

Meta-morphoses

Aeon Last/Penultimate

Book 3: Revolting Youth

We were standing outside the classroom, waiting to be called back in. I was fidgeting in the middle of the hall, and she was leaning against the wall. She was wearing her usual sort of outfit. Dark skinny jeans, black top converse that rotated with some short boots, and a loose black flannel shirt criss-crossed by thin, neon green lines, the top few buttons undone with a black tee underneath. It was right between the fading local fashion of darker, loose ensembles and the new trend of brighter colors and more form fitting outfits, but stood out from both. You don't need to know what I had on in detail. Just something thrown together from me hand downs that most people would have kept as house clothes or thrown out, and old clothes of my own that didn't fit right anymore. It wasn't that we didn't have money at home. It was that we had enough money problems that it was a hassle to spend any. My parents were embarrassed by my general shabbiness, and other kids made their jokes behind my back, but I didn't mind that much. Easier to deal with that than getting castigated for spending on something new after being cajoled into doing so in the first place.

"Has anyone asked you out to Formal?" she asked. Her Wisconsin accent always came out a little stronger when she asked a question.

"Hmm?" I replied, looking up from my observation of my shoes. They hadn't changed much from that morning, although I hadn't noticed how close to divorce the outsole and toe cap were. Once that happened the whole thing would fall apart quickly. Terminal shoe decline, very sad stuff. It meant I'd have to get a new pair soon. Duct tape was a step too far for the parents, as much wardrobe disrepair as they tolerated.

"Has anyone asked you out to Formal?" she asked, her expression not giving away any clues as to her motivation. She had hair down. I had noticed that for all the dark colors she wore, she never wore anything darker than her hair. My observations of her observing me did clue me into the fact that she was studying me. I had noticed those big, green eyes watching me unusually often. Although, she often caught me catching her and it made me wonder if the first few times were coincidence. I had a tendency to stare off into space that occasionally made people uncomfortable when the classroom was divided into two blocks of horizontal rows across from each other, a clear path for teachers down the center of the classroom. Maybe she did the same, and thought I was watching her when we found each other making eye contact while I was trying to figure out if she was watching me. My instinct was to stare down at my desk when that happened, which I always realized in retrospect probably made her more certain that I was

watching if that's why she was watching me. I found myself in those kinds of pointless, stupid dances often. I've been trying to work on it. Unsuccessfully. For most of my life.

I laughed, "No."

"That's too bad. Were you thinking of asking anyone?"

"Uh. No. I haven't thought about it, to be honest." I said

"You could come with me if nobody else asks. I wasn't going to go, but some friends wanted me to. I could bring you along, if you want."

"Oh, uh, thank you. But I don't think... I'm not sure I want to go in the first place."

"Not your thing?" She asked, smiling and slowly nodding her head in understanding. Except she kept nodding like people sometimes do when they're hearing something they'd rather not, but want to play it cool. I'd done it myself often.

You wouldn't be getting ideas above your station, would you, child?

Hush, you.

Don't worry about the bold too much. That's just one of the voices. He's always along for the ride. Then, now, for all my life at different volumes. Kind of a dick.

"Umm. It's not like I'm totally opposed to the idea, but I don't know if I'd be much fun. I'm not really a dance person. I mean, I don't dislike dancing. As an idea. I'm just not good at it. I'm really bad. I avoid it when I can. That might be kind of boring. For the other person." I explained, trying to avoid being honest about my wanting to avoid a social event full of strangers with a decoy truth. I used to not talk to people at all, but I figured out that after a certain point, you become the shy kid people want to get to talk. If you really want people to overlook you, you have to learn how to make a little small talk without saying anything interesting enough to be spun into a conversation. And you have to pay enough attention so that you know what won't catch people's attention on an individual basis. If you don't engage, you're a puzzle to figure out. If you can make yourself unintriguing, you're wallpaper. Sorry, I should have said earlier that I was the italics. You could probably figure that on your own, but there's other voices and, you know, stuff. It'll probably be a formatting nightmare for whoever is writing this if they really get into the...whole breadth of it. I'm glad I only have to narrate. I can say whatever and it's the author's problem to figure out the details. And the typographer later. I don't usually get to be that free with my words. It's nice.

“I get it. I never dance much when I go. We could hang out before then. The two of us, or you could meet my friends. Make sure we have something to talk about.” she said with a smaller smile and a more vigorous head nod. She kept looking me in the eyes, and I couldn’t decide whether to look back or go back to taking field notes on my shoes.

Hope spring eternal, eh? And it always dies, doesn’t it?

“The ticket price is a little high for my taste. Money’s a little tight right now.” I said, starting up another half-truth to avoid having to explain that I didn’t want to get to know anyone well enough that there was a risk of exposure to the vortex of my truly personal life. I used to not say anything about my financial situation, but a simplified version was handy for wriggling out of deeper scrutiny.

“I could cover it.” she said, the smile and nod were both gone.

I started sweating. It seemed like she wanted me to say yes.

How disappointing. Mr. Lonely still can’t tell the difference between polite pity and interest. You’ve had a lifetime of opportunities to learn the difference.

I could feel him standing behind me. Hovering over me. The presence I could only ever catch a glimpse of. It had been a while since I thought he existed physically, I tried to tell myself it was just imagination and anxiety running away from me, but it felt too real. Sounded too real. Some asshole in my ear going on day in and day out. With hindsight, I suppose I was partially right, just wrong about the cause. I tried to ignore him. I always tried to, but it’s hard to completely shut out someone you can never get away from without, you know, getting away from all of it. Life. It was a tempting option most days, not having to hear anything ever again. It’s an exceptionally rare day I don’t at least idly consider it a few times. I tried to ignore him, but the doubt came creeping in all the same.

That’s not a good idea. My parents wouldn’t want me to-”

Oh dear. Not unraveling are you? Is it all spilling out? “Help! Help! I’m bleeding all over the fucking place!” How...disappointing. The chaff must try and remember silence is the only way it can be spun into gold. Or at least be kept from going rotten.

Stop.

I did try to avoid talking about the family idiosyncrasies. He’s tricky though. He tells me to be careful knowing it’ll trip me up. Not that he gives any credit for not getting tripped up. He

doesn't do praise or constructive criticism. Doesn't matter what I do, there's something wrong with it. We're all going to have to deal with it. It's probably not great for story flow, but try living with him. Now that's distracting. I can't even go to the bathroom in peace. Have you ever had to take a dump in private with someone still somehow criticizing how you sit? It's a nightmare.¹

Sorry. The author can only talk to me in footnotes. Fair this time, but hopefully they won't be showing up too often.²

"Thank you for the vote of confidence", I'm saying sarcastically if you couldn't pick on that. Don't footnote this. I will move on. Just don't go stepping on my yarn, Terry Hackett.

Alright.

His prodding stopped me talking, stopped my eyes roaming from face to shoes so I had to take in her expression. Lips pulled taught, a disappointed furrowing of the brow. Signs of bracing for an unwanted response. I was going to commit to my answer rather than try to walk it back and risk seeming bothered by what I had already divulged. But that little pause changed my life, seeing that not as guarded as intended sadness for a moment. I had to ask myself if she really wanted to see more of me than she would in class?

It was a whole drama in my head. To her eyes I had started answering, paused for a second, then blurted out "Are you asking me out on a date? Dates? Like two dates, the first one and then the dance?"

And why would she do a foolish thing like that?

She laughed, which made him laugh. "I wasn't going to call it that."

Life's a funny thing, you can have not even considered a possibility until the moment it seems to present itself, and still feel like you got punched in the chest when it slips away just as suddenly.

Truly Embarrassing. Well done.

"It was more like getting to know you to see if it could work." she continued, doing what I had never been able to. Shut him up.

"Oh." was all I could muster.

¹ Focus

² We'll see

She looked up at the ceiling. I could still see her bite her lip as one leg errantly lifted its ankle and ground the carpet with the foot before she regained her composure. "If you really want to call it a date, I guess that'd be okay."

It was nice to hear, but I still panicked. An incredulous "Why?" slipped out.

"What?"

"Sorry. I meant, uh," I looked over the wall beside her as if it would help me finish a thought like a stucco Cyrano, "I didn't know you were interested."

"You've seen me watching you," she said. And then she winked. I can only describe the sensation this caused as a somewhat pleasant heart attack.

"I didn't think much of it," I lied.

"Sure," she said with an affectionately derisive snort, "what were you saying about your parents?"

"Just that they have a prideful strike streak and don't like to be seen as needing money," I said. It wasn't exactly a lie, that's how they might describe it, the only problem was that they didn't have much to be proud about. I think it might be a haughty streak at that point. Or maybe making it seem that straightforward was a lie of omission, but I maintain that being needlessly honest is a greater sin.

"You could always not tell them," she said, cocking her head to one side.

"True."

"So...do you want to go on a date with me?" she asked, squinting and raising one eyebrow.

That's a different question than whether you should, isn't it? And that's the question that matters.

You know something? I think I'd rather have you judge things I've done than things I haven't.

"Yeah."

“Yeah?” she asked, tilting her head again and trying to suppress an ear-to-ear grin.

That moment haunts me sometimes. A lot of moments—and some long stretches of my life—do. I don’t think she’d have been so excited if she knew if what had tipped me over into saying yes was sticking it to a hallucination. I didn’t know that’s what it was at the time. I knew it wasn’t normal, but I didn’t think I was crazy. Still, I wonder if not mentioning it was also a kind of lie of omission.

A concern raised itself separately from any voices. “This isn’t one of those things where you’re setting me up, is it? I get excited, probably tell a bunch of people, and then you tell me to wear something weird and specific to a public location so I look like a jackass?”

“That’s an oddly specific example, bud.”

“Do you know Big Felix? Happened to him his freshman year.”

“Oh, yeah. I did hear about that. Whatever happened to him?”

“He stole a cop car on a bender and tried to sell it to a chop shop. He’s dead or in Canada depending on who you ask.” I said, scratching my chin as I tried to not remember how he looked hanging out of the window. Happy, but empty. Vacant. Like part of his brain was firing enough to tell him it was exciting, but there wasn’t anything cognitive going on. I don’t think he’d fried his brain bad enough that he’d lost the capacity. He’d stopped caring about what came next enough that he switched off that thinking entirely. I’d seen it happen a few times. People can do all sorts of unwise things to the body and keep going, but choosing to be like that was a reliable sign that they didn’t have long. It wasn’t recklessly floating along so much as putting rocks in your pockets, getting on a leaky boat, and seeing how long the inevitable took.

“Jesus.” she said.

“You can understand why I’d like to not retrace any of the steps on that journey.”

“I can. I wouldn’t do that. I don’t know why anyone would do that.”

“Oh, you know, upperclassmen entertaining themselves. Speaking of, you do know that I’m a freshman, right?”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah.”

HA!

She bounced one leg and stared at the ground. “Huh. I knew you were younger. I ... I did not know that. Your birthday is during the school year, right? Mine’s between them.”

“It’s in a couple of months.”

“Oh, cool. We’re only really two years apart then. That’s not weird. Right?”

“I guess not, but it is unusual. For you to be the older one. I think it’s a real anomaly for it to happen to someone like me.”

She snorted again, “An anomaly? Wow. That sounds serious. We should call a scientist!”

“I’d prefer not to. I think they might dissect me for unrelated reasons.” I said with a blithe but not totally insincere paranoia. She chuckled. I don’t know why some people find me funny, but even if the why was a mystery, her being one of those people at least helped the attraction—potential attraction?—make some sense. It making any kind of sense filled me with a feeling of dread over how I would mess it up. Being messed with doesn’t bother me. It’s not fun, but it’s easy to move past. I started sweating more profusely, and I felt a tremble working its way into my limbs. I crossed my arms tightly over my chest and locked my legs.

“Hey, Giddy.” she said, a term of endearment she had thankfully kept to private conversations, which I realized only then was probably a hint I could have picked up on.

“What’s up?”

“Don’t overthink it. It’s not a big deal. I know you a little bit. You know me a little bit. I’m not going to be upset if you’re a little awkward. When.”

“I guess. It is new for me though. Uncharted territory, could be dragons for all I know.” I said, my stream of consciousness slipping out as spoken words as I rubbed the back of my head. She found that entertaining.

“You think I might be a dragon?”

“I don’t know, they’ve been known to look like people, depending on the mythology.”

“I think the fact that I’m real rules that out.”

I tried to think of a response before stating plainly “I’m not great at banter. I overthink things sometimes.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” she said.

How long do you think it is until the novelty wears off of your little foibles and she gets tired of you. I give it thirty minutes of sustained conversation.

I thought she wasn’t asking me out in the first place. How’d that prediction go, Nostradamus?

I usually didn’t go for that type of sarcasm, but I didn’t mind her’s. I deserved it, for lack of a better term. No one had ever been able to pin down what was going on in my head, but I never had been able to hide that I had trouble communicating. If I had, it would probably be because I had somewhat better communication skills in the first , and then it wouldn’t be as much of an issue. I told her “I’d like to see you one on one first, if you’re comfortable with that. I think that pressure would be easier to manage than a more casual hang out with strangers.”

“Sure.” she said.

“Can you say that a little more Wisconsin?” I asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “You wouldn’t be trying to make fun of me, would you?”

“I just like accents. Except most of the French ones, if I’m being honest.”

She exaggeratedly rolled her eyes before indulging me, “You betcha.”

My body had a surprisingly libidinal response to this. I really hadn’t expected that. I would have avoided it if I had. Fear, excitement, anger. Any arousals or passions, they all flooded the mind in similar ways.

We were standing outside the classroom, waiting to be called back in. I was sitting beside a slow but strong river on a clear, bright night when a man with both a full hiking backpack and his Sunday best on emerged from the bushes on my right. I was there on a camping trip. I tried to cover myself best I could with my limbs. It had been a challenging excursion, in unwanted but, by that point, entirely expected ways. He nodded acknowledgement in my general direction, but his mind seemed otherwise occupied.

Have you considered how you go about finding ways to not be disturbed might be disturbing to others? Something to think about. The presence said, sitting near the water just beyond the edge of my periphery no matter where I looked.

No one to blame this time. Little more self-control and we wouldn't be back there. he said in the fluorescently lit present. I tried to focus on her talking about where might be a good place to meet. I nodded along, hoping that going through the motions of paying attention might help my mind focus and keep from slipping back.

The man walked beside me and stared at the water. I tried to get up with some privacy intact. He started to speak. I was telling her an automated response I made years back—as a way to politely decline more platonic proposed hangouts—that I didn't like movies as a get to know you outing, not being able to talk and all. I registered a tone of agreement without taking in the specifics as the man said “I had... a good life.”

I asked them both “What?” and then I asked her to repeat what she had said as the man repeated himself.

“I had a good life. That's what everyone will say. It looks like I did. I almost did. But people always surprise you. I met my wife in junior high, if you can believe it. I didn't tell my parents for a few years. I can't remember when it was. Only that it was a good while later. We used to sneak over to each other's places. My friends used to sneak out, but I never thought about doing it until she asked me to. It was as innocent as breaking the rules could be. Until one night, she asked me to take my shirt off. I asked her if I could kiss her if I did. We both said yes. That was as far as it went before she left. Now that I think about it, it was that night that I finally decided to tell my parents about her. My father was a very religious man. Every night he'd help me with my prayers after mom had gone to bed. Had me lie down as he stood above me holding my hands tight while I asked for mercy and forgiveness. I thought I caught him sniffing the air, like her perfume was still there. But he'd kill me if he thought I had been fooling around. It couldn't have been that. That's what I told myself.”

The wave of familiar nausea washed over me across both times. She had said something about casual restaurants.

Careful not to get too carried away by nostalgia.

I started babbling about a little seafood stall out in the county.

“When I finally had her over I was worried my father would make a fuss about her being a...a liberated woman was the polite way to put it. But they get along. I was happy, until prayers. He told me he was so happy I was becoming a man and she would be good for both of us. We had his blessing as long as we kept sneaking around, as long as I told him everything we did so he could make sure we didn’t go too far. He asked me what kissing her was like. I always thought of him when I was around her. It made me want to break up. But everyone said we were so good together. I made her happy. Why stop?”

We both know how this ends. the presence said back then. It was one of the times he was right.

Maybe you could make her happy. he said in the hallway, twisting the phantom knife stuck in my stomach, one that’d yet to be stuck in me back at the river and lingered long after.

Fuck off.

She didn’t know it existed. Most people didn’t, not even long-time locals. I said that to her, wondering how it stayed open.

“I put up with it and I never told her. Why would she need to know? I got away from the church when I got a scholarship to a better college than the local one. My wife was thinking of breaking it off since she was going somewhere else. I could have lived with letting it run its course. My father encouraged her to stick by her man. I left the church after my father died. It was just before graduation. The funeral was the last time I went back home. We had a good run, the two of us. The only real problem was that I never wanted kids. But we worked it out. Then we got old, and she wanted to feel like part of something bigger. A community. She started going to a church like the one we had back home when we first met. I stayed away. We drifted. I couldn’t tell why I wouldn’t give it a chance. I didn’t want her to have to learn so much about our relationship so late in life. After so many good years, even if the last couple hadn’t been as good. Then I caught her helping a boy with his prayers.”

He finally looked at me, a wry smile too calm to match the wild in his eyes making him look more crazed than any kind of demented cackle ever could.. She had asked what they had. I was rattling off a rote list as I noticed he had little chains with locks wrapped around the pack's buckles. His body was sagging from the weight. Part of me wanted to stop him from what he was going to do, and part of me wanted him to go and be gone as I listened to her asking if she wanted to meet there or if I should pick her up. I let out a delaying “hmm...”

“People always find new ways of letting you down. The right thing to do would tell someone. I don’t feel like it. I got to thinking if she was always like this, or if I could have

stopped it. Then I thought my father saw a little of him in her that I missed. That I missed my whole life. What a fucking disappointment.” He laughed. It was cold, but there was a real mirth there. That was worse than if it’d been hollow. It really was all a joke. All his life.

See, he gets it. the presence said in unison across time.

“You look like you know what I’m talking about.” I feel down into dozens of memories and nightmares his story had brought to mind. Fresh ones and old. I had a good memory. I could hold onto fine details. Or maybe I was just bad at forgetting. I looked at her and saw other faces and her face replacing those of the iniquitous mid-violation in the past. I felt sick. I had to get my head above the surface as I watched the man walk into the water until he was submerged. I had to put myself back in one place. I wanted to ask for help, **hey, not everybody gets to meet their future self. Maybe she could be your Mrs. Right,** but instead I said slightly too loudly “No time like the present.”

“What was that, bud?” she said, looking both mildly concerned and entertained. I had wet spots under my pits.

The presence was talking, but the one good thing of hitting a low enough low in a day was that it made him easier to tune out. “I was going to leave after this period. I don’t have anything important going on in my last two classes. I know people think I’m kind of a bookworm and a teacher’s pet, but you have to do well enough and look like you enjoy the work so that you have some wiggle room for when you really aren’t feeling it. It’s certainly not like I’m learning much from this shithole, might as well find ways to make some me time with as little friction as possible.”

“You’re not trying to be a cool guy right now are you? No offense, but that’s. I wouldn’t have asked you if that was something I was looking for.” she said. She was frowning slightly.

I was happy the lights had seemed to suddenly grow too bright. It helped keep my feet on the ground. I was honest in that moment, “God, no. I’ve just been having a weird time lately. It’s not me being bold either. It’s more like after a certain amount of nonsense I stop caring about getting in trouble. I’m going to do what I want, and right now I want to spend some time with you more than I want to do the blindfold desk maze for whatever reason they’re setting that up. I also really want some fish tacos. I’m getting those tacos. You can meet me there if you like. Text me if you’d rather do it some other time.”

You’ll be singing a different tune when-

I really won’t.

you have to face the music.

“Damn, Giddy. I didn’t know you had it in you.” she said, impressed at my sudden numb confidence. I can’t really blame her for not putting together that it was a bad sign. She was young too, after all, even if she was more mature and better put together.

“I contain multitudes.” I said airily. I started heading for the nearest exit.

“Wait, you're leaving now? What about your backpack?”

“Eh. I’ll deal with that later.” I said, not knowing how to explain that I needed to get away from backpacks to keep treading water. Or that I would feel miserable seeing a smile right then, no matter how much warmer it was than one I had remembered. It was nice hearing her laugh as I left. A bemused chortle that turned into loud cracking up as I opened the door. I did an over the shoulder finger gun for her enjoyment. Then I stopped and called her name.

“Maise.”

“What’s up?” she said between laughs.

“Nothing. Good to get out of my head. Think about how other people got their own little lives going on.”

“You’re a weird guy, Giddy.” she teased

“I know. You love it.” I said, feeling a surge of genuine boldness.

She told me not to get a big head about it as I let the door close.

It felt good. I felt less good realizing that the food stand was next to a canal of clear, swift water, but I had time to walk it off, and avoiding the security guard who heard my exit gave me something to focus on. The whole interaction had maybe taken five minutes.

I mean it when I say there’s a lot going through my head at any given time, and that was far from the busiest it can get.

