

Dynamite*Fiction*

If you're pretty nothing else really matters. I'm sitting in a coffee shop in La Brea waiting for David who I haven't seen since high school, and that's all I can think. If you're pretty nothing else really matters. If you're pretty someone will give you an ID at the door, and the bouncer will look at it with his eyes closed and then let you in. If you're pretty you don't have to pay for drugs and will always have someone to talk to.

Being pretty isn't profitable, and you'll probably starve — but that's how you stay pretty anyway. No one with any intelligence thinks they're doing it for the money. It's something else, and I suppose a lot of girls get so accustomed to being pretty that aging hits them hard, like a drug they can't get back. That they can't get for free anymore.

Being pretty means my best friend's in love with me, though he'd never say it and neither would I. That's all right, but being pretty means you don't get to choose who you date. But I mean you can't choose someone other than who can get you into clubs, give you exposure, put you in front of a camera. You don't even have sex with them — it's a transaction: look pretty in my club, and I'll buy you drinks and introduce you to anyone worth meeting. That's fine, because being pretty means all anyone can do is masturbate to you anyway.

If you're pretty and can look turned on and miserable and a little stoned all at the same time, LA opens up for you like how the televangelists warn. It's a talent and a curse and a job and can too easily consume everything about you. But if you're pretty nothing else really matters.

I suppose I'm pretty.

I haven't seen David since graduation, and while all my old friends were saying goodbye to their parents at four-year institutions, having their pictures taken in collegiate spirit wear, my picture was being taken half-naked in a sweaty studio full of men telling me to give them "more." I suppose all the parents cried when they left. I cried when I left too.

It was my first eight-hour shoot, and Marv comes up to me after and says I was "dynamite." He's always affecting this vintage slang, and's always telling everyone one of these days he'll grow a real mustache like Mark Spitz. I don't know who Mark Spitz is, and no one else does either, but he just shakes his head like we'd never understand. He's only 34 or 37 or something, too. My dad would know, but I haven't had the heart to return his calls.



“Dynamite, Alexa, you were dynamite!”

“Thanks, Marv.”

“Dynamite. I’ll see you tonight? There’s a lot of people I want you to meet, lot of really current people I’ve been telling all about Alexa. Frank Ocean’s looking for some girls for one of his, uh, side projects, one of the artsy ones, you know? We’ll work on that at Corner. Katya will be there, and Isabelle too, but I’m sure you already knew that — Katya, Isabelle, and Alexa, now that’s dynamite! And we’ll break bread with this Youtuber who’s starting to produce music videos. You have to meet him, really current stuff. Tonight at Corner — we’ll all eat at Bellevue beforehand, yeah? Where the waiters won’t have any problems with your irr-e-pressible youth. And make sure Isabelle’s on her game she’s been a little . . . less, recently.”

“All right.”

“Give me a little more than that, Alexa, this is a big night.”

“I’d like to meet Frank Ocean.”

“And he’d love to meet you, the way I’ve been talking about you. I always bring you up when I’m with him. Tonight at Corner, I’ll send a car. And Alexa?”

“Yeah Marv?”

“Dynamite stuff today. Really dynamite stuff — you’re doing great.”

“Thanks, Marv.”

He walks away, probably to go smoke the Italian cigarettes he imports even though his asthma makes it near impossible. I’m exhausted and count the hours of sleep I could get before tonight, wondering in the back of my mind whether or not he’s even met Frank Ocean, much less mentioned me.

But that was already so long ago, some 14 hours of infinity, and I wish David would just get here so I can hear about USC and everyone I used to know and hear a different past in the present tense. He’s late like he never is, but I’m mostly anxious because I can’t stop wondering what he’ll think of me now, wearing clothes worth more than his car. If he knew everything, he’d say something like “prostitute without the sex,” one of his philosophical-y statements that don’t really make any sense. I chose this coffee shop because it looks like the one where we always used to study for finals together back in high school, back at home, and I don’t want him to think I’ve changed. Not too much, anyway, not as much as I think I have. I really just want him to recognize me from memory, not from my headshot. I don’t know what I want to happen. Maybe just see myself in his eyes again, a fossilized version of me, back when I didn’t feel so old. Or young I mean.

Last night when the car came we were almost late because Isabelle was showering again. The whole way from Bellevue to Corner, Marv



kept trying to get us to call him our “old man.” Isabelle dutifully agreed and Katya couldn’t really follow the English, and I just said “whatever you say, Marv,” but before we got to the club he’d had us all change his name in our phones, and now I’ll have to explain why “My Old Man” is texting me to everyone. I think about what my dad would say I should really call him.

When we get to Corner it’s the same as always — they play the same playlist at every club, serve the same alcohol, have the same conversations. I start to wonder what the point of this all is and know I haven’t been in LA long enough to get disillusioned. I freak out a little when I think, “I need a drink” because it’d never been serious before.

Marv takes us over to a table where a prematurely balding guy is arguing with someone about the price of bottle service. When he sees Marv he sends the man away but doesn’t stand up.

“Marv!”

“Calvin, how the hell are you? These are my absolutely favorite girls in the world: Alexa, Isabelle, and Katya.”

Like a prostitute without the sex, huh David?

“Pleasure. Join me, please.”

As we all climb into the booth I whisper to Marv, “Who is this guy?” but Marv doesn’t get it and just hisses back: “the Youtuber,” then adds almost kindly: “Show your personality, like we worked on.”

“This shirt cost \$500,” the Youtuber says mildly, as if everyone had been wondering. It’s plain white and covered in carefully sewn holes. You can see more skin than shirt and it’s too obvious he’s trying not to waste his annual chance to wear it.

There’s a really young girl there with him who I didn’t see before and he doesn’t introduce and the only thing I think he says about her is that he scouted her on Instagram. She looks really young, younger than David’s sister, but he still pours her a shot of Tequila and she downs it a second after him.

“This shirt cost \$500!” he says again, ten or thirty minutes later. Marv’s on his phone and the other girls are absorbed in comparing their RIPNDIP cigarette lighters. The girl slides a hand through one of the holes in his shirt and whispers something in his ear. I can’t help it anymore.

“How old are you?”

Marv looks over at me weird and the girl glances up to the Youtuber with the \$500 shirt a little scared, I think. Or she could just think it’s funny.

“What a stupid question,” the man says, and Marv starts to laugh and the girl does too.

“Let’s dance, huh? I think Frank Ocean’s supposed to be here tonight . . .”



Over the summer before we left, David would always joke about how I was going to go live in a Bret Easton Ellis novel. I never told him I'd read it — he's the kind of guy who hates it when someone gets his references. I'd just smile and laugh and give him a feminine, softly incredulous "what?" But now I don't think I could laugh. I think I'm too young for that.

Later on it's dark and I'm drunk and I can't really move. I don't know where Katya or Marv went and there are a bunch of people whose names I can't remember learning too crammed together to dance, holding drinks aloft at their shoulders. Isabelle's whispering something but she's not looking down so I don't realize she wants me until she says:

"Alexa, please, I need to talk to you."

I turn and the world lags a second behind. It almost looks like she's gonna cry.

"Hey Isabelle what's wrong? Is it about Frank Ocean? Don't worry about it Marv's always saying shit like that. He's 90% bullshit but the 10% is still pretty good. I wouldn't worry about it."

"I don't care about Frank Ocean, Alexa, let me just like fucking talk to you."

"OK," I say, but she looks around scared and starts to walk outside so I follow. I get held up in the crowd when someone says "you look just like —" a name I can't make out and he won't let me leave until I've proven I'm not. I show him my ID, my real ID, and he says "happy birthday, sweetheart," but I grab it and leave without saying anything. When I get outside Isabelle's standing in the shadow of a bouncer that doesn't even seem to recognize we're there. Her hands are shaking and she can't light her cigarette.

"What's wrong, Isabelle?"

"Have you — I mean, have you ever — do you know Darien?"

"Yeah, sure," I lie.

"Do you . . . know him?"

"Um, no, no I don't think so. Do you?"

"Alexa Jesus Christ! Darien's never . . . you've never been — you don't know Darien? Darien's never . . ."

"Have you talked to Marv?" I ask, trying to guess what she took.

"Forget it," she says. The lighter slips from her hand. "You don't want to hear this."

She asks someone on the street for a light and walks off down the sidewalk. I think maybe I should go after her, but then Marv will probably look for her, and then I realize she's right. I don't want to hear it. I pick up her lighter instead.

When I turn to go back into the club the bouncer stops me.



“Can I help you?” he asks, and I’m a little shocked anyone here’s actually paying attention.

“Yeah I just stepped out for a minute to talk to a friend, I wanna go back in.”

“Sure — if you’re 21.”

“I just came out of there, you saw me.”

“I see a lot of you girls.”

“Excuse me?”

“Go on,” he spits. “I know what they want. For the club’s reputation.”

I wish Marv was here to yell at him for me and I know that if I tell him he could probably get the man fired, but I’m struck that for the first time since I started modeling I really feel used. As if smelling the vodka-breath propositions of rapidly aging self-important Somebody was somehow advancing my career. Like one of the stupid jokes I heard someone make once as they cut a line — “Exposure? How does naked on my bed sound?” Here they all are trying so hard to be the Hollywood assholes they grew up watching on thick TVs in Eagle Rock and Pasadena. LA’s a man, no matter what anyone says, filled with people commenting on my Instagram to say which pictures they’ve masturbated to, even people from my high school I never really knew. I suddenly wonder if David’s ever masturbated to me, wonder if the answer means anything. What it means to them.

I don’t remember much after that. There was someone who looked like David, but that was only in the way he kind of shyly came out of the bathroom, looking if anyone noticed he’d left. All night I only talked to men. No matter how many girls they ship into these clubs I always end up with men. Rooms full of men no matter how many of them there are. But I don’t really remember much after that. I guess Marv must’ve found Isabelle because he didn’t mention her the rest of the night.

As I’m waiting outside with him for an Uber I can’t stop wondering how old that girl with the Youtuber was and how young the bouncer thought I was or what happened to Isabelle so after minutes of silence I ask:

“Hey Marv, is Isabelle OK?”

“Who?” He doesn’t hear me, eyes down at his phone.

I can’t make myself ask again.

“Uber’s here,” he says. “Safe drive home, I’ll call you tomorrow. And Alexa?”

I turn before the car door.

“Dynamite stuff today. Really dynamite stuff.”

“Your mustache doesn’t look anything like Mark Spitz’s,” I say, and climb into the car.



When I get home the shower's running but it doesn't sound like anyone's in it. I go to bed wishing Isabelle and I and the girl with the Youtuber were big — bigger than Marv and that man in the crowd — big, because wishing that they were small doesn't seem as realistic. Then I practice the way I'll say hello to David tomorrow. No matter how I do — hey, hi, hello, David! — it all sounds like I love you. Maybe because that's how everyone hears it. But I fell asleep before I could think about that.

And now I'm here sitting in a La Brea coffee shop waiting for David who I haven't seen since high school and the only thing I can think is if you're pretty nothing else really matters. It's been fifteen minutes since he said he'd be here. I check my phone and finish my coffee so I can order again with him when he arrives.

Before I left he'd joked about meeting all my model friends and finally being “one of the cool kids.” I asked him what, I'm not cool enough for you? And he said I could've made his Bar Mitzvah cool, even if it had included a lecture on the color beige. I liked that, because when we were thirteen I wasn't proportioned right and there were things written about me on the bathroom stalls. Before nothing mattered.

I see him walk up the sidewalk, glancing around as if to make sure he isn't trespassing. Now he comes through the door and my heart starts to pound so I look down at my phone to postpone the moment of recognition.

He sits down across from me.

“Lex! You look great,” he says. “Happy birthday.”

I start crying.



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