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Dancing With Dragonflies

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Dancing With Dragonflies

I fear the persistent hum of the dragonflies will eventually drown out my thoughts. The buzzing sound grows more tedious every day, turning my headspace into a toxic place where ideas only live to die. But sometimes, I think, it isn't so much the noise, but the presence which upsets me.

I sit on the dusty stone bench at the bus stop. The stone feels cool on my bare thighs but the sun above envelops my body in a casing of warmth. The balmy breeze blows my blonde hair over my shoulders, tickling my pale skin. I smooth the hairs back into place as the smell of freshly cut grass crawls up my nose. The grass cutters light up in response to signals from the dragonflies. Then slowly the circular plate-like drones glide over the unkempt grass and file it back into perfection.

There are about 50 unread messages on my phone. I prefer to talk in person where I can whisper—not that it does much good. I am flipping through them when a notification pops up on my screen:

THE BUS HAS ARRIVED, MARIKA

And sure enough, the bus has pulled up on the street in front of me. But something stops me from getting on. I shake my head and look up at the deliriously happy sun. Then I see it; a tiny silver and blue dragonfly zipping by me. Such a little thing with so much power, like an infant over their parent. It flies around almost naturally before landing on the leaf of a rose bush beside my bench. Its weight lowers the leaf to the ground.

Without an ounce of thought, I stand, lift my brown heeled boot over the bug, and stomp down with as much speed and strength as possible. The satisfying crunch makes me smile. I

move my shoe out of the way and bask in the sight of the shattered bug on the ground. It doesn't ooze or leave a stain of blood. No. The only living thing harmed was the poor leaf that got stuck in the crossfire. I wish I were smarter and could pick apart the pin-head sized camera or the microphone. But unfortunately, all I see are crumbs of a tiny robot.

Of course, it only takes them moments to arrive. The dragonfly probably told them while my foot hung above it. Or maybe it was posthumously. The flashing red and blue light greets me at the curb, as the officer handcuffs me and loads me into the backseat of his vehicle, babbling on about my rights. It only takes about twenty minutes until I'm downtown and talking to a woman with oval glasses and a fat mole on her chin.

"Marika Banks," she recites without having asked for any identification. She didn't need to; the dragonflies would have told her. "Destroying government AI property is a felony, would you like to go to prison?" I shake my head. "I wouldn't want to see a young girl like you ruin your life. Your record is squeaky clean, and I have on file that you are a class A citizen. Despite what the footage of the incident tells me, I'm choosing to believe that you were under the impression that it was a bug... eating the rose bush? You didn't understand the situation before you acted?" She looks at me expectantly. I nod until my head feels as if it might snap off my neck. "And I am sure this will never happen again?" I keep nodding. "Good. Then I will let you off with a warning this time. You're free to go."

"Thank you, thanks," I say, grabbing my backpack from the end of the metal table as I rise from the stained swivel chair. The words sound sincere, but they don't feel it.

"Next time, I will not be so generous." She warns, looking deep into my eyes, chilling every bone in my body.

“I understand.” I say, with a curt smile, before retreating from the station as quickly as possible. The sound of my boots click-clacking on the tile floor carries me out the automatic doors and down the street to the mall where I hope to take my mind off things. But the buzzing continues.

I enter the first store I see, called *Libellule*, and am greeted by an employee, “Hello, Marika, what can I do for you today?” She says my name wrong, emphasizing the “ika” and not the “mar”. I ignore her and browse through the racks of clothing, only for her to bother me again, “Here, Marika, I’ve picked out a few things in your size and style for you to try on.”

“No thanks,” I snap. I leave the store in a hurry, rushing past the advertisements which change as I walk past them. The girl who originally was a brunette and wearing athletic attire is now blonde, wearing a short pink dress and nude wedges. It looks like I’m staring at myself in a funhouse mirror.

I walk past the row of other stores, noticing the screen panels on the walls change before I approach them. There’s a dog food ad in one, a restaurant with a plate of sushi, lots and lots of shoes, and everywhere I go... pink. I pull my phone out of my pocket and let it fall to the pavement. Then I take my boot once more and smash it, hoping the advertisements would cease. But they merely shudder before changing to another tailored image.

The buzzing follows me home from the mall. I can still hear it in the back of my head as I rush past my dog Bailey—who always awaits my presence at the door, into my room; eager for solitude. But I see two dragonflies in my window, observing me. I hold my pillow against my face until I can’t breathe. My arms get tired and the pillow loosens. Then I fall asleep.

The next morning I'm determined to throw them off my scent. I sleep in late and wake up to the sound of water running in the bathroom. It's 7:10, my usual shower time and the water is ready for me. But I press the pillow back over my ears until 7:20 when the water stops, and the automatic dryers begin. I don't roll out of bed until 7:50—where usually I would be in the middle of my arduous makeup routine. Instead of venturing into my Barbie-looking closet, I trek to my older sister Harlow's room.

The walls of Harlow's room are painted gunmetal grey and littered with old rock band posters: *Nirvana*, *Ramones*, and *Arctic Monkeys*, anything with bass and not from this century and it's for her. Her bed—an unmade mass of dark blue sheets thrown across a black metal bed frame, is home to piles of ripped jeans and graphic tees. I peel off my lilac pajamas and peach slippers and replace them with a pair of black jeans ripped from ankle to thigh, a baggy purple tee with a skull and roses on it, and her burgundy combat boots, which I find under the cigarette-burnt table by her bed. Then I head to her bathroom, where I plow through her black eyeshadow and dark lipstick. And when my tainted reflection still isn't enough, I find a pair of scissors and stand there, snipping my long blonde hair as my heart beats in synch.

“Marika!” my mother exclaims as I rush past her. I glimpse at the bowl of granola and yogurt she had prepared for me as I sprint out the door. My stomach rumbles past the bus stop as I walk to school under thick black clouds; I bet the dragonflies can hear it.

“What the hell are you wearing?” my friend Roxanna asks upon my late arrival, “And why haven't you answered my texts?” I open my mouth to say something to wipe the scowl off her perfectly made-up face, but nothing comes out. I can hear the buzzing as the dragonflies' dance around us. I shrug and look down at Harlow's dirty boots. My lack of response urges her to continue, “Also, I got a notification yesterday saying you were at the mall. Why didn't you tell

me? I would've kicked off and gone with you." I keep my vocal cords locked up. "Well? Are you going to say something or are you just ignoring me in person too?" I shrug again. "You freak!" she exclaims before storming off. I don't feel sad because it's what must be done. I would rather be silent than give them access to anything more than a visual representation of me. If they hear me speak, they can see my thoughts too.

The following weeks rush by as if they have somewhere better to be. Every day there's a new outfit from Harlow's closet and fewer words spoken. I occasionally skip school. Last Tuesday I pierced my nose. On Thursday I bought a blender just because it was a pretty shade of yellow. Saturday came and I jumped off the pier into the lake. Yesterday I burnt up all my belongings. Yet the swarms of dragonflies continue to grow every day, angry at me for not being their friend.

Then today, while walking home from school, I see another advertisement billboard on the side of a bank. There's a middle-aged man in a navy-blue suit down the sidewalk in front of me. He has an expensive-looking brown leather shoulder bag and a paper coffee cup in his hand. The screen flicks through images of his liking; an ad for a Rolex watch, luxury coffee beans, an over-priced cologne for men. I roll my eyes and take a deep breath as he passes it and I approach it. The screen stops for a moment. It goes static. I smile. I've won.

Then a picture of dog food appears. Then an ad for makeup, a music streaming service... I scream. I let my vocal cords sing into the sweet and pungent air until my bellowing becomes so irritating the sky starts to cry, sending powerful streams of water to silence me. I comply because I'm too tired not to.

Even in the rain, dragonflies follow me home.

“Marika, Harlow and I are worried about you.” My mother and sister are standing together in the lemon-scented kitchen when I get home. My mother looks frail and Harlow fatigued. “You’ve been acting strange recently. You barely eat, you don’t speak, you have no care for anything...” she pauses, “I got a notification. It recommended I have you see a mental health professional...”

My mind is whirling like a flushed toilet, “Why aren’t you bothered by the dragonflies?”

“They’re here to help us...” My mother pleads.

I push past her and lock myself in the bathroom; the only room without windows for the dragonflies to spy on me. Maybe I shouldn’t think anymore. Maybe they can read my thoughts. They will always be watching me, listening, recording, tracking, tracing, chasing... A crash of thunder shakes my very soul. And even through the walls and the pouring rain, I can hear the buzzing.

I crawl into the bath. I grab my razor and pop out the blades. My wrists hang over the edge of the tub and I listen as the blood drips onto the perfectly white tiled floor. I breathe in the concoction of iron and sickly-sweet toilet cleaner. *They’ll never go away*, I tell myself. I will never be safe. *If they won’t go away, I’ll go away...*

Then a dragonfly lands on my nose. And I hear the wailing of ambulance sirens, only seconds after I took the blade to my wrists. Then there’s the sound of the bathroom door being kicked in, and next are the paramedics. There is a flurry of people and noises, but they are all on mute.

All I can hear is the buzzing.