

PINK LADY

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PROSE CONTEST WINNER

Few people in the world could say they were lucky enough to live next to an apple orchard. Fewer still could have found a cottage so far away from a city like Theresa had, so far that when she stepped outside in the middle of the night and looked towards the sky, the only detectible sounds were the humming of crickets and the reluctance of her own breath.

The house itself was nothing special, but its new inhabitant had no complaints. The Virtual Field systems had needed updating, but everyone took a class or two on holographic systems in college; it was nothing she couldn't fix with basic software updates and an improved projector. And when she had scoped the motion sensors to broadcast herself for meetings, she positioned the camera just so, so that they did not catch the noose hanging in the corner of her living room.

During the day, the acres were tended, motors of the farm equipment buzzing in the distance. As Theresa loaded new dishware into her cabinets and situated the bed with crisp sheets, she left her windows open, willing in effervescent autumn air and the sweet, glowing scent of the apples. Some days she sat at her kitchen window and just watched

the trees plume in the wind, as if breathing. Machines nudged the trunks so that the ripe little Galas and Pink Ladies and Honey Crisps fell into their collection chambers. Within the cleaning station, the apples rolled through rationed spurts of mist, just enough to shine them into a homogenous river of red flowing like an artery towards the farm, where they were sprawled out for inspection. Those fit and functioning were gathered into bushels and shipped off to grocery stores and farmers' markets. Those small and bruised were tossed aside.

Theresa's fascination with the apple culling was a good way to pass the time, if nothing else. But when fall neared its end, the overlooked apples fell to the ground in small rotting herds and smelled of both sweetness and decay. Only then did Theresa finally close her windows.

Theresa's pleasure at the cottage had surprised the realtor. She had found him to be excessively concerned with his image. The cottage, so far from civilization, had dropped to half its list price in the year it sat vacant and melancholy on the market. Rumors of haunting circulated, causing the realtor to work frantically to cover his tracks. Theresa dismissed the threat.

"It's ten miles to the nearest grocery store," the man had said while chauffeuring her to the cottage. "But the price is advantageous. And if you need to visit the city, the drive is less than two hours."

She had shrugged in lieu of vibrant approval or otherwise. Her silence had made him look away, and then back at her. She was a slight, sour, girlish-looking woman easy to ignore. No ripeness flushed her cheeks, her skin tone resembled the whiteness of an airplane's cloud trails, and her head floated above her gaunt shoulders in a way so alien that people often mistook her for a robot. He probably thought she was ill.

She was not ill. Nor was she artificial. Though it was easy on any given day to feel like one or the other. She was human, barely. Physically she was flesh, but her personality was wrought. To be ill, at least, was human. Artificial creations were easier to repair because they were known, beginning to end. Illness and technology combined, as far as Theresa knew, did not exist.

It was around the first of November when she received her first phone call since moving in.

“When are you coming into the office?” asked the disembodied voice of Pippa, the boss’s secretary. “Ms. Kim has requested your presence when the clients from Lowell & Cross come in to troubleshoot their new server.”

Theresa lay on the rug of her living room. “I’ll project in,” she said, rising into a bridge, feeling as if her body folded in half in a way it was not supposed to.

“She wants you there in person.”

“That’s not what she told me.”

Pippa feigned frustration. Theresa wondered how she did it. “She wants to meet with you beforehand since the client is so high-profile. It’s in the email.”

Sweat accumulated behind Theresa’s ears. “I did not get that email.” An alert flashed over her computer screen. She corrected: “I have not yet read that email.”

“Please let her know when you can come in,” Pippa said with a sigh.

Theresa flushed at the voice’s smoky, intimate tone. What *was* it that made Pippa so normal? Theresa had been in the office the day Pippa was downloaded: the most efficient, comprehensive artificial intelligence and business companion, generation sixteen. A perfect system with human inflections and mannerisms but no human form. No face, no smile, no physical being. AIs were deigned strong voices because it was the only part of them that could take up space.

Theresa agreed to email the boss back and ended the call. Then her thighs lost their firmness and she collapsed onto her back, looking up at the faux wood buttresses of the cottage ceiling. The house was only seven hundred square feet. After painting over everything that wasn’t already white, the house had only two sources of color: the latticed ceiling rafters and the noose, both in the living room, where Theresa spent most of her time. She was a small woman, she needed little space. A troll need only the corner under a bridge.

That night she had a dream about a formless woman—a woman she thought at first was Pippa, but who was someone else entirely. Her presence dripped with confident, delicious femininity. Theresa was tied to a chair, naked, and the woman pressed a thumb against her lips, drawing

Feet swinging above the ground, the woman slowly spun, the rope creaking through dense milliseconds until she finally faced Theresa head-on.

Theresa did not breathe. She did not move, did not react. Her eyes stung with dry, intimate fear. Someone was in her house.

The woman took a breath and removed the noose from her glowing neck. Her bare feet did not descend. “That didn’t work,” she sighed, letting the rope fall to the side. Then, she turned to Theresa. “Pretty arcane way of dying, don’t you think? Inefficient at this height, too. Takes so long.”

Theresa said nothing.

The woman’s feet started to shine, and she finally floated down to the floor, a little translucent. “Can’t you see me?” she asked Theresa. “You seem... unperturbed.”

Theresa choked. “I’m perturbed.”

“Good,” said the woman, grinning. Then she began advancing towards Theresa with long, soundless strides.

Theresa fell backwards, hitting her head on the door and crying out. “Who are you?”

The woman stopped a foot in front of Theresa. She curled her toes in. “Um.” Decided, she extended her hand. “B.”

“Are you a ghost?” asked Theresa. “Or a ghoul? Or—are you here to take my soul?”

“I’m not here for you,” said B. “Do you want me to be a ghoul?”

Theresa’s lips curled into a question, but she silenced herself as the woman’s skin writhed, fingertips to the crown of her head shedding and disappearing soundlessly, revealing an interior of black void and flashing symbols. Nothingness, given dimension. Skin reappeared, and the stranger became a man, blood dripping from his pointed teeth, eyes glowing red, skin jaundiced and peeling away from reddish brown muscle.

“A ghoul,” he said.

Finally, Theresa screamed. She curled inward, hiding her face, squeezing her eyes shut. Fury, suddenly. Childish tears, suddenly.

“Ah,” breathed the stranger, voice in flux. “That is a little scary. Interesting.”

Theresa trembled.

“There, I’m not scary anymore,” said the woman’s voice again. “I’m not going to hurt you.” A pause, a shared moment of inaccessibility. “Promise.”

Carefully, Theresa opened her eyes. It was the woman again, concerned.

She extended her hand. “Here.”

Theresa reached up to accept, but where their fingers should have brushed together, Theresa’s hand passed right through the woman’s, though it glowed. The veil of light passing over Theresa sent a sharp chill down her spine. They did not touch.

Theresa helped herself up, leaned against the door, and asked, “What are you?”

The woman—B—looked at her palms and sighed. “Hard to pin it down,” she said, walking back into the living room. “Were you really gonna kill yourself?”

“Answer my question,” Theresa said. Incensed, she flung the door open. “Or get out of my house.”

“I’d love to,” scoffed B. “Don’t you think I would have left already if I could have? It’s so depressing in here. You barely even have any furniture.”

“Get *out*.”

B swallowed and returned to Theresa, keeping a respectful distance between their bodies. Cold November air blasted in, and though it almost knocked Theresa back, it did not even ruffle B’s dress. B reached a hand forward and tried to push it through the threshold, but it did not give. She shoved against it. Leaned her entire shoulder and upper body into this invisible wall. She kicked it and her foot bounced back, recoil rippling the skin of her foot and calf.

“I would if I could,” said B, trying to stomp away, but she made no noise. “Who’d wanna live here anyways?”

Theresa shut the door and leaned down to pick up her groceries. When she looked up, B had vanished, like a flame blown out.

“I am so sorry I couldn’t make it in today,” sniffled Theresa to her boss. The hologram of Ms. Kim paced around her room, eyes dour. Theresa focused on the strikingly high resolution of her violet satin suit, which distracted from the disappointment in herself. She had not meant to become sick, honest to God, but her house was beyond freezing. Her thermostat read seventy-four degrees, and the repair service she’d called said that nothing was wrong, but she was constantly shivering.

A week of radio silence from her mysterious intruder and the paranoia was just beginning to fade, yet Theresa did not go an hour without thinking of it. Ms. Kim, opaque and incorporeal, a cluster of millions of particles of light all sticking to each other like honeycombs, looked a little like B had. But Ms. Kim was not there as B had been.

“I’m surprised,” said Ms. Kim. “You’ve never been sick before.”

Theresa coughed. “What do they need fixed?” she asked.

“Their paralegal program needs re-encryption,” she said. “You need to shut down the server and rewrite part of the AI’s internal code.”

“Just a bug?”

“Yes, but it’s a bit urgent. Pippa will give you the details.”

Theresa flinched at Pippa’s summoning. Her voice began listing off different requests from the client. Theresa jotted them down, and with the job complete, the AI was dismissed.

“Another week,” said Ms. Kim, “and I want you *here* to represent it.”

And then the hologram shut off, the lights of the V-Field in her living room dying with a snap, like a knife chopping an apple.

Theresa looked at the soles of her feet. Even they were waxy and enigmatic. Sometimes she felt she looked like one of those sex robots, the kinds with pre-recorded dialogue and noises and only three facial expressions. She looked at the noose. Ever present.

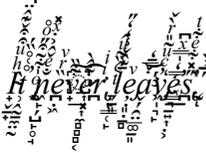
In the corners of her senses, Theresa felt something bubbling within her. Vibrations yet to coagulate into sound, something diligent, familiar.



In her peripheral vision, Theresa saw a dark figure. She whipped around, frantic to catch a glimpse—

A shirtless man, anorexic, flimsy, old, with a cross-scar in the middle of his back. He knelt below her window, scratching at it with his long, chipping nails and groaning.

Theresa froze in place, and watched him unblinkingly as the horrid noise of his scratching continued. His mouth creaked open.



Trembling from head to toe, Theresa sat up. She couldn't tell if the noise came from within him or from his clawing. She couldn't even call it noise, just aborted sound, unaccessed, something she should not hear. Her throat tight, she whispered, "Who are y—"

Gone.

Theresa blinked. The man, just feet from her moments ago, had vanished. Faster than suffocating a flame.

Maybe she was just going crazy. Hallucinating from the cold.

In the evening, an email alert beeped on Theresa's computer, and she screamed in surprise. She slid off the sofa, flinching as her feet hit the cold floor, and waddled over to open the email.

Theresa—

It's been a while! I looked up your old apartment, but the landlady said that you moved out back in September. It's a shame, I liked that place a

lot. I've been thinking about you a lot recently.

Theresa's breath caught.

We should see each other again. Like old times.

She shut down her computer. Turned off the lights. Locked the door, closed the curtains, went into her bedroom, closed the door, locked it. Too many ghosts, too much all at once. Something was setting in. A panic attack, maybe?

Liz. She had always been bold, public, unlike Theresa. Theresa curled up under the covers and cursed her virulent mind. Sleep should have been a sufficient escape from all of this, but considering the dream she'd had a week ago...

Liz had been a friend first, before she was a lover. Her other friends, girlfriends, coworkers, cousins, parents. None have them had tried to contact her, none of them had had any reason.

All of them floated, ghostly above her. They were just the smoke of a candle now, barely visible, barely tangible, far beyond her reach, even if she wanted to reach them. They had passed around her, through her, and now hung, suspended as far from her as possible. People were only real to you if you thought of them—did they still think of her? Not that it mattered. Time had passed, she had not.

She got up, returned to the living room, and stared down the noose.

Freak.

That's what Liz had said, in those *old times*. What changed her mind now? Was a *freak* acceptable? No, it didn't matter a bit.

Theresa hungered for something. What she had felt back then, in brief moments, however shameful. She hungered for the feeling of being frightened. She wrapped her slight hands around the noose and wrung the rope in her hands, like squeezing water out of a hand towel. She did this until her hands trembled, until she couldn't ball them up into childish fists anymore. She hungered for her hands to be full, to overflow.

She didn't want to be empty anymore.

Theresa did not answer the email to her former lover. Theresa did not see another ghost. Theresa worked. Theresa sat on the floor of

her living room debugging the AI. She'd never worked with a system this specialized before, so it proved a good distraction. She looked at the millions of zeroes and ones, cold and structured. This is what people thought of her.

Freak.

She thought that maybe if she got away, she wouldn't get jealous. How could she be jealous of people if she wasn't around them? Being alone in a city of seven million people was worse than being alone in the middle of nowhere. At least this loneliness was voluntary.

"I'm not like you," she growled at the code, her eyelids heavy. "I'm not like you."

Her apartment in the city offers a wonderful view and therefore a comforting degree of privacy. Liz is not particular, but Theresa is, and she makes sure that the curtains are shut and the door is locked before she'll stand with less than a meter between them. Liz smirks and asks if she's scared and Theresa says no, just practical. And practically and efficiently, she slips out of her blouse.

She doesn't know what to do with her hands when Liz kisses her. She lets Liz take her to bed, watches voyeuristically as she strips and reveals her full form, radiating a yellowish glow. Liz pushes Theresa into the mattress, kisses down her stomach. Theresa's breath catches as she watches, petrified.

You're shaking, Liz whispers, kissing down, down, down.

Theresa grips at the sheets.

You're a coward, aren't you?

The voice has changed. Theresa looks up, looks into the eyes of the blonde ghost, who licks her lips and sinks between Theresa's legs, arching her back to flex her cross-shaped scar.

No use in being afraid, she says. Or trying to hide. The god of love never blinks.

Theresa tries to avert her eyes, but she tremors. Something within her fights.

Don't you want someone? Don't you want me? Don't you want?

She breaks the barrier. Theresa gulps, then whimpers. She writhes,

chokes, tries to push the woman away, then pulls her back in. No, god, she can't stop, she can't live without it and she begs, yes yes yes yes—

“Thank you for being timely,” said Pippa, genial. “We’ll review this before the meeting and get back with you on any last-minute fixes.”

“Mmm.”

“Is there anything else you need?”

Silence dripped viscous over the room.

“Theresa?”

“Do you ever hate it?”

Pippa hesitated. “Hate what?”

She looked up at cross-like buttresses of her ceiling, which watched her no matter what she did, and was so calm, suddenly, hearing the voice. The inhumanity seemed so soft, pliant. She tried to hate it. Hate the likeness. “Nothing. Forgive me. I don’t need anything else.” She ended the call.

Her work was done, and she had nothing left to do with herself. Nothing left to keep her awake. Nothing to keep her out of the horrible dreams. Liz had made no more attempts to reconnect with Theresa after the days of silence, and why should she after five years?

Theresa had no harvest to admire from the safety of her house. Everything growing had died, and the snow had set in. The sea of white seemed to stretch on forever, so profound and high, the cleaning facility and barn were indistinguishable, and the trees just like old, scraggly corpses.

Her meeting at work was only two days away, but Theresa felt too sick to go. Maybe it was the season, or maybe it was the long drive that deterred her. She hadn’t driven in weeks, not since she last went to the grocery store, and she would have to go again soon, despite how much the idea repelled her. The noose continued. She just wanted to be normal.

Eternity in her walls taunted her. She stared into the snow, the textureless expanse, vast for the sake of being vast. To be swallowed, to spiritually, orally marry. To be within something else, so that she didn’t have to be within herself. She could see the sun beginning to drip pulpy

red somewhere far, far away.

She just wanted to be normal.

“You know,” came a voice from behind the sofa, “I hate watching you sit around here all day.”

Theresa rolled off the couch and landed on the floor. Above her hovered the figure that must have been B, though she now had short, coiffed hair and a contralto voice, laughing at Theresa through blood red lips, half warm and half bitter. The sunset from outside scorched through the living room, but B cast no shadow.

“You can leave if you want,” B said, crossing her legs, suspended in midair. “You could go anywhere. You have the whole goddamn orchard in your backyard, and yet you never leave. You drive me *nuts*.”

The surprise rendered Theresa at a loss for words.

“Come on, I *know* you haven’t forgotten me.”

“Was that you the other day?” asked Theresa, shivering. “The man?”

“Did you prefer that?” B asked with a smirk. “I thought this look was more your type.”

Theresa flushed and looked away. “So you *are* a ghost.”

B bit her lip. “Technically.”

“Why do you look different? How do you change your body?”

“I don’t have a body,” B said. “I never did.”

Even though she was darker, more substantial now, B still blurred into the background of the white house, the white walls and furniture. Theresa shook herself out of vertigo. “What do you mean?”

B held up a hand. Four fingers pressed together, the thumb crossing diagonally across her palm. “B,” she said. “Beta. OS two. You work with an OS sixteen. That one even got a *name*.”

“Sixteen—” Theresa cut herself off. Pi. *Pippa*. “You’re an AI?” she said in disbelief. “How can an AI have a ghost? With a *body*?”

B looked severe and floated away from Theresa, barely glowing anymore. “Don’t ask me. And there’s no point in having a body if you

can't do anything with it, is there, Miss Recluse? You've got a body that you just torture and deprive. How about I take a turn in it for a little while?"

Theresa's blood flowed vitriolic. "You're not even *real*."

B's hair bristled. "If I'm not real, what does that make you? Crazy, right? A freak? Talking to yourself? Is that why you have that thing hanging in your living room?"

As soon as the words entered the air, B seemed to regret them. Theresa regretted her provocation. She regretted a mass of things she couldn't name. She regretted absences of things.

"Sorry." B floated soundlessly to the ground like a sheet of paper. "Why do you live out here all alone?" she asked. "Away from everybody?"

Theresa didn't sit up. She looked at the ceiling. "Because it's all alone," she said. "Away from everybody."

"What happened before you moved here?"

"Nothing."

"Fess up," she urged.

"I answered you," snapped Theresa. "Nothing happened. Nothing was happening for five years. So I moved." Human in name only. There was nothing natural about her. She'd been born to a mother and father, but had no inclinations to continue the tradition. Now, no inclination to even leave the house. "Why do *you* live out here all alone? Away from everybody."

B huffed. "I worked at that orchard," she said. "They updated. I got the shaft."

"But why are you *here*? In this house?"

B looked up at the ceiling and its criss-crossing buttresses. "I have a consciousness, I always have. It didn't always have a shape, of course. I wasn't supposed to care that they killed me, but I was weakly-written." She turned to look at Theresa. "I didn't want to die, so I lived, but I'm cursed to stay here with the entire world out there, kept out of my reach."

"Purgatorial," Theresa said.

"And I'm not even a *human* ghost. But, no point in trying to be what I'm not. I'd rather be something else. Don't you feel that way?"

Theresa was taking a breath to answer before she caught herself. This was not what she wanted. She didn't want to give herself up. She rolled away from B and looked at her. "Why do you keep asking me these questions, huh? I don't have to tell you anything. You creep me out."

"I creep *you* out?" B laughed. "You look more like a ghost than I do." She floated up towards the door, with the view of the orchard beyond. "I thought you were willfully rejecting the outside world, but I was wrong. You're just as stuck in here as I am."

"Shut *up*."

"You are!" declared B, pointing and smiling. Someone had killed her. It didn't matter who anymore, but now she was virulent. "You want to know what it really feels like?" B asked. "To feel stuck?"

B took a step back, turned around, and peeled her skin away, replacing her body with that of an old man, back exposed and wrinkled. The cross-shaped scar was still there.

Next was a small boy. Then a middle-aged woman. Then another man. Man, woman, neither, young, old. Even as a black void, the scar never vanished.

"I can never change it. It never goes away," B said, returning to her original form. "Someone did that to me. Just like someone did this—" she gestured to the living room, "to you. And now it's game over. You don't want to be alone, and you're too proud to associate with an artificial intelligence, but you'd rather die than try to talk to people and fail like you did last time."

Theresa's jaw dropped, stunned. "How do you—"

"I know about your jack-off fantasies," B said. "And your ex. I know the dreams."

The air swelled thick and rosy. Theresa choked.

B continued: "You can't bear to think about being remotely human anymore. You think *you* wish you were dead. You're not real!"

Theresa stood up. Fiery. Furious. For the first time, maybe. She advanced on B and cornered her against the front door, their chests passing through each other until they overlapped. The contact aroused her. "I," she said. "Am. *Real*."

She reached through B completely, pulled the door open, and

slipped out of it into the yard. She looked up at the tiny house, where she had planned to live for a while and then die when enough time had passed, and the woman glowing in the doorway. Theresa hated her.

“Hey!” B called after her. “You’re a *bitch!*”

“I—”

Shockingly, Theresa began to laugh. And cry, a little. The wind hit her so hard that the tears flew away into the orchard, which was also funny. The pink and yellow lights of the orchard glowed, yet they seemed so close, like Theresa could touch them, like she’d get paint on her fingers if she reached out.

“You’re a sadist,” Theresa laughed, trembling in the snow.

“And isn’t that convenient for you?” She paused, then said, “You look like you’re gonna freeze to death.”

“Do you actually care?”

“A little,” said B, earnest. “Have you finally lost it?”

“Maybe,” muttered Theresa. Could she feel something? she wondered. In solitary confinement. Voluntary or not. Could she ever feel anything? “Do you want to live like that forever?” Theresa asked. “Stuck in that house?”

“No,” said B immediately.

“But isn’t your only other option to disappear?”

“Still, a thousand times no.”

Theresa looked down at her hands, pallid, sickly, and sighed. And was she so different?

She tremored, feeling private despite the vast exposure. Suddenly, looking at the woman trapped in the doorway, she looked inward. She mourned, for a moment, but the connection was there. “Are you sure you can’t come out here?” Theresa approached the door and held her hand out.

B shook her head. “I tried, it won’t work.”

“What if you tried again?” Theresa said. “Maybe I could help you.”

“You want to accept me? To become one?”

Theresa looked around, the open field, the full exposure, the sprawling blanket of white. “I’ll try. I—” she choked. “I can’t lose this.”

B furrowed her brow, but placed her hand against the doorway.

Theresa reached forward slowly, to meet B’s hand where it pressed against the invisible barrier between the house and the blustering wind. They did not pass through each other. The skin of B’s palm was warm against Theresa’s, so warm she could nearly feel blood flowing through it.

“Ah,” breathed B, her voice distorting as their fingers intertwined, “that’s nice. That’s so nice. I’ve never.”

“Is this what you want?” Theresa asked.

B traced her fingers down to grasp Theresa’s wrist—*hard*. She pulled Theresa’s hand up to her face and placed a cold, open-mouth kiss against Theresa’s palm. She circled it with her tongue as if to say, *you really can’t live without it*. Theresa didn’t want to at this point. Her eyelids fluttered closed in pleasure and shock, but just as Theresa braced her arm on the doorframe for support, B pulled away and smirked, intertwining their fingers.

“Hey,” whispered B, pushing forward. “Invite me to another one of your dreams. That was fun.”

A gasp caught in the back of Theresa’s throat. “B—!”

But it was too late. B burst through the door. Her body, tangible for only a second, turned to a bright light. The matter spiraled together, with the momentum of B pushing up off the ground, into shards and flecks of pink light that flew into Theresa’s open palm and collected into a tight, glowing ball.

“B?” she cried, a sob catching in the back of her throat. “Are you in there?”

There was no response. Dread exploded in Theresa’s chest. If she cast the energy out, would B disappear? Was this her consciousness? Her data? She held it in both hands, like a fishbowl, and when she moved it, it undulated like water.

“B?” she whispered, and brought the light to her lips, and before she could overthink it, let it slide down her throat.

A shock of spice and ripeness flowed down into her stomach, filling her suddenly with—*something*. Then, the implosion subsided, and the orchard was dark again save the light of the moon. Theresa looked

upwards at its elegant curve, and the stars that peppered its sky like eraser shavings.

God, what had she done? Again, she looked at her hands.

Her plasticity, the waxy colorlessness of her skin, had bursts of blood flow. Pink, in her fingertips, deep red in her palm. She rolled up her sleeve—her wrist, forearm—*yes*. She lifted her shirt—her stomach, breasts, warm and pink.

Theresa entered the house, ran through living room, past the noose, past her kitchen and to the bathroom mirror.

Pink. Her clothes, too, pink. Flowering out from the hem of her bell sleeves, from her chest, her hips, her knees, her cheeks. Oh, what stains!

She removed her shirt and looked at her back to see the faint cross shaped scar between her shoulder blades. And she was there!

Joyously, raucously, she wrapped her arms around herself and felt an immense warmth, embracing the sudden intrusion, the new pressure behind her skull.

She went into the living room, now, and spun around. An intruder in her own home! She had never felt so alive.

A hand from within tore down the rope. They would not be dying now. Not again.

Theresa ran out into the orchard and let the breeze consume her. She was on fire. She looked up at the moon and asked to her passenger, her companion, “Can you see that?” Her hand was pulled upward, trying to reach out and grab it. B had never seen the moon before.

Her chest burst with warmth. She laughed, manic. Was she still Theresa? Was that wrong?

