visionary

You are not fearless

You do not have immense volume

Nor are you idiosyncratic.

You put on a long-sleeved sweater and say "I can't see my watch!"

When you should be saying, "what do I need with a time piece? Time stops when I wear this garment."

You, Piper

You sleep in a sleigh bed at night,

upholstered in a chintz of deep pink cabbage roses

garlanded with blue ribbon
and outlined with sage fringing
you eat rose and violet creams in it
and read Barbara Cartland romances.
The person I'm looking for slumbers on a metal grate
Under a tarp of nails
And eats leather and roots and feces

Can you make the sound of an ambulance siren with your pupils?
Can you wear a steel cage like it's heat-creaked silk organza?
Can you make a garment look like a Sunday suicide?
No. No no no.

So.
Where does that leave us?

The model vanishes.

Then. In silhouette. We see the model commit
suicide.

Lights up on JESS seated at a computer. LEWIS
hangs over her shoulder. Both wear drab
clothes. They are colored sickly beneath the
fluorescent lights.

JESS

(to us)

I hit the down arrow on my keyboard hard several times. I am aware the force of my finger
is excessive but I am still meekly satisfied by this minor gesture.. With my other hand I
raise my coffee mug to my lips, knowing the coffee is terrible cold and also knowing it was
terrible when it was hot. The wetness reminds me I am not made of pixels and page hits. I
am capable of feeling wetness. I am human.

(to Lewis)

Okay. The overview is fine. The 'scope of work' is fine.... You spent a lot of time on this.

LEWIS

Yeah.

JESS

(reading)

Sowuuuuuhhhhhhhh underlying architectural changes that will be implemented during this project right right right right future initiatives will be easier to implement and ultimately become more scalable God who the fuck told them we'd be done with this mess by August? Seriously?

LEWIS

We all decided that.

JESS

In the past three years they've done so many work-arounds and patch-ups AND had so many Dreamweaver hacks fucking around with their code it'll take five months just to slash through the back end. Did you talk to Lisa directly?

LEWIS

Yes.

JESS

Fucking Mediablitz . Has anyone over there even LOOKED at their code? Can anyone over there even READ code?

(to us)

I become aware that two clumpy pieces of my unwashed hair are stuck to the eyelashes of my right eye. I realize I haven't showered in four days. I wonder if Lewis can smell the oil of my scalp.

LEWIS

You smell weird. I think Lisa has someone who knows HTML.

JESS

H T Fucking M L. You're serious.

LEWIS

No.

JESS

You're joking.

LEWIS

Have you eaten lunch yet?

JESS

No.

LEWIS stands and grabs the strap of the brown leather messenger bag from the back of JESS's chair. He hands the bag to JESS.

LEWIS

Beep beep beep. Burrito intervention. Let's go.

They are now in a burrito place.. A bassy African groove plays loudly above.

JESS

(to us)

Chipotles is crammed full of broody office clothing with humans speaking in tones several notches louder than hospitable. The air is heavy with moisture from the steam trays on the food line, which thickens the fermenty boiled florals of women's hair products. I pinch at the folds of fat hanging over my waistband and apologize to my body in advance for what I am about to imbibe.

To LEWIS.

This place has a way of making you feel one rung lower in the cultural food chain.

LEWIS

What do you mean?

JESS

The music is globally responsive, the patrons are coiffed, and all the brushed metal trimmings and exposed ductwork and blond wood and track-lighting... it's like you're not just buying a sub-par Mexican meal, you're buying a lifestyle.

LEWIS

What are you talking about.

JESS

Nothing, I'm just tired of the assumption that I need a chain restaurant to tell me who I am.

LEWIS

It's all natural farm fresh ingredients, Jess. You can stand to be awash in modernity for that.

JESS

(to us)

He doesn't know about the email I got this morning from my mother's neighbor. An elderly woman with one good eye, two good teeth, and posture like an elbow macaroni.

Three models from Victor's earlier show totter in. They are still dressed in their heels, furs, and prints.

They pose. They pose again. JESS watches them. The models circle JESS threateningly. JESS shoves a forkful of burrito into her mouth.

GNNAGGGKKK...

She grasps her paper cup and begins sucking urgently at the straw.

LEWIS

Why get the hot sauce if you can't handle it?

JESS

I need to suffer for my food.

LEWIS

You need some time off. Chill for a week. Go to a spa. Do some yoga. Take some shrooms. Have a spiritual awakening.

JESS

My mother is dying.

Beat. The models vanish.

LEWIS

Really?

JESS

Yeah.

LEWIS

Should you go be with her?

JESS

Unclear.

They freeze.

Lights up on VICTOR and ESME in the 70's in Victor's boutique. They are smoking. ESME fusses with a gumball machine.

VICTOR

Suicide.
Really?
That is the most BANAL choice a human can make.
The world is maybe better off without such a BANAL choice-maker.
I didn't invent truth you know.
Should I have said "YES! PERFECTION! THANK YOU!
You shit rubies and I want to eat them."
Her one job in life is to walk in a straight line
Point A to point B.
One foot then the other then the other then the other then.... Done.
She failed.
Not my fault, am I right?

ESME

Also her ass was huge

VICTOR

I mean did you see that?
Should have its own zip code.
Fucking fuck.
There was more press about the suicide than the clothes
Did anyone even *see* the clothes?

ESME

Shall I quote?

VICTOR

Please.

ESME reads from a paper.

ESME

"Victor Cavanaugh's new line is garishly delectable. His solid, architectural aesthetic melds progressively with the gothic, the treacherous, and the peculiar."

VICTOR

(preoccupied)

So she couldn't walk, so what! Must be a hundred other jobs in this city for tiny women with saucer eyes and weak ankles. I shouldn't have said any of that stuff to her. I was imitating a self that no longer exists.

ESME

BORING. Where are the matches?

VICTOR

Over there.

ESME grabs matches and lights a lavender candle.

ESME

Landlord is still burning that filthy sulfur oil. Makes everything smell like boiled eggs.

VICTOR

I stopped noticing.

ESME

‘Cause you never leave the fucking store.

VICTOR

I want to see who my customers are. I want to understand who is interested in what I make. If anyone. I don't feel well, Esme.

ESME

Fine. I'll pull for tomorrow, and you can spit some ideas for fall.

VICTOR

I have none. Without you I'm just a hand sewing the air without any thread.

ESME

Don't make me pity-fuck you. I'm too high right now.

VICTOR

You're high?

ESME

That dead model had a hippie boyfriend who passed out dime bags before the show. Speaking of chumps, we're supposed to get some bunny shipped in this week from like, Little Rock.

VICTOR

Arkansas isn't the Midwest, it's the south.

ESME

Same thang, different twang.

VICTOR

Why is she coming *here*?

ESME

For that promotion we did with the NBC radio affiliate. VIP fashion treatment. Tour of your workroom and maybe a free headband. You said you wanted more attention from the middle.

VICTOR

I said I wanted the mainstream to catch on to my ideas. As in, have them make their way to me on their own. Not yank them from their sofas and ram my designs down their gullets.

ESME

Some folks need to be bludgeoned into awareness. What's that quote, "fashion must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us?"

VICTOR

That's Kafka. He was talking about literature.

ESME

Art is art.

VICTOR

Who wears a fucking \$9000 jacquard chiffon blazer cut for someone six foot three and 92 pounds? In the worst fucking economy since the depression?

ESME

And Roxy Music ordering six pairs of your Tudor-inspired doublets to wear on tour means absolutely nothing.

VICTOR

Six jackets, Esme. For a band that most people in this country have never even heard of. I'm going to die in obscurity.

He begins arranging the jackets on the rack.

VICTOR (CONT.)

They are stunning, though. If I'd gotten my start ten years earlier I'd be famous by now. Not drowning in a sea of F.I.T. babies in their parent-funded shops.

VICTOR begins pulling outfits from the racks.

ESME

So the other day? I'm thinking about Vietnam, right? And I get this vision.

A G.I. Jezebel cabaret show
We'll gather an army of sizzling, sleek-limbed supergirls
Give them tattered T-shirts
huge-shouldered, metal-epauletted tailcoats
military shirts with shrapnel holes
rusty bullet belts slung around completely destroyed jeans
stained, minute, raggedy leather loincloths
sequined camouflage
Stilettos shaped like rifle barrels
And we'll make little hanging septum rings out of tiny garnets
Nosebleed chic
These bitches will fight for our love
Because our love is war, man

What do you think?

VICTOR

I think it's gonna piss a lot of people off

ESME

It could be our fall line. The troops will be out by then. And even if they aren't-- it's protest art! Co-opting the bloody spectacle and cranking it through the glamourizer. You don't think the kids will eat that shit up?

VICTOR

I think the kids a) couldn't afford it and b) are tired of the war being commodified and sold back to them.

EMSE

I got a feeling about this--

VICTOR

Is that pity-fuck still on the table?

ESME drops her panties and bends over the work table in her dress.

ESME

Don't get me sweaty. I want to wear this to the Missoni dinner tonight.

Freeze on them.

Lights up on JESS in a bar. Alone.

JESS

(to us)

Instead of purchasing an economy seat
On a budget airline to the South
To watch a dying woman who hates me
Take shallow sips of oxygen
From a plastic nose tube
I'm waiting for someone I haven't met yet.

We don't have an appointment.
He may not even exist.
But here are his stats:

One.
He is skinny
The kind of skinny that makes people nervous
It's partially genetic
But mostly he just smokes a lot
And forgets to eat
I'm so jealous of that.

Two.
He wears gorgeous clothes.
Clothes I've only seen in photos.
The kind I could never bring myself to buy.
He spends every penny he makes on them
He'd rather be poor than have an unfit garment touch his skin
But he isn't superficial
He just loves himself
Some people do.

Three.
He looks like my father.
Who died when I was two so I can't call upon his face with any precision but that's
probably okay 'cause now I can make my small inventions around the parts I do know such
as his body type, his complexion, his hairline.

Four.
He'll have no qualms about allowing a promiscuous tipsy stranger to take him home.

Five.
We're gonna have some crazy epic drunk sex. Slamming against walls and tearing up
bedsheets, et cetera. Someone will probably get a black eye. It'll go on for like, ever.

And eventually his particles will become mine and we'll shrink down all microscopic. We'll travel into the corpuscles of strangers, in and out of cells and cilia, through mucous membranes, beneath fingernails, then out into the earth, through the roots of a grass blade, through the hard shells of Amazonian insects, onto the tongues of termites, and oh then we'll get fucking HUGE! We'll billow upwards into the galaxy and cloak the constellations, wrap 'em up like wedding gifts. And then we'll collapse in the pull of our own gravity and reconstitute as a white, heatless star, and wash the universe in our ghostly glow.

Yeah, man.

That's how rockin' our sex will be.

Six.

This is more me than him but he'll fall asleep right after and I'll just stroke him and talk to his sleeping body like people do on TV.

I'll tell him this:

“I am stroking the space between your ear and your shoulder
I am stroking the space between your hip and your thigh
I am stroking the space between your spine and your navel
I am consumed with your spaces between”

And from these I'll build out my father. Shape him from dust and aromas and smoke and breath and everything else in the invisible world.

And later on I'll wonder if I raised my father from the dead just so I could fuck him.
Which is pretty dark, right?

But first he's gotta walk through that door.

VICTOR walks through the door, looking much as described. He wears gorgeous clothes. He immediately lights a cigarette.

VICTOR

Hey.

JESS

Hey.

VICTOR

Pretty dead in here

JESS

All the hipsters are across the street doing 90's karaoke
That's a hell of a jacket

VICTOR

It's really fucking hot out
But I can't take it off
It's a perfect reflection of my id right now

JESS

You look thirsty
Can I buy you a drink?

VICTOR

Don't you want my name first?

JESS

Not a requirement.

VICTOR

Fair enough. Dry martini please. With a twist.

JESS

Not really a man's drink.

VICTOR

I'm not really a man.
I'm a filthy, bratty, terrible baby.

JESS

Nice sales pitch.

VICTOR

Something tells me you don't need the hard sell

He gets his drink.

VICTOR

What do you do?

JESS

I work for an upstart dotcom. I dream in pixels.

VICTOR

How very modern..

JESS

I'm the bleeding edge of culture, man. Except I want to kill myself.

VICTOR

Oh please. Suicide is the most BANAL choice a human can make.

JESS

Except when one's life is even more banal than the choice to end it. Which in my opinion is less of a choice and more of a way to quiet the noise.

VICTOR

Yikes.

JESS

Just kidding. What about you?

VICTOR

I'm all over the place. Right now I drive a gypsy cab.

JESS

Are you a prostitute?

VICTOR

Should I take that as an insult or a compliment?

JESS

Or a trust-fundie?

VICTOR

Now I'm insulted.

JESS

Just trying to figure out how you got the cash for those sick duds.

VICTOR

I made these.

JESS

Made.

VICTOR

Sewed. Cut. Fitted. Et cetera.

JESS

Color me dazzled.

VICTOR

I have aspirations. Also it's difficult to find things in my size for grown-ups.

JESS

You don't eat I assume.

VICTOR

Food is for the weak and for women who hate themselves.

JESS

Here's to low self-esteem.

They clink glasses and drink.

VICTOR

Your ass is kind of huge.

JESS

'Scuse me?

VICTOR

It's like two trashbags filled with sadness

JESS

How could you be that drunk already?

VICTOR

I'm not. I'm just an asshole.

JESS

Good thing I dig assholes.

VICTOR

I guess you're the chick whose friends tell her she should date better dudes.

JESS

I don't have friends. And I don't date. I just fuck.

VICTOR

People don't "just fuck." That's a movie dream.

JESS

I do. I'm like your mom's worst nightmare. Self-employed self-destructive and omnivorous. Speaking of mom's. Mine's dying.

VICTOR

I'm sorry. Of what?

JESS

Broken heart. Slow process. I haven't talked to her in seven years. Her neighbor just sent me an email yesterday saying it's gotten serious. She thinks I should go out there. My mother is a smoker too. She buys Vantage 100's by the carton and lights up before her bowl of Special K every morning. She holds her cigarette high up in her knuckles and gestures casually it's like the cigarette is a sixth finger. She likes to guess how much weight I've gained just by looking at me. When I was growing up she filled my closet with beautiful, expensive clothes that were always a size too small, hoping I'd feel inspired to fit into them one day. I'm not sure why I just told you all that.

VICTOR

Because you need something ineffable and I'm standing right here?

JESS

Maybe. And maybe you're not even real. You're made of pixels. Or dust.

VICTOR

I don't know whether to hold you or to ask you to take me home.

JESS

Both. Please.

VICTOR holds JESS.

VICTOR

Take me home.

Freeze on them.

Lights up on ESME in the workroom in the 70's, sketching. She wears something amazing, as usual.

LOUELLA, a cheerful ruddy woman wearing horrible clothes, pops her head in.

LOUELLA

Hi!
I'm here!
Sorry I'm so late
I had to take a cab
The subways are so confusing!
I'm staying at the Best Western.
Louella Wilkens?
I won tickets on WCFW?
Um in Little Rock Arkansas?
VIP fashion treatment?
All inclusive package?
Two nights in a three star hotel?
Tour of the studio?
Headband?

Silence.

I was trying to win Simon and Garfunkel tickets
I asked around about you folks afterwards
The name rang a bell
A little bell
I don't really follow fashion
I just go to Dillards and buy what's on the sale rack
Is someone boiling an egg?

ESME

(with contempt)

Is that what you're wearing right now?
Dillards?

LOUELLA

I don't think that's the brand
It's just where I got it.
I mean it's comfortable and doesn't make my ass look huge.
I also like a little give in the waist
Oh and I hate itchy fabrics
And stuff I have to dry clean.
Such a hassel.

More silence. She retrieves a Tupperware from
her bag.

LOUELLA (CONT.)

I made these. They're cupcakes. Brought them on the plane.
I got creative with the frosting.
I like to be creative. I paint.
Watercolors. Landscapes.
Last spring I had a little showing in our community room
Neighbors mostly
Some girls from my office
And guess what!
I sold two paintings!
And a rocking chair.
Someone right now is rocking in front of my artwork
Drinking a lemonade and feeling good about life.

(beat)

I cannot stop talking.
I'm so sorry.

She tries to hand ESME the tupperware. ESME
does not take them.

LOUELLA (CONT.)

Just cupcakes. They don't bite.

ESME

I don't imbibe sugar.

LOUELLA

Well no wonder you're so skinny!
Like everyone else in this city
I've never seen such skinny people
Except my cousin with MS
And you're so pretty
Are you Mr. Cavanaugh's assistant?

ESME

No.

LOUELLA

Oh. Are you a model?

ESME

Former.

LOUELLA

How glamorous! What do you do now?

ESME

I'm Victor's muse.

LOUELLA

Muse! Sounds like an important job.
Is he around?

ESME

Not yet.

LOUELLA

Oh. I was afraid I missed him.
I don't often get to see famous people in person.
Once? When I was a waitress at our local greasy spoon?
Smokey Robinson came in to eat one night
I served him coffee and toast
and afterwards they had to tell me he was someone special!
You know what I said?
"Everyone is someone special."
The more people who see how special you are
The more famous you become--

ESME

Oh my god you really need to shut the fuck up.
I mean Jesus. I know New York City is a VERY exciting place but could you at least *try* to
keep your shit together?

Beat.

LOUELLA

Why are attractive people always so rude?
I mean it's really consistent.
The prettiest girls in my school were always the meanest.
Maybe you get cranky from the not-eating?
You know a cupcake would solve a lot of your problems.

VICTOR walks in, fraught, and a little
exhilarated.

VICTOR

I couldn't sleep Esme. All night, in my head. Piper dangling from a lighting fixture in her
mother's kitchen. Breeze blowing through the curtains. Breaking down the wall that
protected herself from herself.

Beat.

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!
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to read more