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## Hotel Inferno

*Quarter-way in our life's journey, I was pushed astray from the road covered in white dust and woke to find myself in the light of Dante's hell without my pedometer.<sup>1</sup>*

### I

Dodging the amber murder hornets swarming the grand gateway onto the First Floor, my guide, Ariana Grande<sup>2</sup>, gestured me off the elevator we had traveled on. She had previously saved me from the wrath of Wendy Williams, Perez Hilton, and Bryce Hall, the three security officers of the hotel<sup>3</sup>. Ariana and I now stood in front of Anthony Fauci, the front desk clerk of hell. Upon noticing us, he hastily pushed his latest copy of *Sports Illustrated* away<sup>4</sup>.

“Name and cause of death?” He asked monotonously, frowning down at a roster marked in red ink. My mentor motioned me to answer by pushing me forward. I hesitantly retold the story of my death: how I was murdered in a school shooting on my birthday.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Dante Alighieri's *The Inferno* and E.M. Forster's "The Other Side of the Hedge".

<sup>2</sup> Ariana Grande-Butera, an American singer and actress, represents Virgil, Dante's guide. She left Catholicism in 2014 after it rejected her older brother, Frank James Michael Grande Marchione (Frankie Grande), for his sexuality.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Joan Williams, Mario Armando Lavandeira Jr., and Bryce Michael Hall allude to the Leopard of Malice and Fraud, the Lion of Violence and Ambition, and the She-Wolf of Incontinence (the Three Beasts of Worldliness) respectively. Williams, who body-shamed Grande on her show in 2015, is known for provoking feuds through her controversial comments about others, especially her interviewees, thus comparable to the Leopard and its disguise when approaching prey. Hilton represents the Lion, an aggressive creature, through his methods of gaining fame, which include posting gossip about celebrities (such as Grande) on his blog. And Hall, just like the She-Wolf, has a constant lust for increasing social media popularity through scandals and disputes (one of which was with Grande).

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Anthony Stephen Fauci has been the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984, served on the White House Coronavirus Task Force, etc. His position refers to Minos, the semi-bestial judge who assigned sinners their punishment in *The Inferno*. Growing up, he enjoyed playing sports such as baseball, basketball, and football.

The doctor nodded, “Oh, yes. You’re from California<sup>5</sup> too?” Before I could respond, he chuckled and continued, “What a tragedy—they cried for a week and then just forgot about it<sup>6</sup>. Rather typical, I’ll say.” But his voice held no humor.

Frameless full-length mirrors were situated around the receptionist’s desk. They blocked his view, leaving him uncertain of everything beyond. Instead of reflecting light onto the ground, they reflected blackness. While Dr. Fauci was esteemed by Americans for his knowledge in life, he was surrounded by oblivion in hell. Faint whispers could be heard from beyond the mirrors.

“Welcome to Hotel Inferno. Here are the keys to the Second Floor and the Seventh Floor<sup>7</sup>. Enjoy your stay.”

## II

“Each woman on this floor is placed in a different wing based on her sins.”

Across the elevators, stood a wall with an enormous plaque: “Women Are Bad,” it read in curly, threatening letters. “Those Who Hurt Themselves,” “Those Who Hurt Others,” and “Those Who Were Hurt by Others,” said the three smaller plaques pointing to the different wings on the floor. My guide led me towards the first wing, “Those Who Hurt Themselves.” The hallway was covered in artwork of fairies and other magnificent creatures, each with an aura that drew me towards them, making it impossible to look away. I silently asked Ariana whether I could approach the paintings, and she nodded in affirmation.

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<sup>5</sup> California has the highest number of school shootings in the United States of America (since 1970).

<sup>6</sup> An allusion to the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*. A similar quote is said by Clay Jensen (played by singer and actor Dylan Minnette) on the TV show. (Jensen is attempting to prevent a school shooting in that scene.)

<sup>7</sup> In *The Inferno*, Circle Two was home to the lustful. Here, the Second Floor includes women due to the negative modern-day connotation of women relating to sexual greed (i.e. “slut-shaming”). Meanwhile, homosexuals reside on the Seventh Floor, since Round Three of Circle Seven in *The Inferno* contained sodomites.

As I wandered closer to the paintings, I was met by a painful surprise—a closeup of the women revealed that they weren't as fair and lovely<sup>8</sup> as they seemed from afar. Covered in the pain of beauty<sup>9</sup>, they inaudibly cried for help, their agony tainting the walls like blood staining white sheets.

“It's often we hurt, sometimes without even knowing it. These women spent their lives ruining themselves, and now, they spend an eternity in misery without a break or way to release themselves,” My all-knowing guide gently explained. She gestured me further down the hall, “Look on, and you may even recognize some of these women.”

I slowly moved through the hall. The women in the canvasses shifted from mythological to real as I walked deeper down the path. Some women wore dirty rags, and others had a sewing tape measure wrapped tightly around their waists. Each woman had their eyes glued open—they were being forced to see one another in the same way that everyone saw them when they were alive. While they shunned their own grief in life, they couldn't do the same in hell. I recognized Princess Diana<sup>10</sup>, her skin as brittle and pale as broken paper and her eyes like glass that had been shattered a dozen times. Probably more.

On the other wall was Whitney Houston<sup>11</sup>, an invisible smile covering her face. Unlike many other women in the artwork, there were no tears in her eyes. Instead, her eyes were hollow—her grief had been stolen from her, and she was left with nothing. The entire canvas was

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<sup>8</sup> Glow & Lovely (formerly Fair & Lovely) is an Indian skin-lightening cosmetic product that recently rebranded itself after receiving backlash because of its implications regarding beauty standards and colorism.

<sup>9</sup> An allusion to the phrase “beauty is pain.”

<sup>10</sup> Diana Frances Spencer, Princess of Wales, was a member of the British royal family from 1981 to 1996. In her biography (written by Andrew Morton) *Diana: Her True Story*, the princess revealed her struggle with bulimia nervosa (an eating disorder) and other mental health issues.

<sup>11</sup> Whitney Elizabeth Houston, an American singer and actress, is regarded as one of the greatest artists of all time. She suffered from drug addiction.

filled with water, but the water was red. Droplets fell onto the ground, pitter-pattering slowly, like porcelain glass dolls gently brushing past each other.<sup>12</sup>

My guide snapped me out of my daze. “It’s truly a shame,” she told me, “The women in this wing deserved better. They didn’t do this to themselves.”

“Then who did?” I asked, curiosity seeping through my veins. “Because scarred or not, they’re truly beautiful.”

“Society did this.”

### III

As soon as the elevator door opened, I was met and surrounded by darkness. But the darkness wasn’t black, it was colorless. It almost seemed as though I was inside a black-and-white film. I looked down at myself and realized that even I had been converted into a colorless nobody. Next to me, Ariana, who was still in color, looked rather privileged.

“You’re here because...”

“...I like women and men<sup>13</sup>,” I finished for her, studying the Seventh Floor. A dingy banner hung loosely above me; “The Gay Community Is Bad” was written in a straight, block font. The floor was a straight corridor with an unequal number of doors on either side.

My guide wordlessly steered me to the door labeled “Bisexual.” Upon entering the room, I was met by chokingly windy weather, causing me to shiver even underneath my sweater. I turned to Ariana, confounded to learn that she wasn’t cold. It was because in life, we had turned away from the supposedly natural-and-warm comfort of heterosexuality, so in hell, we were denied this feeling and were instead left icy and lonely.

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<sup>12</sup> Houston died in 2012. She drowned in her bathtub, but reports reveal that the illicit substances in her system and a heart disease also contributed to her death.

<sup>13</sup> A lyric from Ariana Grande and Victoria Monét’s song, “MONOPOLY.”

I walked through the freezing room, Ariana beside me, unable to see much in the thick fog. We were soon met by a brown crackling hedge<sup>14</sup>, blocking us from the other side like a great stone wall. Confused as to why I could see the hedge in color, I looked to my guide in question, and she told me that even in hell, there was a constant divide between people. The hedge was the only object that appeared in color to me because it served as a reminder: if I were normal, I would've been able to see it—not in brown, but in green, as Ariana had informed me that was the hedge's real color<sup>15</sup>.

We continued on to an opening in the hedge, and I realized that on the other side was a maze. As soon as we entered it, the opening behind us closed. The walls of the hedge stretched up miles, and the haze was so thick that I couldn't even see the ground. In silence, I observed the maze I was stuck in. Other than Ariana, there was nothing and no one around me. The people in this room were unable to pick a side<sup>16</sup>, so in hell, they were left without sides and had to suffer alone.

My guide explained how the maze was endless with no way out. Everyone in this maze was under constant monitoring. If they wandered within a viewing distance of each other, they received an excruciating electric shock<sup>17</sup> and were forced miles apart, even if they had caught a glimpse of one another on accident.

“How could one possibly watch over every single person in a maze this big?” I asked Ariana, and in response, she said there were cameras throughout the maze. Mike Pence<sup>18</sup>, who

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<sup>14</sup> “Brown crackling hedge” is a motif from E.M. Forster’s “The Other Side of the Hedge”.

<sup>15</sup> In Forster’s “The Other Side of the Hedge,” the narrator later discovers that the seemingly brown hedge is actually green.

<sup>16</sup> “Pick a side” is an offensive and biphobic saying.

<sup>17</sup> An allusion to electrotherapy, which was a common technique used in conversion therapy to short out brain pathways and force patients to “forget” their sexuality.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Richard Pence, an American politician and the 48<sup>th</sup> vice president of the US, is known to be anti-LGBTQIAP+ (rights). As the governor of Indiana, Pence passed some of the most restrictive abortion laws, signed a bill allowing discrimination against non-heterosexuals, blocked the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Indiana, etc.

controlled this floor, watched over these sinners from his underground bunker. He had initially been condemned to other floors, but after being discriminated against by other sinners due to their dislike for him, he was sent here. My guide described how he had been left alone in his bunker, as no one desired to be near him.

Ariana and I soon left the Seventh Floor, returning back to the First Floor, where I was to pick the floor I would prefer to reside on. Inquisitively, I questioned: “If I were neither a woman nor bisexual, would I have been sent to heaven instead?”

To this, my great guide answered: “Heaven does not exist. And if it did, it would be empty. Everyone has sinned in one way or another, whether that be their sin or society’s sin for making it one.”

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