

I Ate a Reindeer in Helsinki

*A play
by*

Patrick Hurley

CHARACTERS:

LENNY- Late 30s. Typical American. Any race. Stubborn, but also a people-pleaser. Is at a crossroads in his life and desperate for meaning.

ALMI-30s. Finnish. Small but fierce. She's afraid of nothing and gives away even less. Mysterious but charming.

BARTENDER-30s-40s. Finnish. Broad and approachable. Should give the sense of comfort with just his presence.

Setting: This takes place in a bar, but one that is entirely theatrical. There should be a thick black canvas or curtain that surrounds the stage, as if they were inside a tent. The top of this fabric should have tiny holes poked in it and soft light should be coming through the little holes. There can be a bar and stools, or these can be implied. Same with the action, if it's enacted at all, it should be overly theatrical and specific, but can just be spoken. When it says the bartender leaves, he should not leave, but step aside and watch the scene from a distance.

/ indicates overlapping dialogue. This means the next line of dialogue should begin here.

-- is a pause. But like, a real pause. This world exists mostly in silence, so for some of these pauses to be effective, they must go much longer than you're comfortable with.

ALMI, LENNY, BARTENDER are already in place when the house opens. Lenny and Almi are sitting, not too far apart, they are both drinking, and the Bartender is polishing glasses, or cleaning something. They don't speak to each other. Lenny looks out an implied window near him. If he or Almi finishes their drink, they motion for another from the Bartender and he brings them one. When It's time to begin, house lights dim, and this silent drinking continues for as long as needed.

--

ALMI

The forest is glowing tonight.

LENNY

So much snow.

BARTENDER

The icy moonlight always brings in the strays. Can't tell if it's closing or opening time.

--

ALMI

The forest looks like it's glowing tonight.

BARTENDER

She says as a mere attempt to break the silence.

LENNY

There's so much snow here.

BARTENDER

He's not skilled at small talk. The room is overflowing with awkwardness.

ALMI

Not so much snow anymore. Thanks, global warming.

BARTENDER

They surrender to their fate. Conversation is now happening.

I'm Lenny.

LENNY

Almi.

ALMI

Hi.

LENNY

Hi.

ALMI

BARTENDER
She stares at him, a lingering feminine stare. They hold each other's gaze.

BARTENDER

What?

LENNY

I was just going to say I thought you have a nice smile.

ALMI

What's that?

LENNY

You were smiling before.

ALMI

Was I?

LENNY

ALMI
Maybe I imagined it. Well, even if I did, I thought you had a nice smile.

ALMI

BARTENDER
The smile returns, like an encore performance.

BARTENDER

ALMI
There it is! Nice.
Whatever! You're going to think I am trying to sex you.

ALMI

BARTENDER
He chuckles.

BARTENDER

Sex me?

LENNY

ALMI

Or, you know what I mean. You can't just be polite to someone anymore and tell them something like that. Never mind. I'm crazy. You should drink your beer and not listen to me.

BARTENDER

Against his wishes, because he longs for solitude, he finds her charming. Engaging.

LENNY

Are you from around here?

ALMI

Oh, yeah. Tragically so.

LENNY

I wouldn't think that's tragic. It's beautiful here.

ALMI

It is beautiful, but it's also a bit, you know, what's the word, hick?

LENNY

Hick?

ALMI

Yeah, a bit. You know, redneck.

BARTENDER

She laughs at herself, it's what you would call an infectious laugh.

LENNY

And for some reason she repeats the first thing she said.

ALMI

The forest looks like it's glowing.

LENNY

And then she says something I'm not expecting.

ALMI

I hope the sun never rises again.

BARTENDER

He's not sure if this is profound.

LENNY

Is this the side effect of a philosophical mind? Or just seasonal affective disorder?

--

ALMI

Have you ever seen a day go by without the sun?

LENNY

I haven't.

ALMI

It's bizarre. Sometimes the darkness is like a blanket. You know? Like a cover that reaches from the smallest insect all the way to god. Lower-case g. I'm a questioning agnostic-

BARTENDER

A parenthetical, she might be saying to convince herself.

ALMI

By which I mean I don't believe in anything I can't question. But the dark is comforting. It's complete. And you can't tell the difference, at least for a short time, you can't tell the difference between a cockroach and Jesus Christ.

BARTENDER

He laughs at this.

LENNY

The expression on her face is anything but sarcastic. The creases around her eyes tell me that she's having trouble, either finding the words, or dissecting the meaning of her own thoughts. People who speak more than one language often make this face.

ALMI

When the darkness goes away, the sun doesn't make sense anymore. And I want to hide from it forever. I like not being able to tell a cockroach from my savior.

BARTENDER

She smiles sadly. But she doesn't mean to.

LENNY

I want to comfort her. I don't.

BARTENDER

He just lets her melancholy softly land in the silence. Like a butterfly, fluttering beautifully, ignorantly toward her long-awaited respite right in the center of a spider web.

--

ALMI

What brings you to our desolate, frozen city?

LENNY

I'm accepting a prize.

ALMI

A prize? For what?

LENNY

For writing.

ALMI

And you're accepting it here?

LENNY

Yeah.

ALMI

In Helsinki? Did you write about snow?

BARTENDER

She laughs and downs the rest of her beer. She likes his company.

LENNY

No, it's for poetry.

ALMI

A poetry prize? Oh my god. That's amazing. I love that. I'm so glad I was the only other person crazy enough to come out tonight. And what a poetic setting. Don't you think?

LENNY

Yeah, I've been meaning to ask, what is all of this?

BARTENDER

He looks up at the makeshift tent they're sitting under and his wonder is piqued. And his curiosity, which is always a hubris, takes over his whole mind.

ALMI

You can't tell?

BARTENDER

He shakes his head. How could he tell?

ALMI

It's a pagan thing.

LENNY

She says casually. As if it were just normal to encounter pagan décor.

Pagan, I say?

She says-

ALMI

It's all of life. Like a blanket that goes from the Earth and stretches all the way up to the heavens. Holding us all in together. You know, tightly wound. Together. And outside the blanket is where all the light is. Which is why the sun never comes up in Helsinki. Didn't you notice the name of the place?

BARTENDER

He tries to remember the name of the place where he's sitting. He can't.

ALMI

Ydra's.

BARTENDER

He doesn't get it.

ALMI

Yggdrasil? The tree of life?

Yeah, I don't really get it either. I mean it doesn't look like a tree, right.

BARTENDER

She laughs and motions for another beer.

LENNY

But then in the summer the sun doesn't set at all, right?

ALMI

In midsummer. That's right. It's light all the time.

LENNY

And what's the deal with all the little holes in the tent?

BARTENDER

She laughs. And repeats the last two words.

ALMI

The tent.

BARTENDER

She continues.

ALMI

Those are the stars.

They both stare up at them.

LENNY

She chuckles a little under her breath, She's thought of something. She doesn't say it. She turns her head with a great deal of meaning. She's remembered something. She doesn't say it.

--

LENNY

The bartender comes over and sets another beer in front of her.

ALMI

Yeah, thanks.

Do you ever feel like your thoughts are just too general?

LENNY

What?

ALMI

I don't know. Like, you know, like, say there's all of these thoughts in your head all the time.

LENNY

You mean like a human being?

ALMI

No, but, you know, like all of the thoughts that you have, do you ever think they're just so general? I don't know. Like none of them are worth even thinking about?

LENNY

Is that what you think?

ALMI

Yes. All the time. I think, why would someone want to hear anything I have to say? And if I paint something, why would anyone think it's profound? It's just generic crap.

LENNY

You're a painter?

ALMI

Not really. I mean, yes. But not really.

LENNY

She's one of those people, drowning in self-deprecation. I like that about her.

ALMI

And you're a writer.

LENNY

Sure. Sometimes.
-I'm also drowning in it.-
I'm mostly a teacher these days.

ALMI

But you're getting a poetry prize.

LENNY

Yeah, but it's nothing. It's silly.

ALMI

You came all this way for nothing?

LENNY

I wanted to see your frozen country.

ALMI

It is frozen. You picked an especially cold time of the year. How long are you staying?

LENNY

Just the weekend.

ALMI

Why so short?

LENNY

I'm in Stockholm for a week. I just popped over for the weekend.

ALMI

And you wandered into this deserted place for what?

LENNY

A drink.

ALMI

And maybe some meaning.

--

BARTENDER

They hold their stares. A Helsinki standoff.

LENNY

She says this like she knows me.

ALMI

Maybe the answer to life exists inside this blackness.

LENNY

Hmm.

ALMI

Don't get too excited, I'm not actually deep. I just live here, in the world's icebox.

LENNY

What do you do?

ALMI

This is a very American thing to ask. What do you do? It's like asking someone what they did wrong in their life to get to where they are.

LENNY

Did you do something wrong in life to get to where you are?

ALMI

I'm an artist. So you tell me!

BARTENDER

They both laugh. That kind of knowing laugh that creative types seem to share most often at the expense of others. Others who don't quite understand what it is to be tortured by a true calling.

LENNY

So you paint?

ALMI

On good days. Most of the time I doodle.

LENNY

And this is how you make money? On doodles?

ALMI

No, but for real, I'm a journalist for the local paper.

LENNY

A journalist? That's great.

ALMI

No, it's not. It's just the result of a bad decision at university that led to a bad decision with a man that led to a bad breakup that led to another bad decision with another man and then one with a woman, and then a good one with a woman that led to the right connection that led to a job that led to this job. That was like a very psychotic thread. I'm sorry.

LENNY

She takes a slow drink. Her self-deprecation is now starting to feel obligatory. I start to think she's hiding something. Maybe not from me, or anyone in particular. But something she can't reveal. This intrigues me.

BARTENDER

He's holding his stare a bit too long.

ALMI

I won't have sex with you, you know.

BARTENDER

He is mid-drink and almost spits it out.

LENNY

Really? That is an aggressive non-sequitor?

ALMI

I mean, you know, I don't want you to get the impression that I'm hitting on you, or leading you on at all. I'm not.

LENNY

You kinda are.

BARTENDER

He laughs a little.

ALMI

I wasn't. I mean it.

LENNY

Uhh, you are a little bit.

ALMI

I wasn't at all.

LENNY

It's okay. Don't worry. I don't sleep with women.

ALMI

Why not?

LENNY

Because I'm gay.

ALMI

Right! Oh my god. I'm sorry.

LENNY

No, don't be. It's fine.

ALMI

I don't know why I asked that. Ugh. Sometimes what I want to say in English, doesn't come out that way.

LENNY

It's fine. But, hey, if I did sleep with women, you'd be in so much trouble.

ALMI

Oh, would I?

LENNY

Oh my god, yes! I would be all over you like white on rice.

BARTENDER

She gives this expression a disapproving face.

ALMI

Somehow that feels offensive to more than one culture.

LENNY

It's just an American expression.

ALMI

So, most likely then.

BARTENDER

They drink.

--

ALMI

What is the most profound thought you've ever had.

BARTENDER

He smirks at this. He's happy to finally have an inciting incident.

LENNY

I don't know that I could pinpoint it.

ALMI

Come on. Try.

LENNY

No, it's just that so many of my thoughts are so profound.

ALMI

Okay.

LENNY

No, really, you should see inside this head. It's like a Mensa orgy in there.

ALMI

You're joking with me.

LENNY

I am.

ALMI

Come on. Think. What was the most profound?

LENNY

That's a ridiculous question.

ALMI

No, it's not.

LENNY

No, it is. Really, like, how can someone actually know when their most profound thought occurred? Like do some people actually take note of that. I think most people write in search of, not because of. You know?

ALMI

That's a terrible reason to write. So, you don't actually have anything to say? You just hope you will?

LENNY

Okay. All right. What was your most profound thought?

ALMI

When I was nineteen my father killed my brother.

BARTENDER

This takes a minute to land.

Like a long minute.

He looks at her as if she's just confessed to murder.

ALMI

Two years later I cut my wrists. I didn't do it to die. I called an ambulance right before I did it.

LENNY

Then why did you do it?

ALMI

My father stabbed my brother. In front of me. And then he ran away. My brother lie bleeding to death on the carpet. I held his

head in my lap, and put my hands over the wound. And prayed for maybe the last time in my life that the ambulance would make it there on time. That was the last time I prayed. That was also the last time I cried. My tear ducts are like deserts now. Never again, I say!

BARTENDER

She takes a sip. She doesn't seem to be invoking any emotion inside of herself. As if she's reciting this by rote.

ALMI

But after that, what's worth crying over?
But back to the story.
As he was dying he looked at me with a face I'd never seen before. And he said his last words to me through his broken breath. In a voice I'd never heard before.

BARTENDER

She stops. She wants him to ask. She's a pretty gifted orator.

LENNY

What did he say?

BARTENDER

She leans in, to really get the full dramatic effect.

ALMI

If you can skip this part, you really should.

BARTENDER

Lenny laughs a little at this. A nervous laugh. He feels bad about it.

ALMI

Before I moved his head from my lap, the thought occurred to me. It was a thought that would change everything. Right then. With my dead brother's head in my lap. I knew, there was nothing I would ever imagine, that I could never think of anything that would be as profound as this moment.

--

LENNY

So, what does that mean?

BARTENDER

She gets a gleam in her eye, a lioness about to pounce.

ALMI

If you have to ask it means nothing like that's ever happened to you.

BARTENDER

He nods at this. But his nod is a substitute for words he wishes he had. Wisdom he wishes he could impart. A knowing nod is all. And a knowing nod is never really knowing anything at all.

LENNY

That doesn't explain why you cut your wrists.

ALMI

His name was Luukas.

LENNY

You did it over a boy?

ALMI

My brother. My brother's name was Luukas. I needed to talk to him. I was seventeen, and I thought I could die for a few minutes and see him.

LENNY

Really?

ALMI

I know. Saying it out loud is...It's crazy. But, I really believed it. Like I made this pact with god.

LENNY

Lower-case g.

ALMI

It wasn't a prayer. It was a bargain! And I thought it was worth a try.

LENNY

Hmm.

BARTENDER

Ridiculous as it is, it's one of the more profound things he's heard in quite some time. Strangers never divulge so much, he thinks. This might be a real connection.

--

LENNY

Why did your father stab him?

LENNY

She just stares at me. Like she's going to say something incredibly shocking. But she just shrugs a little, like she's resigned to the fact that sometimes we can't understand the horror of other people.

ALMI

It was a stupid fight. Something unimportant. My father was violent. Everyone in my family is violent. Got a thing for knives. He got carried away.

LENNY

A thing for knives.
Did he go to jail?

ALMI

No. No, he jumped off of a bridge a few months later.

LENNY

Jesus. What about your mom?

ALMI

She left for America with some musician she met when I was five. I barely remember her.
Let's talk about something else.

LENNY

Okay. Like what?

ALMI

Are you going to write all of this down someday? Will I be a character you create in one of your stories?

LENNY

Well, who knows. Everything is material, right? Aren't you going to paint me someday?

ALMI

No. You don't interest me that way.

LENNY

Ouch. Well, I'll make sure when I write that down I make it sound less harsh.

ALMI

Tell me something.

LENNY

Like what?

ALMI

I don't know, like what was your most profound thought.

LENNY

I thought you just got through saying we don't actually have those?

ALMI

That's not what I said. The difficulty of modern thinking is made all the more complicated by the fragmentary stupidity of human beings.

I don't say this. Instead, I say, I just shared my awful past with you. Tell me something horrible from your life.

LENNY

I don't really have a story to compare with yours.

ALMI

Stop comparing then. Why do Americans always seem to be obsessed with what other people are doing?

LENNY

I'm a writer, other people fascinate me.

ALMI

Ugh! What a bad answer.

LENNY

It is not.

ALMI

Other people fascinate you? Oh my god, you're so deep. You spend your life observing other people so you have something to write about.

LENNY

I don't know what you want me to say.

ALMI

Well that's your problem. You don't answer anything honestly. You just want to say the right thing. Let the answer be wrong! Most of the time the wrong answer is closer to the truth than the right one.

LENNY

Where did you hear that, a handbook for shady lawyers?

ALMI

You are the same as every other American!

LENNY

Are you honestly upset?

ALMI

I'm just tired of meeting people with nothing to say.

LENNY

I didn't say I /have nothing-

ALMI

Typical!

LENNY

I just came in here for a drink, I wasn't looking to extrapolate the meaning of life.

ALMI

I don't think you could if you wanted to.

LENNY

Well, that's a real nice judgment, but you don't know me.

ALMI

How did you get here, anyway?

LENNY

What?

ALMI

How did you get here?

LENNY

What, to this bar? I walked.

ALMI
From where?

LENNY
What?

ALMI
You walked! From where?

LENNY
My hotel.

ALMI
There are no hotels near here.

LENNY
It was a long walk.

ALMI
Not for like twenty kilometers. There's not a hotel for at least
twenty /kilometers.

LENNY
I took a taxi.

ALMI
What color?

LENNY
Are you kidding me?

ALMI
What color was the taxi?

LENNY
I don't know. Yellow?

ALMI
You don't know?

LENNY
It was yellow.

ALMI
You don't know how you got here.

LENNY

That's absurd.

ALMI

And this poetry prize. What about that?

LENNY

What about it?

ALMI

A poetry prize? In Helsinki? In December?

LENNY

What the hell is she getting at?

BARTENDER

He's flustered.

ALMI

His face changes. Like his attention is narrowing to something very small, like a bead of water.

LENNY

I can't remember.

ALMI

What's the name of the prize?

LENNY

I don't want to talk about this anymore.

ALMI

What about the name of your "poem?"

LENNY

Don't use air quotes. I'm not lying.

ALMI

I didn't say you were.

LENNY

The poem's called "The Blood of Winter."

ALMI

No, it's not.

LENNY

Yes, it is.

ALMI

That's a terrible title. Like some generic rip off of a million other things.

LENNY

I'm sorry you don't like it.

ALMI

Read it to me.

LENNY

Is she for real?

No.

ALMI

Why not?

LENNY

I don't have to prove anything to you.

ALMI

Read me the Winter's blood.

LENNY

That's not /what it's called.

ALMI

Oh come on. Don't be a baby.

LENNY

Yeah, I think we're done. I think I should go.
I get up to leave.

BARTENDER

He stands and reaches for his wallet.

ALMI

You can't go.

LENNY

I can't?

ALMI

It's negative twenty outside. It's snowing. You'll never get a taxi, and you'll freeze to death trying.

LENNY

Why is she trying to keep me here?

BARTENDER

He looks at her. He doesn't believe her.

ALMI

The pallor of his face has noticeably changed. Crimson. Like a cartoon character about to blow steam from his ears.

LENNY

Could you please call me a taxi?

ALMI

The bartender chuckles a bit at this.

LENNY

Is something funny?

BARTENDER

I don't think that's gonna happen, sir. Storm's pretty bad. Plus it's late. We're pretty far off the grid here. But don't worry, I got an extra room if it doesn't let up.

LENNY

An extra-no, I can't stay here.

BARTENDER

You might not have a choice.

LENNY

Fuck.

--

LENNY

I took a taxi.

ALMI

Okay.

LENNY

The driver and I talked about the Olympics.

ALMI

Nice detail.

LENNY

They were in Helsinki in the 50s.

ALMI

They were.

LENNY

We drove past the stadium.

ALMI

You did.

LENNY

How else would I be sitting here?

ALMI

You just said you took a taxi.

--

LENNY

Did your father really kill your brother, or was that your way of having some fun at my expense?

ALMI

You think you're important enough to create a story like that for?

LENNY

I didn't say that.

ALMI

It was implied.

LENNY

Why did you come here tonight?

ALMI

My car broke down.

LENNY

Yeah, sure.

ALMI

You want to see it? It's less than a kilometer down the road.

LENNY

I don't believe her.

ALMI

Maybe it was fate.

LENNY

She's playing some kind of game.

ALMI

Providence ain't just a city in Rhode Island.

LENNY

I ignore her. I move seats. To speak to the bartender.

LENNY

Is the storm really that bad?

BARTENDER

Looks to be.

LENNY

Does this happen often?

BARTENDER

Sometimes. It was predicted, though. You should have checked the weather.

LENNY

So we're just stuck.

BARTENDER

Looks that way. It's not so bad. At least there's room at the Inn. Some people get stuck in much worse places. Gratitude for what we have. This is a saying, yes?

LENNY

Yeah. I'm sorry, I wasn't insulting your...bar.
It's a nice place. How long have you worked here?

BARTENDER

I inherited it from my father. And he inherited it from his father. I think it goes back to my great, great, great grandfather.

LENNY

Family business, huh? I didn't realize I was in such an old bar.

BARTENDER

It wasn't always a bar. It started as an Inn for Russian soldiers in the late 18th century. It's rumored that Gustav the third slept here.

ALMI

He doesn't recognize the name. His face gives it away.

BARTENDER

He was the king of Sweden. He was assassinated in 1792.

LENNY

Why?

BARTENDER

Why is anyone assassinated?

LENNY

So he slept here?

BARTENDER

In one of the rooms in the house attached.

LENNY

Is that where you live?

BARTENDER

Yep.

LENNY

Okay, well, if the storm is going to get worse, shouldn't I try to get back to my hotel now?

BARTENDER

You could try. But without a car you're not going to get very far. And even with one, like she said, there's no hotel's for at least twenty kilometers.

ALMI

He quickly checks his watch, as if he's late for a train. He's dripping with anxiety, like sweat. His eyes dart around the place as if he's contemplating various ways to escape.

LENNY

It's almost midnight.

BARTENDER

Longest night of the year.

LENNY

How's that?

BARTENDER

It's the equinox. Shortest day, longest night of the year.

LENNY

Of course it is.
When does the sun actually rise?

BARTENDER

A little past ten.

LENNY

10 o'clock? That's crazy.

BARTENDER

Yeah. And it'll set just after 15.

LENNY

Fifteen-what is that? That's what.../ 3PM?

BARTENDER

Sorry, 3PM. Yes, that's right.

LENNY

How are you people not more depressed?

BARTENDER

High rate of suicide.

LENNY

Happiest country in the world, eh?

BARTENDER

Inconsistency is sometimes the sign of prosperity.

--

LENNY

Do you have the number for a taxi?

BARTENDER

Sure.

LENNY

The two of them exchange a look.
What was that?

ALMI

What was what?

LENNY

That look! What was that look?

ALMI

I don't know what you're talking about.

LENNY

Yeah! You just looked at each other.

ALMI

You sound paranoid.

LENNY

What is this? Huh? Are you guys like underground killers or something? Are you fucking with me, because you're going to kill me?

BARTENDER

Whoa! Let's take it easy, shall we?

ALMI

He jumps to his feet. He's scared.

LENNY

Then call me a taxi! Okay? No more god damned games. I want to leave.

ALMI

The bartender puts his hands up in a sign of surrender.

BARTENDER

Okay. You got it. I'll call right now.

LENNY

She watches him closely.
He picks up the phone.
He dials.
We wait.

ALMI

He's really scared.

LENNY

Why isn't anyone answering?

BARTENDER

Hei!

LENNY

He speaks in Finnish.

What's he saying?

Hey! Hey! What's he saying?

ALMI

He's asking if a taxi will make it out here.

LENNY

More Finnish. Sounds fake. /I really wish I could understand what he's saying.

ALMI

He looks at the bartender desperately wishing he could understand what he's saying.

LENNY

What's he saying now?

ALMI

He's giving them the address.

He watches him intensely.

LENNY

Why has he stopped talking?

ALMI

I don't know. He must be listening.

LENNY

What are they saying?

ALMI

The bartender holds up a finger.

He needs a minute.

LENNY

Yeah, I got that.

BARTENDER

Okay. Kiitos.

ALMI

That means thank you.

LENNY

Yeah, thanks! /What did they say?

ALMI

He hangs up the phone.

BARTENDER

Roads are closed. Can't make it out. I'm sorry.

LENNY

You've got to be shitting me.

BARTENDER

Sorry. But hey, I have rooms.

LENNY

No, fuck this. I'm walking.

ALMI

He's so hostile.

BARTENDER

He takes out his wallet and counts some euros.

LENNY

What do I owe you?

BARTENDER

Nah, it's okay.

LENNY

What are you talking about? I had like six drinks.
What do I owe you?!

BARTENDER

Your money's no good here.

LENNY

What the fuck does that mean? Why would you say that? Why would he say that?

ALMI

I shrug.

BARTENDER

She shrugs.

LENNY

Shrugging? Really? Now you have nothing to say?

BARTENDER

I'm just trying to be nice. For the inconvenience. You can settle up in the morning. I'll get a room ready for you.

LENNY

I'm not staying here!

BARTENDER

You don't have a choice. Come on. Let me get the room ready and then I'll have the kitchen make you both some dinner. The storm's supposed to let up by midmorning. It'll be fine. Sounds good?

ALMI

He exhales. He sits. He really doesn't want to talk now. Silence hangs over us. Weighted and specific, as if we ordered it. A cloud of disdain and tension to sit over us.

--

ALMI

At some point, in this quiet, it occurs to me, or him or maybe all of us... that so much of life is just this. This sort of in-between. A kind of nothing. Killing time waiting for the next thing of import. Interlude. This is most of our time. This is life.

--

BARTENDER

He checks his pockets for something.

ALMI

He can't find his phone.

BARTENDER

He forgot his phone.

LENNY

Can I use your phone?

ALMI

The bartender nods and puts the phone on the bar. He smiles. Boyish. He's definitely gotten away with things because of that smile.

BARTENDER

It's all yours.
I'll be back in a minute.

ALMI

The bartender leaves.

LENNY

I can feel her staring at me.

ALMI

I'm staring at him.

LENNY

Maybe it's a European thing. To stare at people.

ALMI

His American arrogance is off-putting. If he looks over here, my face will imply as much.
He dials.
Too many numbers.

LENNY

Shit!

ALMI

He dials again.
Again, too many numbers.

LENNY

God dammit!

ALMI

One more time.
Nope.

LENNY

Son of a bitch!

ALMI

He slams the phone down.

LENNY

I can't remember the number.
Why can't I remember the number?

ALMI

Check your mobile.

LENNY

I don't know where it is.

ALMI

Cut off from the outside world on a frozen night near the north pole with two strangers. Sounds ominous.
I smile to lighten the mood.
It doesn't work.
Maybe you're just drunk.

LENNY

She smiles. Condescendingly.
What if something sinister is going on.

ALMI

You're starting to think something sinister is going on, aren't you? Hey! I know. Tell me something terrible that happened to you in your life. It'll make this situation feel much less awful.

LENNY

I'd rather not talk anymore, if you don't mind.

ALMI

Okay. Fine with me. Don't forget, I live here. I can go days and days without the sound of another voice. I once got lost in a forest for three days. I had nothing but water. I ate berries that I'm sure were poisonous.
I saw god in those trees.
I hope when you write that down, you don't capitalize god.

LENNY

I'm ignoring her. I can survive a night. I won't sleep. I'll just wait for the sun to rise, wait for the snow to melt.

ALMI

He's not talking to me. Not a punishment. I never lose this game. He'll speak first.

But he'll wait. He'll try to win.
And so we sit
In a long

Long

Long

Silence.

LENNY

You really a painter?

ALMI

Shrug.

LENNY

I should have died when I was nineteen.

ALMI

Okay.

I want to ignore you, but, what?

LENNY

"Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me."

ALMI

Did you write that?

LENNY

That's Emily Dickinson.

ALMI

Does it explain why you should have died? Did you almost die by way of plagiarism? Couldn't even have an original thought in the face of death, huh?

LENNY

Why is it that nature is always depicted as a woman, a mother? And death is always a man?

ALMI

Makes sense to me. But in all fairness, in most renderings, death is more of a gender-neutral, cloaked, medieval weapon enthusiast.

LENNY

I fell through some ice. On a lake in upstate New York. I needed to get out of my head. I had a fight with my family, and I went to stay with this older guy in a cabin not far from Niagara Falls and I went for a walk on a frozen lake. The white expanse of it was calling to me. This desolate frozen sanctuary.

ALMI

Sounds familiar.

And you fell through?

LENNY

The strange thing is, when I was about twelve years old, this old woman who lived down the street from us, she told me I was special. That I would prove the existence of god to her. I didn't understand what she meant. And then she told me that my life would end in ice, not fire. As if those were the only two options. She said souls that were drawn to the cold were the only ones you could trust, because they had deeper thoughts. Because heat makes you think only of corporeal things. Your body. The torment. And cold forces you into your mind. And lulls you to sleep. Gently.

When I fell through the ice I didn't feel anything. Nothing. the absence of everything. It's hard to explain. I remember the crackling sound. Old floorboards giving way. From far away, suddenly closing in like a lit fuse burning towards some kind of ice-blue dynamite.

And then...

ALMI

He makes an explosion sound. Subtle, but juvenile.

LENNY

Then the splashing sound. I woke to that sound for years. Trauma, they call it. But it was honestly comforting. Relief somehow. I never regained full feeling in my fingertips or toes. Even to this day, I can't really touch anything and know what it is. It's like it's separated by some kind of invisible barrier. Like I have cotton balls attached to my fingertips and toes. Everything just a little muted. I was in a coma for three days. I have no memory past the splashing sound, until I woke up in a hospital bed. I thought my doctor was death. I saw his big white face covered in white stubble and his dull gray eyes. And my first thought, the very first thing I thought, was how glad I was that it was all over. I made it past my own death. What's left to fear?

ALMI

What a disappointment then. When you understood the truth.

LENNY

That has usually been my relationship with truth.

ALMI

I know how you feel.

LENNY

My mom told me about a week later, the old neighbor lady came to their front door and asked if I was okay. Because she had dreamt that I crawled out of a frozen lake and walked all the way to her front porch, and left a white rose for her. She said the rose was god. And I was her angel. Bringing her back to something she thought she lost. Religion, I guess. She died in her sleep that night. The thing is...no one told her I had fallen into that lake. She dreamt it. Sometimes I think maybe it didn't really happen. Just the dream of an old faithless woman who needed to believe again.

--

ALMI

We let the silence back in. And it takes us both.

The bartender returns.

BARTENDER

Are you both hungry?

ALMI

I'm always hungry.

BARTENDER

What about him?

ALMI

He's painting devils on the walls.

LENNY

--

ALMI

Are you hungry?

LENNY

I guess I could eat.

BARTENDER

Great. It'll be ready in a minute.

LENNY

Thank you. Can I get another...?

ALMI

He holds his empty glass in the air.

BARTENDER

Sure.

ALMI

Looks like someone's resigned to his fate.

BARTENDER

I pour him another beer. I hope this one helps relax him. He's very tense.

--

ALMI

Do you have a boyfriend? Husband?

LENNY

No.

BARTENDER

She nods her head at this. Hoping for a little more information. He doesn't give it.

ALMI

Love is for suckers.

LENNY

Yep.

BARTENDER

He takes a big drink.

ALMI

I'll never fall in love!

BARTENDER

She takes a big drink.

ALMI

How many languages do you speak?

LENNY

Are you talking to me?

ALMI

Why not? Or are you still mad at me?

LENNY

I speak English. I'm American, we only speak English. I mean I can say a few phrases in Spanish.

ALMI

I speak four. We all mostly speak at least three. But you know what's really funny about Americans?

LENNY

No, please enlighten me.

ALMI

You speak just the one language, but you never stop talking. Every American I have met has so much to say. I mean, I speak four languages and I can sit in silence so much longer than Americans. Why is that?

LENNY

Maybe you don't have anything interesting to say.

BARTENDER

She smirks. Makes a little laughing sound.

ALMI

Do you think that thoughts are more important than feelings?

BARTENDER

He's not quite sure how to answer this.

ALMI

I mean we spend our lives being told how much we should feel. And when we should feel. But thoughts are what make us. Who cares what we feel? If we can't think deeply, how can we ever feel deeply?

LENNY

That makes sense.

ALMI

And I'm so scared that my thoughts are just always...what is the word...?

LENNY

Generic?

ALMI

Yeah. Generic. Small. This is why I love the silence. Winter is this months-long retreat from the pressure of having to come up with anything in front of someone else. I don't know if that makes sense.

LENNY

Sure. There's fewer people around you, so you can live in your own thoughts. I live in New York City, so, there's never a moment of silence.

ALMI

No, but I mean we spend most of our day in thoughts that mean nothing. How to talk to the coffee shop guy, how to greet the people at work, what to say when you are with a client. Or a stranger. Or even on the phone with a friend or family member. Nothing significant. All day. Every day. Just general nonsense. And then one day you realize you are whatever age, and you're worn down by all these insignificant thoughts. You've become them. Because they are printed on you. Wrinkles and gray hair you are lined with nothing but general experience, and life. And then! You actually can't have any real meaningful thoughts. It's too late. That part of your brain has atrophied. I like that word.

LENNY

That's a very bleak way of looking at life.

ALMI

The first man I fell in love with- He had a boat. Tiny, beat up thing, he never cleaned. It smelled of mold and dead fish. For our first date, he took me, on this boat, so romantic! I couldn't get the smell out of my hair for two weeks. He took me to a small island sauna about twenty kilometers out. The day was gray. Sleet gray. The kind of gray I call the subconscious of Scandinavia. Dreadful and dangerous. The boat rocked back and forth, almost in a rhythm. We slogged through the icy Baltic waters of the archipelagos. This was in November, so it was pretty cold. And the sky and the sea were the same color. Reflecting one another in perfect balance. What

the French call *mélange*. At some point, I remember looking out all around us, with these little islands, patches of brown with dead trees sprouting up on this gray almost ashen canvas. And we were the only boat I could see. In any direction. Floating in this silvery-sleet galaxy. We were completely alone. This landscape. This lack of color. This is most of life. Yes? The long, lonely silences that occupy our time between the superficial and the desperate distractions. Pain exists only in the absence of this void. And so this void must be the answer if, and only if we are to stop living. Frozen. Without pain. This is where I go, when I need to feel reborn. Rejuvenated. This is my place. It is not bleak to understand pain. It is only bleak to pursue it. And one who runs toward the gray waters of the world, they understand meaning. But you can't stay on it. No, colors only mean something if you step away from them for a moment and then come back. But I'm terrified. I'm so terrified that I have been on this boat, in my head, for too long. And I'll never know color again.

--

BARTENDER

I think your food is ready.

LENNY

He leaves. We don't say anything until he comes back.

--

ALMI

He comes back with two plates.

BARTENDER

I hope you're hungry.

ALMI

He has napkins and flatware.

LENNY

Thank you so much.

ALMI

It smells delicious.

LENNY

I look at the plate. Meatballs in some brown sauce. Cabbage and some kind of cheese. It's oddly, exactly what I would have expected in a place like this.

ALMI

So Finnish! Bon appétit.

BARTENDER

He smiles at her. Kind of. He doesn't really mean it. I turn on some dinner music. They both stop to listen.

ALMI

Beethoven.

LENNY

The Coriolan overture. I love this piece.

ALMI

You know it?

LENNY

What? The American isn't as stupid as he's supposed to be?

ALMI

No. American's aren't nearly as stupid as they think everyone else is.

BARTENDER

They both smile. A non-verbal...touché. At last, to agree on something.
They listen.

--

LENNY

The pauses.

ALMI

I know.

LENNY

Amazing. It's like everything just stops for a moment. It just all goes silent. Why do you think he did that?

ALMI

To scare us. It's unexpected. Makes up pay more attention.

LENNY

It's so-

ALMI

Shh!

Listen.

--

BARTENDER

They eat and listen.

--

BARTENDER

They move to the music. They hang onto some of the notes as if they were physical things in the room.

ALMI

It can save your life.

--

BARTENDER

The music stops.

LENNY

Maybe it's because he was deaf.

ALMI

What?

LENNY

The pauses.

ALMI

He understood the impact that silence can cause the sounds to have. We listen closer. We feel a little of the emptiness he existed in. And he knew...music can save your life. It's like gray, the silence reminds us of the great beauty of the sound. But walk away from it for too long...

--

LENNY
This food is delicious, by the way.

BARTENDER
I'm glad you like it.

LENNY
This beef is so tender.

BARTENDER
Oh good.

ALMI
It's not beef.

LENNY
Oh. What is it, pork?

ALMI
No.

BARTENDER
She and I share a sly smile.

LENNY
What? Is it veal? Lamb? What the hell am I eating?

BARTENDER
It's reindeer.

ALMI
He stops chewing and looks down at his plate. I can't tell if he's disgusted or fascinated.

LENNY
I'm eating reindeer?

ALMI
Yeah. It's good, right?

LENNY
I'm eating reindeer?

ALMI
It's very common here.

LENNY

But...I can't eat reindeer.

ALMI

Well, you are.

LENNY

You don't understand, I grew up thinking reindeer were magical! You know Santa's sleigh and all that! There's an entire mythology built around magical reindeer! I can't eat Rudolph!

BARTENDER

He spits the food out into his napkin.

LENNY

Why didn't you warn me that you were going to serve me reindeer?

ALMI

Oh my god, just eat it! It's not magical reindeer, I promise.

LENNY

Ugh! I just ate reindeer.

BARTENDER

He takes a big sip of beer.

ALMI

You are so American.

LENNY

That's upsetting. That's so upsetting.

ALMI

I think it's delicious.

BARTENDER

She takes a huge bite and savors every bit of it.

ALMI

Mmm. So good.

LENNY

You're a little bit sadistic, huh?

ALMI

Winter is really long here. You have to make your own fun.

BARTENDER

It does taste pretty good though.

ALMI

Oh come on! You'll be so hungry if you don't eat it.

LENNY

I'm good, thank you.

ALMI

Such a precious American.

LENNY

Sure.

ALMI

Spoiled American.

BARTENDER

She's testing his patience now.

LENNY

Stop saying American!

ALMI

Ooh. Look at his face. He's mad.

LENNY

Could you shut up for a second please!

BARTENDER

She stops suddenly. She's doesn't appreciate being told to shut up. By a man. An American man.

He stabs the meatballs with his fork, as if they were trying to jump off his plate. Then he ravenously eats them, and with his mouth still full.

LENNY

There! Happy! The spoiled American is eating the fucking reindeer! Woo-hoo!

BARTENDER

He begins to have trouble chewing what he's pretty sure is a hoof.

ALMI

He looks like he's going to puke.

LENNY

Oh my god. That was a lot.

BARTENDER

He tries to drink his beer to help him swallow. It just makes his mouth fuller.
She tries to hold in a laugh. She can't help it. He sees her shaking.

LENNY

Yeah, this is so funny.

ALMI

What was that?

LENNY

Hilarious.

ALMI

Nope, nothing.

LENNY

Whatever.

ALMI

You shouldn't mumble when you speak.

BARTENDER

He finally swallows. And takes another long slug of beer.

LENNY

Ahh! Jesus that is chewy.

ALMI

I think his name was Prancer, actually.

LENNY

Ha-ha! So funny.

ALMI

Aww, so you had to be uncomfortable for a moment. Look! You survived!

LENNY

A moment? You think I'm that spoiled?

ALMI

Aren't all Americans? You have so much and think you have so little.

LENNY

I don't know. I lost my job. I'm being evicted from my apartment. I have twenty thousand dollars in credit card bills. My boyfriend of seven years left me for a teenager, I've had a toothache for five weeks, and I can't go to the dentist because I lost my job which means I also lost my insurance, and I'm about two-hundred thousand dollars in student loan debt. So...yeah, God bless America.

BARTENDER

He finishes his beer, and reaches in his pockets looking for something.

LENNY

Shit.

ALMI

What's wrong?

LENNY

I forgot my cigarettes. Why didn't I bring anything with me to this bar!

ALMI

Why would you pay two hundred thousand dollars to go to school?

LENNY

That's a great question! American privilege, I guess.

ALMI

The bartender hands him a cigarette.

BARTENDER

Here.

LENNY

Thank you.

ALMI

He doesn't light it.

LENNY

I don't even want this.

ALMI

Why are you on vacation if you're that deep in debt?

BARTENDER

He gives her a look. A mean look. A mean, somehow sarcastic look. He's not going to answer in words. His look says it all.

--

BARTENDER

Sorry about your job.

LENNY

You know what, it was for the best. I was miserable there. I've been miserable since I finished school. Hell, I was miserable in school.

ALMI

You know the problem with the world?

LENNY

You mean in general?

ALMI

Yes. Generally speaking, that's what I'm good at. The whole world suffers from the same problem.

LENNY

Do tell. The bartender leans in for this one.

ALMI

There are, what, seven billion people now?

LENNY

Something like that, yeah.

ALMI

So, every one of them, every one of us, we all have this story in our heads, right? The story of what life is. Now, in what reality can seven billion different narratives all coincide at the same time? Right? The answer is nowhere. The result is the chaotic, lonely, miserable, pain-fueled world we live in. The best, the very best we can hope for is that we find one or two other people, whose stories are close enough to ours to even stand them for an extended period of time, and that proves more tricky than it sounds. How many nights do you go to sleep alone

and think, the greatest fear is that you'll start dying and no one will be there to comfort you, or just fucking acknowledge you, because the truth is we're all just one tiny inch away from not existing anymore, and for most of us, the world will never even know we were here.

--

BARTENDER

Jesus, that's what I leaned in for?

LENNY

In the frost of summer's twilight, I dream of snow,
Blanched on a ledge of years, the higher I go,
The greater size the view. But the lesser the journey. The
lesser the air.
Ice digs into my lungs, daggers like diamonds, from nature to
body, compulsory. Necessity.
But precious.
There are two versions of me on the mountain. The film negative
and the dream. One meant to be like life, the other lifelike.
Both silent just long enough to whisper reality. Faint and dire.
And brief. To gaze upon the vestal white plain below, and
trickle but one, unctuous, perfect drop of my blood-Down, down,
down.
Into the ocean of winter, falls a drop of me. Of my blood. Of my
life. But just one. Amidst the infinite. Screaming into the
vacuous void of time. I. Was. Here.
Find me.
Find my spot.
See me.
See my blood.
And I will have been alive.

--

But no one may ever know.

Lately thoughts of death wake me up in the middle of the night.
Like death himself, or herself is shaking me awake. Trying to
remind me that I won't escape it. But it's not death, it's me.
I'm being haunted by my own existence. Like the other night, and
this is crazy, I tried to understand, like really understand how
I developed a consciousness. How did I come into being? Why not

someone else? And then the countless dead people that have come before me, all the centuries and centuries of death. The infinite ways to die. The greatest mystery being which corner do we turn down to avoid it for as long as we can. How am I going to die? What will I see? What will I feel? And then what? I don't believe in anything. And I hope I'm right, because facing a memory of what it is to die...that's inhuman. Sometimes I'm convinced that I'll take my own life, just so I can sleep. Mystery solved. I don't like the thought that I might always be just one inch away from total, complete blackness. There would be comfort in knowing, wouldn't there?

ALMI

You ever thought about going to a doctor?

LENNY

What?

ALMI

Sounds like textbook depression to me.

LENNY

Really? Thanks, that's, that's, yeah I have a therapist. I have two. Well, a psychiatrist and a therapist. I'm on like five meds for all my neuroses. There really isn't a pill or a cure for existential dread.

ALMI

Sure there is.

LENNY

Oh, there is?

ALMI

Yeah, maybe a little less self-pity. I mean, how do you even know you're real?

BARTENDER

He thinks this is a strange question. He looks at her for a moment before he answers.

LENNY

What?

ALMI

No, I mean it. How do you know that you're not the creation of a greater being, and you're just enslaved to the reality that was created for you?

LENNY

Well that sounds a little fucking crazy.

ALMI

How? Isn't that just what Christians believe. In a weird, indirect way?

LENNY

Yeah, but they don't think they're not real.

ALMI

Well it is the twenty-first century. How do you know that you're not some kind of artificial intelligence? Created by smarter humans as an experiment to understand existential dread?

BARTENDER

He wants to dispute this, but it's intriguing.

LENNY

That's...that's still crazy.

ALMI

Why? Wouldn't an artificial being think he was real?

LENNY

I don't know, maybe.

ALMI

And if he were autonomous, wouldn't he have questions about himself that he couldn't answer?

LENNY

Well sure, but that's the same for any /conscious being.

ALMI

Then how is that different from just being human?

Tell me again, how did you get here tonight?

--

BARTENDER

She takes a drink. She motions for another. I bring her one. He's not talking. He's trying to remember. He can't.

LENNY

It's jet lag.

ALMI

Okay.

LENNY

I haven't slept well lately, and the flight from New York was-

ALMI

I'm sure you're right.

BARTENDER

She gets up and walks to the other side of the bar to the dart board. He's still trying to remember. His face a bit twisted with fear.

LENNY

You're just walking away from the conversation?

ALMI

What conversation? You don't have any answers but you're certain that you do. So, what's left?

LENNY

I took a taxi. I definitely talked to the taxi driver about the stadium.

ALMI

The Olympic stadium?

LENNY

Right.

ALMI

What hotel?

LENNY

What?

ALMI

What hotel are you staying at?

BARTENDER

He goes to answer, he looks confident.
He doesn't know. His face changes. He shakes his head and stands up and walks over to her.

LENNY

Did you put something in my drink?

ALMI

Oh my god, you think I drugged you?

LENNY

Why can't I remember anything?!

ALMI

How am I supposed to know? You've had like ten beers, maybe you're drunk. But American's don't like to admit to any kind of weakness, right?

LENNY

I can't remember where I'm staying! I'm in a foreign fucking country! I don't speak the language, and I don't know what hotel I'm staying in! That's not drunk!

ALMI

Oh, calm down. You just need a good night's sleep. And you're sleeping here, remember. You don't have to remember anything else tonight. Come on. Want to play darts?

LENNY

Do I want to play- No, I want to know why I can't remember where the fuck I am!

ALMI

You're in a bar, on the outskirts of Helsinki.

LENNY

I ate a reindeer!

ALMI

You did!

LENNY

I ate a fucking reindeer in Helsinki! Right? That happened, right?

ALMI

It did! You ate a fucking reindeer in Helsinki!

LENNY

I flew to Stockholm two days ago, and then I flew here. I'm accepting a poetry prize the day after tomorrow and my name is Lenny. My name is Lenny.

ALMI

Lenny what?

--

BARTENDER

He doesn't know.

LENNY

What?

ALMI

What's your last name, Lenny?

--

BARTENDER

He really tries to remember. He really can't.

ALMI

He starts to look around the place. Really take it in. The artifice of it all starts to sink into his brain like his head is being filled with a thick, wet cement. It makes him dizzy.

LENNY

This is crazy. Of course I know my own last name! This is fucking crazy!

ALMI

Is it? Or maybe, it's my story. Maybe all of this, is just my perspective. In which case, I wouldn't know your last name. I wouldn't know what hotel you're staying in. Right?

LENNY

Yeah, but how would I be aware of your version of this—

ALMI

Let me finish. Geez.

BARTENDER

He shrugs and leans on a barstool with his arms folded across his chest, as if to say, I'll listen to you, but I won't accept anything you say. Men stand this way a lot.

ALMI

In my version of this story, you're a robot.

--

BARTENDER

She throws a dart at the board.

ALMI

Shit. That was terrible.

LENNY

Okay, can we go back?

ALMI

Which part?

LENNY

A robot?

ALMI

Yeah. Artificial intelligence. You are an experiment. Why not? I don't, how do you say it...? I don't know your life.

LENNY

Okay, so this night, this whole place, everything happening is just from your point of view?

ALMI

Maybe. That would explain how you don't know anything about yourself. You might not even be real.

LENNY

Okay, okay, so what if we switch it to being from my point of view?

ALMI

I don't think that's how it works. But we can try.

BARTENDER

She throws another dart at the board. It's a better throw, she's satisfied with that one.

LENNY

Okay, so your name is... Almi?

ALMI

Is it?

LENNY

That's what you told me.

ALMI

Did I?

BARTENDER

He rolls his eyes and continues.

LENNY

Your father killed your brother.

ALMI

What?! That's crazy.

LENNY

You told me that your father stabbed your brother.

ALMI

When did I say that?

LENNY

Okay, I'm not crazy. You said you cut your wrists when you were a teenager because you wanted to die temporarily and see your dead brother.

BARTENDER

She makes a face. The kind of face that would make you feel crazy if someone made it in front of you.

ALMI

I cut my wrists?

LENNY

That's what you said.

BARTENDER

She puts her wrists up to his face and holds them there.

ALMI

Do you see any scars?

BARTENDER

He examines them closely.

LENNY

So you lied to me? Okay! So this has been some kind of game all along.

BARTENDER

She throws another dart. Bullseye.

ALMI

Ahh! Did you see that?

LENNY

Is this just some sort of sick game you play with people?

ALMI

Sometimes the things in your head can get confused with the things outside of your head. It's like when you remember a dream, and sometimes are convinced that parts of it actually happened.

LENNY

And you obviously put something in my drink. So, yeah, thanks for the very memorable evening. But I think, I'm going to go now.

ALMI

Oh my god. Are we really going to repeat this scene again? You can't go.

LENNY

Fuck you. I'm going.

BARTENDER

He takes his wallet out and drunkenly pulls some bills from it and slams them very pointedly, like a gambler on a hot streak placing a bet, onto the counter.

LENNY

That's for you.

ALMI

He's so drunk.
You're very drunk.

LENNY

I don't know how many beers I've had!

BARTENDER

Like eight.

LENNY

Jesus Christ, that's more than I should have had. I think I should go now.

ALMI

I think you should sleep it off. Everything will make sense in the morning.

LENNY

There is no morning! It's winter! At the fucking North Pole! There won't be a morning. The sun doesn't come up! Because that would indicate there's hope in the world, and we all know that hope doesn't exist in a land where you eat Santa's magical pets! I ate a reindeer.

BARTENDER

I know you did.

LENNY

Goodbye.

ALMI

He stumbles toward the door.

BARTENDER

You don't have a large enough coat it's freezing out there.

LENNY

My hostility will keep me warm.

BARTENDER

Let me at least lend you my coat. Hang on.

LENNY

No.

BARTENDER

No, no, I'll be right back.

ALMI

The bartender leaves to get his coat. Lenny leans on the wall. He seems to be getting drunker.

LENNY

Don't look at me.

ALMI

Okay, let's say it is your story.

LENNY

No! No, I don't want to play this mind game with you.

ALMI

No, no come on! Tell me about myself.

LENNY

That's stupid. You're stupid.

ALMI

It's not a game.

LENNY

Everything is a game. Obvs-sus-ly.

ALMI

Maybe you should sit and drink some water before you go.

LENNY

Maybe you should stop using that stupid accent.
Sorry. That was-
I'll sit.

ALMI

He sits. He looks pitiful.

--

LENNY

Do you really think it's possible that we could suddenly become aware of someone else's reality?

ALMI

No. I think we're already doing it. There's really no other way to account for all the suffering in the world.

LENNY

That doesn't make any sense. 'Splain that.

ALMI

Okay. So, the story in my head tells me that you're from a dangerous place. New York City sounds big and scary. I imagine people with guns robbing people on the street and all this crime all the time.

LENNY

And you think that- wait, you think that because you think that, that that means it's happening somewhere?

ALMI

No. I think it's happening somewhere and that's why I think it.

LENNY

But how does that change what's really happening?

ALMI

It doesn't. It just changes the story in my head. And if I remember you telling me that you're gay, then you told me.

LENNY

I did tell you.

ALMI

And if you also told me that you teach literature at a community college in upstate New York, then you did.

LENNY

Did I?

ALMI

Or that you cheated on your last boyfriend.

LENNY

I never told you that.

ALMI

Or that you voted republican when were twenty-one.

LENNY

Hey! That was an accident.
Did I tell you that?

ALMI

Is it true?

--

LENNY

So, who I am is different because I'm a version of me that you created?

ALMI

Or you're a robot. Developed in a lab by scientists trying to better the human condition.

He laughs at this.

LENNY

That's insane.

ALMI

Well let's move the story to your head then. You tell me what the truth is.

LENNY

The truth.
The truth.
Okay. I can do the truth.

--

LENNY

Your father didn't kill your brother, you did.

Oh.
I wasn't expecting to say this.
And by the look on her face, I can tell she is not okay that I did.

ALMI

Game's over.

LENNY

She get's up and walks back to the dartboard.
Feeling less drunk somehow, I stand up and follow her.

I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that.

ALMI

You're drunk. It's okay.

LENNY

I'm actually not that drunk. It's not okay. I don't know you and to say something like that-
I'm sorry.

But wait, is your brother actually dead?

ALMI

No, I don't have a brother.

LENNY

Jesus. Is she fucking with me?
Nope. Nope, she's laughing at me.

ALMI

I never said I did.

LENNY

Oh my god! You're a terrible person.

ALMI

The story in your head is the terrible thing here.

LENNY

I didn't make that up. You said it. Out loud. I heard you.
Ask the bartender. He was here.

ALMI

What's bartender?

LENNY

Okay, whatever! He went to get a coat! You're not gonna gaslight me.

ALMI

You're the one making stuff up.

LENNY

No, I'm sure...I'm pretty sure you said-

ALMI

You're not pretty sure about anything. You don't even know the name of the hotel you're staying in.

LENNY

It's a Ramada.

ALMI

No, it's not.

The bartender returns with his coat.

LENNY

Ha! Bartender! Suck it! He's real.

ALMI

Yeah, you don't sound crazy at all.

BARTENDER

Sorry, it took me a minute to find it. But here it is. One gigantic fleece coat.

ALMI

Good luck out there.

BARTENDER

She goes back to tossing darts.

LENNY

Thank you for the coat. Real bartender. How should I get it back to you?

BARTENDER

Well, I mean chances are pretty good that you'll freeze to death in it, so I put a card in the pocket with my contact info that way the police can bring it to me when they take it off your body.

LENNY

I want to think he's bluffing. She's laughing.
Bitch.

I just nod and take the coat.

Thank you.

BARTENDER

He's not actually leaving. He's really bad at bluffing.

ALMI

Fuck! I missed the board completely.

BARTENDER

He's walking to the door.

ALMI

He's not going to leave. He's a terrible liar.

LENNY

I lean forward to see what it looks like outside, through the only window in the bar. It's really dark. The wind is blowing flakes against the glass like we're inside a snow globe. Shit. How am I supposed to get out of this now?

--

BARTENDER

Want some coffee before you go?

LENNY

Dammit.
Sure. Thanks.

BARTENDER

Poor guy. I pour a cup of coffee.

ALMI

I love the sound of coffee being poured into an empty cup. Soothing, isn't it?

BARTENDER

He takes the coat and places it on the bar and sits to drink.

LENNY

It's like a blizzard out there.

BARTENDER

Want some brandy in your coffee?

LENNY

I really do.
Did I say that out loud?

BARTENDER

Coming right up.

LENNY

Yep.

BARTENDER

I overpour the brandy.
Enjoy, I say. Enjoy.

LENNY

Thanks.

BARTENDER

You sure you don't want to take the room here, and sleep it off. The morning is wiser than the evening.

ALMI

He smirks at this. He finds it a little clever.

LENNY

That's a good saying.

BARTENDER

Wish I could take credit for it.

--

LENNY

Do you ever resent your family? I mean for, you know, choosing your life for you?

BARTENDER

Who says they chose my life for me?

LENNY

Well, I mean, if this place has been in your family since Gustav the whatever-

BARTENDER

Third.

LENNY

Yeah, then that means you just had your whole future mapped out for you, right?

BARTENDER

Actually I joined the clergy when I was eighteen.

LENNY

Wow. Really?

BARTENDER

I had my heart set on being a priest.

LENNY

So, why aren't you a priest?

BARTENDER

Have you ever heard of the Spider God?

LENNY

No.

ALMI

Oh, this'll be good.

BARTENDER

It goes like this. Is there a god?

It mustn't be true. For a just God would never allow humans to exist in the kind of misery that life is riddled with. Yes?

But, whoever said God needed to be just?

No, the question is not does God exist, but rather.. what is god? What are you god?

And god is silent.

If God does exist, he must surely be a monster. An eight-legged creature weaving webs of torment for his lesser beings. Ensnared by the unlucky providence of being born at all.

When my father died, I was eight years old, and I began to pray.

For the first time. I prayed. And my mother, a very devout

woman, would tell me that the silence that follows a prayer is necessary if I wanted God to receive it. And that only in the

deepest silence would I ever be able to hear gods answer to my prayers. So, I would run to the forest near our home, I would

run deep into it, to where it was as silent as could be. The

kind of silence that penetrates every part of your body. It

almost hurts. So quiet. And I would fall to my knees and I would

pray. I mean as earnest as you can imagine. Eyes squeezed shut,

hands clasped together without a sliver of daylight between them

and my chest. It was only much later that I learned the word to

describe my devotion...fervent.

And god is silent.

And so, I made a deal with God. One day, I made a deal that I

was sure would come to be. I asked God to tell me one thing.

After my years and years of prayer and suffering and loneliness

wanting the company of my father back, surely, I was deserving

of at least one answer.

Do you know what I asked?

He shakes his head. Afraid to speak and ruin the moment.

I asked him if I could see my father. One more time. There. In

the forest. Just once. That I would come every day, and I would

pray, and fast and sit in total silence if I could have just one

more moment with him.

And god is silent.

Not even a tiny wind to rustle a single leaf.

I grew more devout by the day. Waiting.
Waiting.
Waiting.

--

BARTENDER

I barely spoke a word for eight years. I was afraid I'd talk through the silence that God was waiting for. So my world grew quieter and quieter. The further I climbed into my solitude, the further from existence I seemed to get. I didn't know how to live in the real world. I kept creating these stories in my head, stories of eternity, of infinite possible universes that all branched out and just kept going. And somewhere, on one of those branches, surely, my father was still existing and I should be able to find him. There must be some justice somewhere in the whole expanse of the whole universe.

Somewhere.

And god is silent.

And then

One day I just started talking again. And then another day I just stopped believing. And finally, I grew to understand that if God does exist, I don't want anything to do with him. And if men were created in his image, I don't want anything to do with them either- and his web of deceit can be woven in all that silence he revels in.

And then one day I woke up. Burning with a midwinter fever.

It was dark out. Like the kind of dark that light doesn't even want to find, and I knew. God was silent because he was as dead as my father. Created and perished in our own minds. In the noise and chaos of human thought.

And only in the silence was anything good or pure to be found. The cold is like that. It's safe. Impermeable. Inhuman. And if god is not dead then he's scurrying under a table somewhere, waiting to lure one of us to our tragic end. But not me.

--

BARTENDER

More brandy?

ALMI

He shakes his head. Thinks better of it and lifts his cup.

LENNY

Why not?

ALMI

The bartender smiles and pours more brandy into the cup.

LENNY

What's your name?

BARTENDER

For your story? Does it matter?

ALMI

He doesn't answer. He just sips his brandy, and silently drinks to the man who knows that god is dead. Or at least only as powerful as an insect.

LENNY

And when I write it down. It will be a capital G.

ALMI

Or it's sacrilege.

LENNY

He lost his faith. That's worth a capital g. He gave up something for an illusion.

ALMI

Is he so different from anyone else?

LENNY

Touché. And a spider's not an insect.

--

ALMI

Why did your boyfriend leave you after seven years?

LENNY

Statute of limitations, I guess!

BARTENDR

He chuckles at this.

LENNY

And his text didn't really say.

ALMI

He broke up with you in a text?

LENNY

Well first he disappeared for a week. And when my frantic phone calls and messages finally proved enough for him, then he texted. Said, "not coming home. In love with Parker. Bye." With like five "e's" Which is just cunty. For no reason. Not coming home, in love with Parker. Byeeeeee. And I wish I were paraphrasing.

ALMI

Wow. What a dick.

LENNY

Yeah, he had a really good one.

BARTENDER

She shakes her head at his silly drunkenness.

ALMI

What did you do?

LENNY

About what?

ALMI

When you knew he was gone?

LENNY

Capital G?

BARTENDER

She smiles and nods at this little bit of cleverness. Inspired, she thinks.

LENNY

What could I do? I sold some of his shit. Burned some of it. And held some of it as I cried myself to sleep. And for the record, Parker was my nephew's friend. He's nineteen.

ALMI

Can't compete with youth.

LENNY

Don't want to. I'm getting drunk again.

ALMI

Well the interval between may be in your imagination.

LENNY

I cried for months. Six months. But, plus-side? I haven't been able to feel a single thing since it stopped. Ice cold like your place of birth. How do you live here?

ALMI

Do you want to feel something?

LENNY

Oh god yes. I liked the numbness for a minute. But now, I think it's pathological. I watched a video of a cat getting hit by a car, over and over again, until it made me laugh. I couldn't feel anything.

ALMI

How badly do you want to feel something?

LENNY

Is this a sexual question? Because I really/ don't think-

ALMI

No. It's not. It's your story now, remember?

LENNY

That's right. But maybe it's not. Maybe it's never been either of ours. Maybe it's his.

BARTENDER

Don't bring me into this.

ALMI

No, no, it's all yours.

LENNY

Well then, in my story, you have a knife. Hiding in your back pocket. And you offer to cut me, to make me feel something.

ALMI

A knife?

LENNY

Not too small either. Like a hunting knife.

ALMI

Like this?

BARTENDER

She pulls a knife out of her back pocket. It's not small.

LENNY

Exactly!
Wait, what?

ALMI

What? We all have knives here.

BARTENDER

He wants to laugh at this, but he can't. It's like something's stuck in his throat, and he's having a hard time swallowing.

LENNY

Why do you all have knives? You need to protect yourself from the vicious reindeers?

BARTENDER

She chuckles.

ALMI

I'm a small woman. I need to make sure I'm safe.

LENNY

But this is my story. So I say, you kill reindeers when you walk through the city.

ALMI

Reindeer. No "s". And there are no reindeer in Helsinki.

LENNY

Then how did I just fucking eat one?

ALMI

How do you know you did?

LENNY

Oh..kay! I'm tired of you. I'm tired of your stupid fucking games. And you know what, I think you did stab your brother.

ALMI

I did.

LENNY

And your father committed suicide because of you.

ALMI

That's good.

LENNY

And you've been chasing their ghosts ever since. Wandering from place to place fucking with tourists, just to feel alive. Right? I'm right. Right? Right!

ALMI

You're the first tourist I've ever met shit dumb enough to wander this far off the grid.

LENNY

Right. Looking for meaning.

BARTENDER

He stands up and is too drunk to walk, so he leans. He's getting pretty worked up now.

LENNY

Well, and if it's my story, then how do I know I didn't create all of this in a desperate depressive attempt to manifest some kind of existential meaning? How do I know? I don't!

ALMI

You do.

BARTENDER

She stands and moves toward him.

LENNY

What are you gonna do?

ALMI

Whatever you want me to.

BARTENDER

He takes a few steps back.

LENNY

Okay, wait. Wait! I got it. Let's have a drink, so I'll feel less. And then I want you to cut me. So, I'll feel more. What did he say about inconsistent prosperity? Done!

--

ALMI

Vodka?

LENNY

Fuck yeah, vodka! Bring it, girl!

BARTENDER

She considers this, and smiles a little crooked smile, and looks right at me.

ALMI

Set us up.

BARTENDER

I nod.

LENNY

He takes two shot glasses and places them on the bar. He reaches for a bottle of vodka, a clear bottle with a silver label. He holds the bottle up to Almi for her approval.

ALMI

Perfect.

LENNY

He pours.

She sits.

She pats the stool next to her, inviting me to sit in it.

ALMI

He sits next to me. We both just stare at the shots for a second.

LENNY

I guess one more is okay.

ALMI

Yeah, a drop won't hurt ya.

BARTENDER

And you can't drown in a bucket!

ALMI

Amen!

BARTENDER

They both pick up their shot glasses.

ALMI

To feeling something.

--

LENNY

Yeah. God willing.
Lower-case g.

BARTENDER

They drink.
They set the empty glasses down.
She turns to him.

LENNY

This may be the most sincere look anyone has ever given me.

ALMI

When the world was brand new.
There was no distinction between animals and humans. Everything was perceived as having its own free will. Its own soul, and not just animals; rocks, trees, rivers. Everything within the realm of human life.
And the world itself had these layers, or I guess we would call them dimensions. Only some of them couldn't be seen by just anybody. Only shamans, or priests of some special kind, they could see all of them, and they could travel between them. These very special people could go from one dimension to another finding the meaning of our existence. They could visit the dead. Those who had yet to be born. The whole world revolved around a central point of growth.

LENNY

The tree of life.

ALMI

Yes.
And the sky, a kind of cloth stretched from one side of our realm to the other, like the skin of a drum. Taut. Created by the gods, the creators, to contain us. To hold us. And this canvas, held aloft by the top of the tree, would keep us safe. And the stars, they were just tiny holes cut into the cloth shining light from the upper world. The upper world being heaven, I guess. And so, the immortal beings lived just above us, disguised by this stretched fabric, waiting to hear from the special travelers between dimensions to find out if we still believed in them. Were we still living devoutly. Correctly.

Sometimes, when it's most darkest, in the middle of the coldest winter, when human contact seems impossibly far away, I look to the stars, to the frozen night sky, and I think, I must be one of the special ones. I must be able to go between worlds. I have dreams that cannot be explained otherwise. Because all of the pain that I've gathered inside of me. All of the loss burrowed into my bones. My marrow reeks of abandonment. It's all because of a greater good. And someday it'll be gone. I'll be gone. But my discoveries...they will always be alive.

LENNY

Why are you telling me this?

ALMI

Because it's never occurred to you has it? That my story might be the one that's happening right now? And yours...maybe ended some time ago. So what meaning is left? You tell me.

--

BARTENDER

It's time.

ALMI

Where do you want me to cut you?

LENNY

What? Oh, I was kidding about that.

ALMI

No, no, really. Where?

LENNY

You're not going to cut me.

BARTENDER

She picks up her knife.

ALMI

How else are you going to know you're alive?

LENNY

I'll risk it.

ALMI

I won't go deep.

LENNY

No, thank you.

ALMI

You can't back out now!
God Dammit!

--

BARTENDER

He gets up.

LENNY

I just want to go to bed.

ALMI

There are no answers in bed. You'll never find any answers by
sleeping your life away.

LENNY

Could you show me to my room?

ALMI

He's not going to show you to your room until he's absolutely
positive that you're a real person! What if I invented you?

LENNY

Okay. This isn't funny anymore.

ALMI

What if you're some kind of artificial intelligence-Why are you
backing away from me?

LENNY

Don't come any closer!

ALMI

What? You're afraid of me again?

LENNY

You have a knife. You're threatening to cut me.

ALMI

You gave me the knife. You asked me to cut you!

LENNY

I did not!

ALMI

You did. Don't be a pussy.

LENNY

Oh, I'm being a pussy because I don't want to get stabbed?

ALMI

How are you supposed to know that the story isn't just in someone else's head?

LENNY

Because I'm here. Aren't I? I'm standing right here! How else do you explain that I'm here?

ALMI

Correlation does not imply causation. So how?

LENNY

Because!

ALMI

That's not an answer!

Because it's my story! All of them!

ALMI

All of them?

LENNY

It was my brother who was killed. It was my father who committed suicide. It was me that wanted to be the priest. I prayed and prayed for God to let me be with him! It was all me.

ALMI

Wow! You really are crazy. You really think that our stories are just altered versions of your own?

Or maybe.

Maybe that's all life really is. Maybe you've figured it all out.

LENNY

They are mine! I came here to be away from everyone. To this dark, cold, fucking awful place.

Stop walking toward me!

ALMI

Stop backing up!

LENNY

I'm real! Okay! I'm real!

ALMI

Tell me your full name.

LENNY

Stop.

ALMI

What hotel are you staying in?

LENNY

I mean it. Stop.

ALMI

When was the last time you felt anything?

LENNY

Please.

ALMI

Funny how at the end of life everything that seemed deep and meaningful is reduced to a fucking cliché. The man who's never had a profound thought.

LENNY

Wait!

BARTENDER

We all have devils.

LENNY

Don't-

BARTENDR

She plunges the knife into his stomach.

ALMI

We all eventually kick the emptiness.

BARTENDER

He slumps to the ground, holding his stomach.

ALMI

It's okay.

BARTENDER

She kneels next to him, and cradles his head in her lap.

ALMI

There are no spaces behind god's back. You were never going anywhere, were you? Never in your life.

BARTENDER

What comes singing, leaves whistling.

ALMI

It's just blood. It's okay. It's just you, spilling out into the wide-open winter.

BARTENDER

Emergency does not read the law.

ALMI

It won't matter soon. You won't remember. And you'll have done it! The relief will come.

BARTENDER

There's nothing more than time in the world.

ALMI

The directions always make sense when you can see the end of the road.

What? What are you trying to say?

--

LENNY

I...

ALMI

Yes?

BARTENDER

Hell will never be full.

LENNY

I...

ALMI

You...

BARTENDER

God created nothing—

ALMI

Go on.

BARTENDER

Nothing but time.

LENNY

I...was here.

--

BARTENDER

She holds his face as the life drains from it. She holds his hand until it turns cold.

She sets his head gently on the ground. And a tear, that had been buried deep in her eye, like a tidal wave, gushes forth and rolls down her warm cheek. And just then, like a flash of lightning, she has the most profound thought anyone has ever had. And it's...just so simple.

--

ALMI

(Whisper)

Damn.

Blackout

End of play