

The Dreamer

"I've wanted to talk to you like this for a very long time," he said.

"I know," she said. "Me too," she added absentmindedly.

The crickets sang out into the night. The boy craned his neck back and looked up through the hole in the gazebo roof.

"That's what I hate about this place," he said. "There's never any stars."

"There are stars," she said. "You have to look for them, but they're there. Look—there's one right there, over your head."

"Oh, that's just one," he said impatiently. "In other places you can see all kinds of stars, and constellations, and—and galaxy formations and things."

"Oh," the girl said. "I didn't know you could see galaxy formations."

"You can," the boy said.

The girl said nothing. In the silence that followed, they heard the faint sound of a car roaring down the highway, accompanied by a thumping bass. The boy let out a contemptuous "tuh!" at the sound.

"That's another thing I hate," he said. "Cars everywhere. When I leave, I'm going to live somewhere without cars. Just like Thoreau. You know, *I went to the woods because I wished to live delib—*"

The girl cut him off. "Why did you want to talk to me?"

The boy stared at her, affronted.

"Sorry," she amended. "I'm sort of on edge."

"I can tell," he said. He stood up and walked to the closest gazebo pole. He turned slightly, so his face was illuminated by moonlight. "I came so I could tell you how I felt. Well, you know how I feel."

"I know how you feel." She added reflexively, "I feel that way too."

"But I don't think you do, really," the boy said insistently. "You're like...you're like this pure thing. You're so sweet and funny and beautiful and you're so innocent. The way girls should be."

"Thank you," she said automatically.

“And I heard—” the boy paused for a moment, treading carefully—“I heard about what happened at Davey’s party.”

The girl said nothing.

“I just wanted you to know I know that wasn’t your fault. I’m sorry that happened to you. I—” he broke off delicately, glancing up at her for a reaction.

The girl looked at him coolly. “Don’t be sorry about what happened. Why should you be?”

“Well, I just want you to know that I know that it wasn’t your fault.”

“Fault?”

The boy looked at her probingly.

“I don’t think there was any fault,” the girl said. “It just happened.”

“But you didn’t *want* it to, did you?”

The girl shrugged. “It was just something that happened.”

“Stop *saying* that,” the boy said irritably. “You make it sound like—” he broke off again. “I wish you would stop saying that.”

“I make my own decisions,” the girl said.

“Of course! Of course you make your own decisions,” the boy said hastily. “But they should be the *right* decisions, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” the girl said. “Should I think?”

“What?”

The boy stared at the girl. Her face was implacable. In her eyes, he saw the reflected gleam of distant city lights.

“I don’t understand,” he said. With his face turned at the moon, his features were soft and angelic, like a boy’s. “Are you mad at me? I don’t know what I’d do if you were mad at me.” He smiled a little bit and sat next to her on the bench again, gently putting his arm around her shoulders. “You’re not, though, are you? That’s what I love about you—you’re so calm and beautiful, like the surface of a lake. Not like those other girls, always yelling or screaming with laughter or flirting—” He shuddered with real disgust. “They’re not pure like you.”

“Thank you,” she said automatically. Then she added slowly, “I don’t know why you always call me that.”

Another car could be heard in the distance, horn blaring, and then it faded. The boy looked up in annoyance at the disruption, and then looked back at the girl. The crickets began to sing again.

“It’s because that’s what you are to me,” he said tenderly, squeezing her shoulder in a way that was almost paternal. “You’re my Madonna of the Rocks, my Beatrice...it’s true what they say about pure love, don’t you think? I feel as though I’m away from all the temptation of the world when I’m with you. That’s why I know what happened at the party was just—well, anyway, that’s why I love you. You’re the way a girl should be.”

“I didn’t know there was a way girls should be,” the girl said.

The boy looked at her curiously—and then laughed. “That’s just it! You don’t have to! You’re too innocent to know about other things.” He squeezed her shoulder again, comfortingly.

“Well,” she said slowly, “that’s not what I meant.”

A burst of laughter drifted down to the gazebo on the wind. They looked up and saw a young, slightly intoxicated couple winding their way down the path. The woman’s arm was slung loosely around the man’s waist, and as they watched, she stood on her toes to plant a long kiss on his cheek. “Oh, whoops!” she cried as she stumbled slightly. The two burst into laughter again and disappeared down a side path.

“Drunk,” the boy said contemptuously. “Another drunk couple, probably off to check into a hotel room. And so goes the tale of the human race.”

“I thought they looked lovely,” the girl said. “Lovely and happy.”

“You’re naïve,” the boy said.

“Do you think so?” the girl said.

The boy sighed contentedly, one arm grasping the girl’s shoulder and the other flung out wide, as if to embrace the cool summer night and the smell of fresh grass and the rustling wind. “God, but it’s beautiful here! I could write a poem right now about how beautiful this moment is, with the sound of the crickets and your face in the moonlight, like an angel’s—” He looked at her hopefully, but the girl’s face was turned off into the darkness out west, where city lights glittered.

Somewhere at that moment there was a party, where women in outrageously bright dresses were laughing with their men and drinking frothy champagne from long-stemmed glasses.

“There’s something so ascetic about nature,” the boy continued. “It’s as though all the indulgence in the world simply disappeared with one big breath of that pure, clean air.” He inhaled deeply and looked at the girl. “That’s what it’s like being with you, you know.”

The girl looked at him. He gazed off into the distance, his eyes illuminated by light.

“What happened at Davey’s was what I wanted to happen,” she said.

The boy stared at her.

He slowly withdrew his arm from her shoulders.

“But I always thought—” he said, and broke off. “You’re not like that! You’re—” and his eyes radiated a strange saintlike intensity as he gripped her shoulders anew—“you’re too sweet and kind to do something like that, I know you are, I always did—you *say* that you wanted it to happen because you’re forgiving, or because—because you want to forgive yourself, you know it was a mistake, you wouldn’t just—”

“No, you’re not listening to me, you’re making excuses for me and I don’t want you to do that this time,” the girl said, raising her voice slightly.

“I’m not! I just want to understand why you think you’re some kind of—because I know you’re not! I *know*—”

“You’re wrong,” the girl said.

“I can’t be!” The boy looked at her pleadingly. “Tell me it was an accident, tell me you didn’t mean it, only—because if you don’t, then I—just tell me, tell me, please—or that means you’re—”

Another car roared by, drowning him out. Once it had gone, the boy leapt up, apoplectic with rage.

“CARS!” he shouted. “I just wanted to sit—even in the middle of nature, oh, what am I saying, there’s no nature anymore, just cars and cement and fluorescent city lights—and there’s always *cars*—no clean country air—no pure air—no pure anything—” He threw a horribly hurt, bitter look at the girl.

“Is it too much to ask that just once I can sit in the middle of nature, away from all the tangles of civilization and corrupted society and shameless women, in a world where nothing like that exists—where you can sit down and for a moment be happy without someone telling you—without cars ruining the silence—and I always thought you understood—I thought—”

“You thought I was part of your dream-world,” the girl said. She stood up and gently took his hands off her shoulders. “Look at me. Do I look like your Madonna?”

“All you dreamers,” she said, a little sadly. “All you dreamers are the same. Idolizing and exalting and building shrines to worship. I don’t want your pedestal. White sculpted statues can’t draw breath.”

The boy said nothing. He looked at the girl helplessly.

“I’m going now,” she said. She stood up and turned to leave. She stopped and glanced back at the boy.

“I’m very sorry for what you thought,” she said. “But I won’t sacrifice my own happiness for something that doesn’t exist.”

And fifty miles away women in bright pretty dresses laughed as champagne glasses ran over and red lipstick was reapplied and doorknobs were turned in secret, the sound of locks clicking like coy asterisks between paragraphs.