

OLIVIA SUDJIC  
SYMPATHY

ONE

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I wasn't with her when the fever started. I didn't even know she was sick. I'd known nearly everything about her until then, and could have recalled the smallest detail of any given day, whether she'd spent it with me or not. For months her presence, and telepresence, had given shape to my new life in New York. Now, with the stroke of a finger, it had gone.

*Unfollow.* Intended as a symbolic gesture only, a symbolic *fuck you*, assuming that I'd still have a level of public access. I'd observed her this way long before we met, but it appeared that her privacy had been altered since then. Very recently, I guessed. I was alarmed by her inhibition or what it meant she had to hide. Before, anyone could find her. Just by typing her name they would get an instant synopsis of her life: the neat grid of her pictures, captioned with her thoughts and feelings, tagged with a location and timestamped. Anyone could track her progress through the city, or slip backwards into her past, to her vacations and graduations. I can't have been the only one who'd done it so successfully. But now I was locked out. A white wall had descended, blank except for a padlock symbol.

More than her physical absence, it was this whiteout that was disorienting. There was little to suggest that time was passing. No news of her mornings or meals, no filtered sunsets or stars. As darkness fell in my world, the light from hers tormented me, remaining the same bright hospital white. I butted my index finger repeatedly against the wall, but her defiant little mouth, just visible in the porthole containing her profile picture, turned my symbolic gesture back towards me: *Fuck you*. It was all symbolic. I touched the mouth; it was hard and would admit nothing. Her face was hard too. It denied, or felt nothing. No amount of pressure made any difference. There was nothing I could depress except *Follow* or *Back*. I couldn't decide which, so I waited, hoping that the unhappy choice would be taken away. Sometimes I would cover the glare with the palm of my hand, cancelling her light completely by squeezing my knuckles together. I'd count out sixty Mississippis and then flare them open again, hoping with this expansive motion to have magically sprung the lock, or to discover that the wall was only a temporary measure and she'd now restored her previous settings. When she did not, I tried more inventive routes. Rather than typing in *her* name, like any fool, I interrogated other names I knew—the names of her friends—pressing on every back door I could think of for a glimpse of where she was and who she was with, hoping to find her sheltering in one of their pictures. Not one of them had seen her, or if they had, they were hiding the fact. Or she was hiding somewhere in that labyrinth of other people's lives, but behind the lens itself.

It didn't take long for my resolve to weaken; then, after I'd admitted defeat, tapping *Follow* again, the time spent waiting for her to approve my request passed impossibly slowly. For whole minutes I convinced myself that it was the best thing to have happened, that this was in fact the only way out: to know

nothing more about her from now on. It was useless, however. I knew too much already, and for long hours in between those minutes I tortured myself with grim fantasies—what was happening behind the wall as I waited for reentry.

*Follow*, once white, was now an arresting grey, the word replaced by *Requested*. I felt this new word did not convey proper urgency. For a start, I did not like the past tense. I glared at the word as I lay in bed, certain that my envoy was not requesting hard enough. I wondered how I might take back control of the situation. When we had spent rare nights apart before, I'd kept our message thread open, in order to watch her name waxing on- and offline in the grey bar at the top of the screen, pressing it every so often to keep it lit. By doing this I'd felt as though I had her next to me, as if she lay beside me breathing, but trying that trick then felt more like lying beside a corpse for comfort.

When I wasn't watching the white wall, I watched the grey bar. At least there time moved on. It didn't tell the *actual* time, but how long had passed since she'd gone off-grid. I wanted to breathe in the same atmosphere as her. I opened the windows as many inches as I could, felt the currents of air that moved between the tall buildings, and imagined liquefying them, creating a hydraulic system between us, so that I could position and push her finger down just by levering mine above the button. Once, I felt sure I'd seen her status morph from *last seen* to *online* and from *online* to the pendulous *typing*: a sign of life, like steam on a mirror. Then I had blinked hard, and again the grey bar, the headstone above the message thread, confirmed that she was not.

I waited for her to appear for so long that occasionally I had to turn over, onto my front, and lower my device-holding hand to the floor to steer the blood into my fingers. If I managed to fall asleep, my mind pinballed through possible encounters, following her to every intersection of the Upper West Side. Depending

on the intensity of my despair, the streets either connected or separated us, and though I barely moved, each time I woke I was exhausted, fingers pruned with sweat as if I'd spent the night stalking the fifty blocks between us.

This limbo period taught me everything there is to know about the terrain between longing and revulsion. Where they met, I felt sickly warmth seep up from the mattress. Whenever I found it, I had the sensation, like a neck twist, a violent muscle spasm, of having briefly possessed her. Just there our bodies snapped into alignment, and it was, for an instant, *me* doing whatever she was doing while ignoring my *Follow* request.

From the limited amount I do know about her activity then, the sickly heat makes sense. My intelligence came later, from the doorman in the building where she lived on West 113th. He reported that by the time she'd arrived at the hospital, two blocks away, as a walk-in with a high fever, a parasite had bored into her brain. He explained that it had all begun, like most things covertly bent on death, with "flulike symptoms," and the first doctor had dismissed her on that basis. Sent her off to buy a stronger version of Theraflu. When she made her second trip, it was by ambulance. The doorman had called 911 himself. Ambulances, he informed me gravely, are usually reserved in America for the very unconscious or the very rich, but he had reasoned that she was both.

"It probably began its life's journey at the bottom of the ocean, in a crustacean. Found its way into something like a frog, and from there into something like a snake, and then a bird—"

"Or," I interrupted, with a croak, "some other creature."

He studied me for a moment. I had barely spoken to anyone in days, and it had become a strain to keep my theories to myself.

"Right," he continued, "before being eaten or petted by her. She loved cute stuff, right?"

“Right.”

“The demon.” He rolled his eyes and I nodded. Her cat was a menace, it was true.

After her operation, she was moved into a room in the ICU, with a prime view of the Hudson. It would have been the first day of October. I remember the air outside was still warm, hot in the sun. The summer, the summer of *us*, lingered in the soft light and the thick end-of-day heat, but she retained little memory of any of it. The latter half of July, all of August and September had been disemboweled with the removal of the parasite. She first met me in August, and she later assured me that my part in it all had either been eaten up by the parasite or burnt away in the operating theatre.

In a story she wrote after it happened, some time after I left New York, she says she remembers nothing but waking: a “burning sensation,” the “wet bloom” of her own eyelids, gluey from surgical tape, seen from inside as she “swam into consciousness” in a bright room. The memory, suspiciously literary, excludes her mother, who had travelled there from Tokyo to keep a vigil. Either the wet bloom is made up and she remembers nothing about waking in that room, or she has purposefully edited her mother from the scene. The mother was definitely there. She even took a picture of her daughter coming round and beamed it back a generation to her own mother, at that moment still sleeping in the curve of their ancestral archipelago. The picture was accompanied with the word *Waking!* in Japanese.

*Kakusei!*

Back in the lobby of her daughter’s apartment, as she returned the spare key, the mother showed the picture to the doorman, plus an x-ray which revealed the strange looping path of the parasite. She thanked him for all his help. He’d saved her daughter’s life, no doubt. She would be discharged soon. It was only two

blocks for her to walk back, or she could take a cab. She might need help, more than usual, in the coming weeks.

You will have seen the *Kakusei* picture. It ended up in the news. It isn't flattering. Her determined face is flushed, the jaw juts out, though I suppose her beauty is a fact so absolute that vanity is beneath it. The picture is now the first to come up when you search for her. Mizuko Himura. I have set a million traps for that name. Whenever she does or says anything, or anyone else does or says anything in connection with her, across whichever ocean, the name reaches me in a Google alert. Each time I reel in the net, experience rapture for about one second, and am then overcome by acute nausea. I will read without breathing, scanning to see if any of her words are about me, or secretly addressed to me, and feel a creeping mortification when nothing stands out and she slips back into the water. Though I am still hoping for a message, even now that more than a year has passed, I have to assume that the omission is the message, and that her long silence contains all the answers I need.

Looking at the pictures of her taken since, I can tell something has shifted. The charm has become strange—stronger, if that's possible—though that might be the effect of distance, or professionally applied makeup, or my reading into her face what I know to have happened, or all of the above. Her features appear somewhat dismantled, less symmetrical, as if you are looking at the remnants of something perfect but you can't properly remember it whole.

I still don't know how she really felt about me. I've gone through all the things I kept; they're inconclusive, flotsam and jetsam that could mean anything or nothing. I am sure there is something very deep, lying far beneath the surface, which, if disturbed, maybe even provoked, might finally come up for air. I used to be able to summon things that way, pulling things to-

wards me on invisible strings, making the sky dense, a febrile blue screen shivering with all that I wanted to keep close. In fact, right before I left for America, my mother had passed the power on to me. A singular inheritance. She'd poked her head into my bedroom, where I'd been holed up, packing relentlessly for weeks. I'd grown used to stepping over and around two halves of a suitcase in the middle of my floor and had forgotten that at some point I'd have to a) close and b) transport it without assistance. After a period of silent observation, me furiously folding things without looking up, she advised that I try to "live lightly" in New York. Back then, knowing nothing of what awaited me, I'd assumed this wisdom was aimed at my suitcase, split open on its back, leaking onto the carpet my too-difficult books (Baudrillard, Deleuze) and too-careful ensembles. Then she'd pinned me to her chest, the first hug from her I could remember as an adult, and I felt her press the power into me. It slid like mercury, tingling in my fingers and toes, giving me a new sensation of their weight. She'd never lived lightly herself, of course. She suffered from incurable apophenia. "In Manhattan," she said, "either you need to be light, so light you float above the city as a solitary spore, or"—and this was the sudden flipside to her warning, the part that lodged in my mind—"you have to be really, really heavy, pulling everything there is towards you."