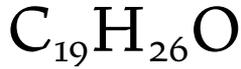


[androstadienone]



Bird wakes up.

The walls aren't white, but close, the color of a cracked egg. She turns her head on the pillow and looks through a window to the street below. Deserted, not a single car parked on the side, and she stares at that until a solitary tank grumbles down the road, guns steady.

Her head aches. She raises her arm to feel it, and sees a needle taped down to the vein in her elbow. She tries to count the stitches on her forehead and concludes ten or eleven. A hospital. But the silence of the room, the hush in the hall, the jarring rattle of a tank outside —

“What happened?” she says, and finds her voice rusty but functional. It has never been particularly melodic. She tries to remember. It's like trying to follow a conversation in a language you barely speak — whatever meaning lies buried there, she can't reach it.

Outside, the sun turns orange and limp violet, silhouetting the bare branches of the trees lining the street. Something about those branches makes Bird sit up and push her hair away from her forehead. *I need a relaxer*, she thinks, feeling the dense, wiry curl at her roots. How long has she been here? There are flowers on the side table — white and pink lilies wilted around the edges and swimming in cloudy water. A note hangs from the vase but she doesn't read it. She wants to believe they're from her parents, but she knows they aren't. Her head aches with the effort of not thinking about him.

She looks back out the window. The trees still had their leaves at the Robinsons' party. Yellow and red and brittle brown.

And so Bird remembers the last thing she can.

It goes like this —

Coffee was in the basement doing lines. Paul was upstairs with the Robinsons and their guests, capital-N networking. He wanted a national security internship this summer, and there were at least two senators and one highly placed government contractor drinking martinis who could help him. Bird had known the second she saw Coffee smoking by the mailbox outside that she would make her excuses, but for now she filled the slot that Paul expected: supportive girlfriend, enjoying the party.

"I think that guy over there is with the *Washington Post*," Paul said, and nudged Felice. "Weren't you saying the other day you were thinking about journalism?"

Felice looked up from her phone and glanced over. "Isn't he the film critic or something? Honestly, you'd think Pam Robinson could get some better guests. I mean, Bob Woodward is a family friend. I haven't decided what direction I want for this summer, but if it's journalism, I'm sure my dad can just call Bob."

"Bob Woodward, like from AP US History? Deep Throat?" Paul said.

Felice smiled gently and combed her fingers through aggressively blunt-cut bangs. "My dad is very well connected."

"My dad knows Adrian Fenty," Charlotte said. She glanced at Bird as she said this, her look a soap bubble of pride that popped under Felice's dismissive shrug.

"What's he, the old mayor of DC? I mean, great for your dad, but the local political scene is low rent."

Paul jumped to Charlotte's rescue. "You really think that, after 8/16? That terrorist flu is practically a pandemic. Venezuela has oil money, a rogue government, and biological WMDs — they're a world

threat. And the most important people in the world live here. Local politics are national politics.” Bird stepped closer to Paul and squeezed his hand, though she felt a jolt of some repelling force she didn’t want to name when he continued, “And that makes it a very good time for me to get in the game.”

Charlotte wound a braid around one finger and said nothing. Behind her, Trevor Robinson stood beneath an early-period Warhol that had probably cost six figures. He was speaking with Cindy de la Vega and an older white man who was gesturing, for some reason, at the ceiling. The Robinsons’ dining room and foyer swarmed with people, mostly adults with a few young hopefuls like Paul, Bird, Felice, and Charlotte.

“Forget the stupid flu, the guy that Trevor’s talking to is the head of Cornell admissions.” Bird jumped to hear Gina’s voice behind her. Gina was a friend of Felice’s, the daughter of someone very rich whose profession seemed to consist of spending money (most recent purchases included an exact replica of the Christopher Nolan Batmobile and a third château in the Loire Valley). Somehow the transitive properties of friendship never seemed to extend to Bird and Charlotte, whom Gina alternately tolerated and ignored.

“I didn’t know you wanted to go to Cornell, Gina,” Paul said.

“Well, I *want* to go to Harvard, but Ms. Vern says that it’s a real reach for me after that shit show in geography last semester, so right now as far as my dad’s concerned any Ivy will do.”

“But still, I mean, *Cornell*? You can definitely do better,” Felice said.

Bird usually stayed out of Gina’s money-scented orbit, but she couldn’t let this go. “I don’t think Cornell is really —”

Paul twisted her hand just as Gina pivoted and smiled. “I know you’d be really glad to get in there —”

“Actually, I want to go to Stanford —”

“— but some of us have parents who hold us to very high standards. And *anyway*, we all know that you guys are lucky. You’ve got, like, a free pass to any Ivy you want. The other day I heard that even *Marella*,

who hasn't done an extracurricular that didn't involve fucking the freshmen girls since sophomore year, is applying to Princeton. Like, my dad actually told me I should check the Latino box on my apps because my great-grandmother came from Puerto Rico, I mean she was white, but still, Puerto Rico, but I decided that it wouldn't be right to get in on anything but my own merit."

"Gina," Felice said after a silence filled by a John Coltrane trumpet solo and Pam Robinson's laugh, "I think everyone is getting in on their own merit."

Paul and Charlotte looked at once exhausted and uncomfortable, precisely how Bird felt; they had all heard this shit with different tunes since sophomore year. Still, usually Felice managed to avoid it when Bird or Charlotte were around.

"Sure," Gina said, smiling at them. "Of course you guys are. You're so smart and talented and, like, pillars of the school. But, come on, Marella's another story. If she was white, she'd be off to UDC."

Paul and Felice laughed. Charlotte wound another braid. Bird realized that she was about to throw her Diet Coke in Gina's face.

"I'll be back," Bird said, and jerked her hand from Paul's grip. Had she seen Coffee standing by the French doors? She pushed through the crowd, heart jumping when she saw a tall man from behind, but he turned out to be Trevor's father. Coffee wasn't upstairs.

The invitations to this party had been limited and coveted, but only by a certain type of student at the brother-sister prep schools of Bradley Hall and Devonshire Academy. Trevor Robinson was one of the richest boys in school, which was saying something in a place where the category of "parents" included the vice president and the secretary of state. His mother was a senator and his father worked on K Street. His mother was also Black, which put her on Bird's mother's radar as a potentially valuable ally in the ongoing campaign to turn her daughter into a model of successful Black womanhood. Pam Robinson was throwing this party ostensibly in honor of a new scholarship she was funding, which would give three "underprivileged" DC

students four free years of the world-class education on offer at Bradley and Devonshire. Carol Bird had complained for a solid week about having to miss this party, but she and her husband had been called away to Georgia for work. For the space of a breath, Bird had thought that meant her deliverance as well. Attending this party would make all her mother's plans for Bird's summer as inevitable as a hole in the ground. How could she possibly refuse that prestigious K Street internship, facilitated by Pam Robinson and her husband, in favor of some cashier job at a gift shop on U Street? Never mind that when she walked past Cici's Handmade on her way to the Metro, Cici always waved at her from the register. Never mind that the smell of their handmade shea butter cream and incense always made her smile. Two days ago, Coffee had found her crying about it in the rose garden. It was the first time their acquaintance had crossed that particular threshold, but it happened easily, naturally. He put his arm around her shoulders; she wiped her nose on her jeans. *Just don't go*, he told her. *Stay home, and tell her you forgot. How much longer can you do this to yourself, Bird?* She knew exactly what he meant. And she had promised him. But then Paul had called her this morning, so sure of her support. Her mother had called this afternoon, and between the fire on one side and the hot iron on the other, she had protected herself the only way she knew how. She went along.

She hadn't known that Coffee would be here too.

She found Coffee in the basement. Hiding from the crowd or waiting for her — she didn't know, but the game required that she didn't guess. He lifted his face from powdered remains on the glass coffee table and wiped his nose.

"That's some excellent company you keep, Bird. What was it you were all laughing about? Marella screwing the freshman class? And here I believed you when you said you didn't want to come to this party. But I'm sure the homophobia adds spice to your friendships."

Bird shivered. So she *had* seen him upstairs. She felt a profound moment of regret for not having thrown her Coke in Gina's face, never

mind the consequences. His withering smile, his condescension, they made her run hot and cold with shame and anger.

“They’re not that bad,” she said, though she knew they were.

“You honestly think that?” He shook his head. “No wonder you came here. So what do you think,” he said, “are we all dead by Thanksgiving or Christmas?”

He tapped his left foot nervously against the wrought-iron table leg and flipped the snuff spoon between his fingers, so fast it looked like a magic trick. Her heart beat very fast, like she’d actually snorted his powder, but she knew that was just Coffee. They had met at another prep school party more than a year ago, and whenever she saw him she felt the echo of that first galvanic shock.

He snapped his fingers and tossed the silver spoon to his other hand. His eyes were a little green and a little yellow, and right now they made him look alien. They narrowed like darts, and they drew blood when they landed true.

“Well? Head up, Bird, or do you care about anything besides getting into Brown?”

“Stanford,” she corrected automatically.

He laughed — she hated that laugh, short and brittle. It made her feel as if she’d been strafed with bird shot. Her breath rattled out of her.

“What, you mean the terror flu?”

“It’s not just a flu, Bird,” he said, making a stupid pun of her last name. Only he ever used it — everyone else called her Emily.

“Then what is it, genius?”

She walked over the plush carpet, so she felt the slight advantage of looking down on Coffee’s swamp-colored eyes and dirty-blond hair, which grew in curls thick and discrete, like fat worms against his scalp.

“A pandemic,” he said quietly. “The CDC called it an hour ago. And California’s ground zero. You sure you’ll have a school to get into this spring?”

He let her tower above him, but she felt awkward in her heels and short skirt, and so she knelt.

“Don’t be melodramatic,” she said, even though upstairs Pam Robinson and the other politicians were talking about quarantines and travel restrictions. “It isn’t that bad.”

“Five to ten percent death rate,” Coffee said, punctuating each word with a swipe of his snuff spoon, like a junkie conductor. Not that Coffee was a junkie. He was something more complicated. “We’re talking Spanish flu bad. SARS bad.” He paused and let the spoon fall to the glass tabletop with a clatter. Bird wondered what Trevor would think if he came down just then – but he must have been the one who invited Coffee in the first place. Boys like him sometimes liked playing sides like that: CIA contractor upstairs, prep school dealer in the basement. Martinis and coke lines, shaking hands and smiling politely.

“Start a war bad,” Coffee said quietly, and leaned a little closer to her. She sucked in a breath. “You think so?”

“Suits upstairs say the drones are already flying over Caracas.”

“Caracas? Already? But isn’t Venezuela still denying that they hired those FARC generals?”

“And FARC claims they haven’t even laid eyes on those guys for years. But the drug lords say Venezuela paid them and gave them the flu, and of course that means we’re safe to ignore the mountain of evidence that even when Chávez was alive Venezuela barely spoke to the FARC.”

FARC, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), had been staging an armed rebellion against the Colombian government for decades. They were notorious for brutal kidnappings and world-scale cocaine operations, and speculation had bubbled for decades in the US press about their ties to Venezuela’s socialist government.

Bird chewed her lip. “Venezuela’s been supporting terrorists for years. Colombia says they’ve been harboring them in training camps. Maybe there’s special intelligence, like in Afghanistan. . . .”

“And bombing some poor city to rubble is really going to save us? Come on, don’t you ever think about the opinions you regurgitate?”

She glared at him, though sometimes she thought half the reason she talked to Coffee was because he would call her out. The way he said it, more wearied than angry, somehow made it better.

“You’re the next Thomas Paine, yeah? Where are your original opinions?”

“I didn’t say they were original. But at least I think about them.”

“How do you know I don’t?”

Coffee smiled, close-lipped. He gave her one of those long looks, the ones that made her wonder why the hell she’d ever liked Paul, even though she knew that her life would be over if she dated someone like Coffee. It made her feel like she wouldn’t care.

“Because you’re smart, Bird. If you thought about it, you wouldn’t believe it. And you *know that*, somewhere deep inside, and so you make sure you never really examine what other people say. Because then you wouldn’t be the perfect Devonshire Academy girl, and you might do something that disrupts your parents’ government careers, and you might realize you won’t actually like the life you’re headed into like it’s a goddamn firing squad, and then, Bird, where will you be?”

“Back in Northeast, living with Nicky.”

It took her breath away, the things she would say just to see his reaction. Thoughts she’d never told anyone, thoughts she never even knew she had, laid out like his little blue pills on a designer coffee table. And that, she knew, was the real reason why she talked to him. Every semi-accidental encounter at a party or after class or in the rose garden — all so that she could feel the profound relief of his presence. Coffee was the only person she had ever met who seemed to like who Bird really was, beneath all the layers of expectation and achievement and failure. Even if Bird had told Charlotte and Felice about her uncle, they wouldn’t have understood. *That* was Coffee’s magic — despite being prickly and judgmental and occasionally insufferable, he understood. He was the one person who didn’t need her lies.