

Follow the Script

By

Blake Thaggard

Every summer, the windows stay propped, sun-beaten rulers stuck between hot wood and hotter glass. The breeze usually isn't more than wishful thinking, but nobody complains. It's just how things are, here. Stuffy classrooms and sweating students and stubborn indifference; something like pride spilling into resignation (or maybe the other way round). Inside and out is illusory. It draws the eye to that seam, but nothing more. A game of distraction, imagined solace from the heat.

But she's mastered that stubborn indifference. She can slink beneath the seam, ducking head below the window's gap, and stay quiet and still even as the sun bakes her back. A spider, maybe. An observer, and a patient one at that, always taking the highest perch, but never forgetting the web. The prey: her classmates. Flies, all of them. Not in stature, but...understanding. Awareness. She can spy them so easily from here, but she can never quite hear them.

The movements of their mouths are hypnotic, and it's all she can do to imagine what they say to each other. Complaints about homework. Parents. Teachers. Friends. Drawing plans for fun, out of the heat. Arcades and bowling. Pools and ice cream. Gossip. Those are her favorite to think about: boys, dogs, kisses in closets, breakups in the rain and fires in the dark.

They laugh, sometimes. She doesn't hear that sound at home. Not anywhere but the TV, at least. It's where she sources this oft-dreamt screenplay: celebrity couples, motley teens, families zany and stupid and perfect. They say the lines and she imagined them coming from the mouths of her peers, perfect little puppets with all the right jokes and charm and timing.

That last part is important. They never talk over each other, the classmates in her head. They know when they need to sneak in a joke and when to stay silent. How to respect and obey

and stay out of each other's way. This camaraderie of theirs doesn't work if they don't follow the script, if they can't follow the rules, if they can't –

And she's lost it.

Her sticky forehead feels especially gross when she presses it into the brick, berating herself with a swift scolding learned and practiced. How long has she been here, already? The clock says four minutes, but lifetimes have passed between her classmates, love blossomed and friendships forged. She never makes it to the end. It's always in the back of her mind, the need to conclude these pretend conversations with grace. The friends in her head deserve that much, at least. An ending that satisfies.

The students seep out of the classroom, sharing shoves, high fives, claps; never once realizing how they languish, unfinished. Pale eyes force themselves to the clock once more. She'll be late getting home again. There's always a price for these false memories, and it's usually taken out in responsibility. A debt that never ends.

Hucking her backpack over one shoulder, she leaves the window behind. Baked grass crunches beneath the filthy soles of her sneakers, then cracked pavement as she crosses the front of the school to reach her bike. Every footstep is another one of these little dreams lost. The details are never the same when she thinks about them later, warm and suffocating nights when the crickets drown away the sounds of dad on the TV.

Maybe she'll forget the frame of the narrative, one of these days. She could put herself in the shoes of her classmates. She could live out those scenes and say all the words. She could have friends and dates and fun. It'd be easy. Easier than going home. Whether it happened or not, it was all real.

It could be real to her, at least.

Couldn't it?