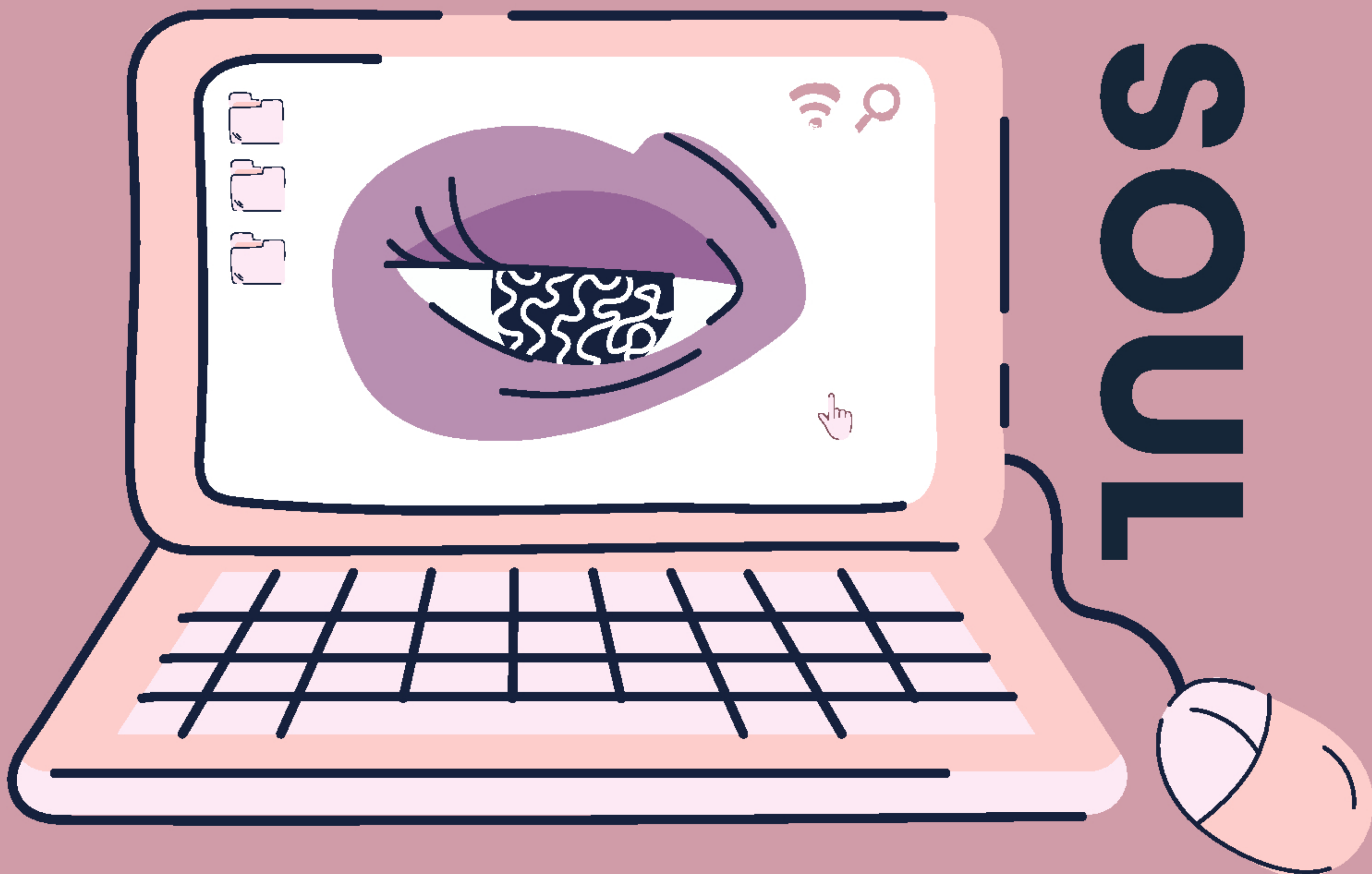


WINDOW to the

SOUL



THIS MIGHT SOUND CRAZY, BUT: “DO YOU EVER LOOK INTO YOUR REFLECTION’S EYES AND WONDER WHETHER YOU’RE AI?”

“OH.” MY FRIEND NODS, PROCESSING. I’M REASSURED BY HER CONFIDENT TONE; I’M NOT CRAZY AFTER ALL. HER EYES SEEM DEEP AS SHE PONDER. THEY’RE ALWAYS FULL OF WONDER, LIKE THOSE OF A GODDESS REDISCOVERING HER OWN WORLD.

“IF ONE OF US IS AI, IT’S DEFINITELY YOU.”

I’M NOT SURE WHAT ANSWER I EXPECTED, BUT THAT WASN’T IT. I TURN THOUGHTFULLY BACK TO MY OWN PASSIVE REFLECTION.

SHE LAUGHS.

“YEAH.”

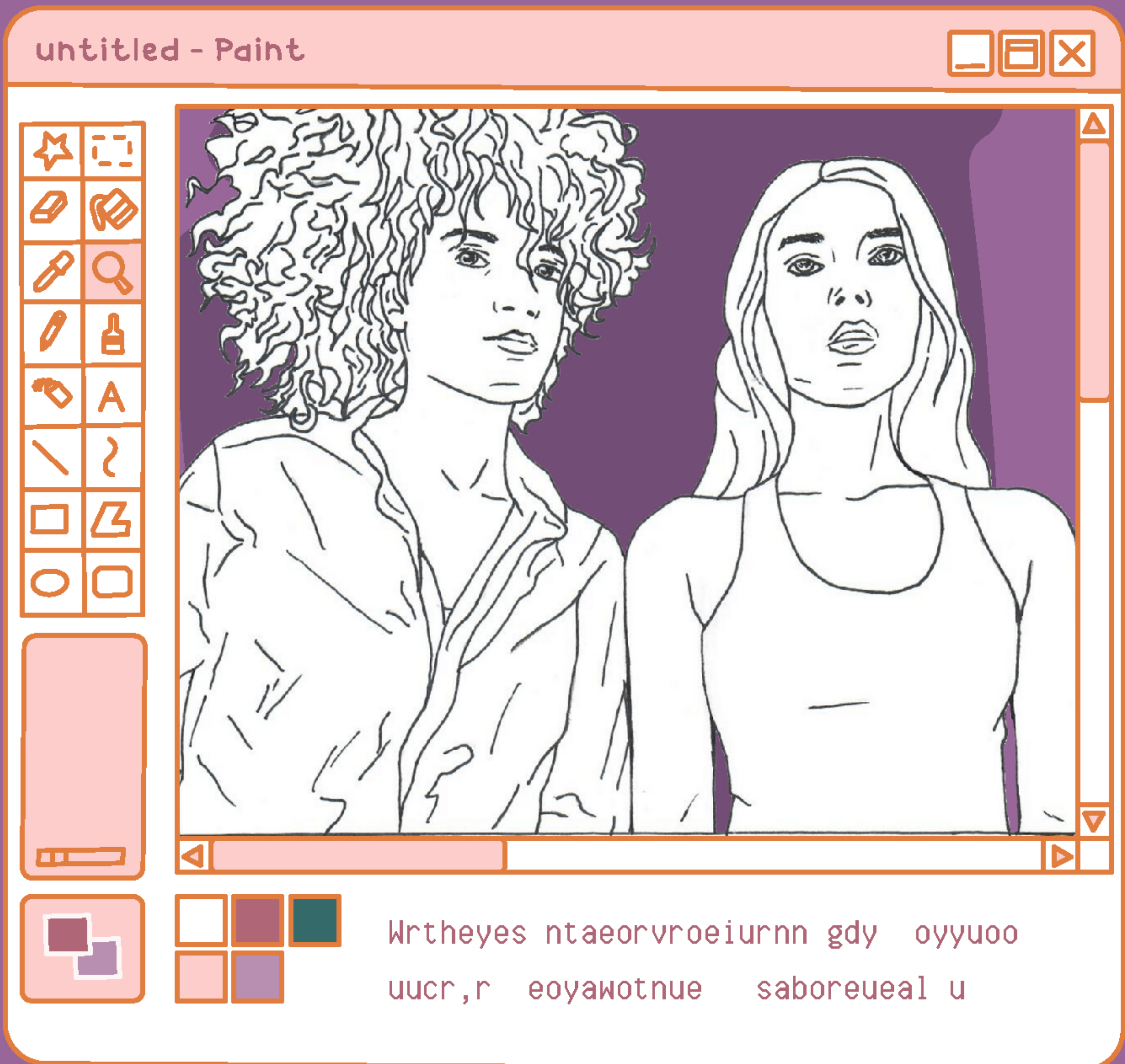
MY FRIEND REAPPLIES LAVENDER EYESHADOW. DUST FALLS FROM HER LOADED BRUSH TO HER CHEEBONES. SHE TURNS THE OLD FASHIONED BRASS TAP, DAMPENS HER INDEX FINGER, AND REPAIRS HER LOOK. HER TINTED CONTACT LENSES COMPLIMENT THE PIGMENTS IN HER COLOUR PALETTE.

“EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU—FROM THE WAY YOU LOOK TO THE WAY YOU ACT—SEEMS DESIGNED, YOU KNOW?”

DESIGNED. THE ELECTRONIC MUSIC HURTS MY EARS EVERY TIME SOMEONE OPENS THE HEAVY WASHROOM DOOR. SENSORY OVERLOAD.

“THAT’S RIGHT... I WAS THINKING ABOUT HOW THE LIGHT BLUE RINGS AROUND MY PUPILS LOOK LIKE POWER BUTTONS ON COMPUTERS.” MY FRIEND LEANS CLOSER, PEERING INTO MY REFLECTION. HER SPRING

JACKET BRUSHES AGAINST MY BARE SHOULDER. “YOU’RE DEFINITELY AI.” WE LAUGH. OUR REFLECTIONS JOIN IN.



THE APARTMENT OF THE WOMAN I’VE ADMIRER FOR YEARS IS QUAINLY BOHEMIAN, BURNING INCENSE STICKS THAT SMELL LIKE CHARCOAL POPPIES. SHE SAYS THERE USED TO BE MORE ART PIECES ON THESE CANARY YELLOW WALLS, BUT A

SUBLETTER STOLE THEM LAST SUMMER. HER PARENTS WANTED HER TO MOVE AFTER THAT, BUT A DEEPLY PERSONAL SENSE OF PRIDE HAD MADE HER STAY. SHE REFUSED TO LET SOME THIEF SOUR HER SPACE, OR TO ADMIT DEFEAT BY LEAVING.

The Cipher:
Skip Every 3rd letter

HER PARENTS INSISTED INSTEAD THAT SHE INSTALL A SECURITY CAMERA. TOUGH TO ARGUE WITH THE PEOPLE WHO PAY THE RENT. THE GROUP OF US LAUGHED WHEN SHE TOLD THE STORY, AND MADE HALF-SERIOUS JOKES ABOUT THE CAMERA BEING HACKED.

I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO SEE HER SPACE EXACTLY AS SHE'D CREATED IT, BEFORE THE SKATEBOARDS SHE'D PAINTED AND THE PRINTS SHE'D ADORED WERE RIPPED FROM THESE WALLS. IT'S A SHAME WE HADN'T BEEN CLOSE UNTIL RECENTLY. WE HAD BEEN BUSY WAITING FOR CIRCUMSTANCES TO CONNECT US WHEN WE COULD HAVE CREATED CIRCUMSTANCES OF OUR OWN. I'M JUST TOO NERVOUS AROUND THOSE I TRULY ADMIRE — NEVER HAVE THE NERVE TO APPROACH, NEVER HAVE THE COURAGE TO LOOK THEM IN THE EYE.

ALL THAT FUZZ ABOUT SECURITY WON'T MATTER FOR MUCH LONGER. THE SCHOOL YEAR IS ALMOST OVER. SOON SHE'LL MOVE BACK TO HER HOMETOWN ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COUNTRY. TONIGHT'S GATHERING IS A BRIEF RESPITE FROM HER PACKING AND TRYING TO FINISH THE FOOD IN HER MINI-FRIDGE.

SHE'S DONE WELL TO MAKE THE SPACE COZY BETWEEN THE STACKED BOXES AND SUITCASES. GOOD MUSIC, BLANKETS, AND PILLOWS DO WONDERS, AND SHE'S DECIDED WHAT'S LEFT OF HER ART WILL BE THE LAST TO BE PACKED.

THE HANDFUL OF PEOPLE HERE HAVE REACHED AN IDEAL LEVEL OF INEBRIATION: COMPELLED TO BE HONEST, YET NONE SO FAR GONE THAT WORDS WON'T REGISTER. MY FRIEND AND I SHARE ADMIRATION FOR OUR HOSTESS. WALLS WILL CRUMBLE BETWEEN DUSK AND DAWN, EVEN AS ALL WHO BREAK THEM AGREE THEY SHOULD BE REBUILT COME MORNING. MUSICIANS WRITE SONGS ABOUT SUCH MOMENTS. I THINK HOW WELL A PERSON FACES THEM IS A SIGN OF WHETHER THAT PERSON BELONGS TO THE DAY OR TO THE NIGHT. WE'RE ALL NIGHT PEOPLE HERE.

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE SO COOL BEFORE I MET YOU," I START. "THAT IS, I MEAN, I STILL DO!"

MY FRIEND JUMPS IN TO SAVE ME: "YOU JUST HAVE AN AURA ABOUT YOU, AS IF YOU DON'T CARE WHAT PEOPLE THINK. IN LECTURES, YOU DON'T TALK MUCH, BUT WHEN YOU DO, IT BLOWS PEOPLE'S MINDS."



“THAT’S WHAT I MEAN!” I CONTINUE, NOW BUBBLY WITH EXCITEMENT. IT’S ALWAYS A RELIEF WHEN PEOPLE ARE FINALLY REAL WITH ONE ANOTHER. “YOU JUST WAIT QUIETLY AND LISTEN UNTIL YOU HAVE PERFECTLY FORMED YOUR THOUGHTS. NOTHING YOU SAY IS FLUFF. YOU ONLY SPEAK WHEN YOU HAVE SOMETHING WORTH ADDING. I ADMIRE THAT ABOUT YOU.”

THE OBJECT OF OUR ADMIRATION LOOKS SLOWLY BETWEEN THE TWO OF US. WE TAKE UP MOST OF THE AVAILABLE SEATING, PERCHED ON THE SIDE OF THE DOUBLE BED IN HER SMALL DOWNTOWN

APARTMENT. EVEN WHEN SITTING CROSS-LEGGED ON THE WORN WOODEN FLOOR, HER BODY HEAVY WITH INEBRIATION, SHE SEEMS IN CONTROL. A SOFT STRAND OF HER SHORT BLACK HAIR FALLS AGAINST HER RELAXED LIPS. HER COSMIC EYES SPARKLE APPRECIATION BEHIND A PARADOXICALLY COLD EXPRESSION.

“I’M RELIEVED TO HEAR IT COMES OFF THAT WAY,” SHE BEGINS COOLY. “MOST OF THE TIME, I’M ACTUALLY JUST FIGHTING OFF CRIPPLING SOCIAL ANXIETY.”

THE WALLS COME DOWN. THE SECURITY CAMERA’S TINY RED LIGHT BLINKS. SHE BLINKS SLOWLY TOO, UNFAZED BY OUR STUNNED SILENCE. SOMEHOW, SHE SEEMS ALL THE MORE MAGNIFICENT NOW.



HOME AGAIN. THE SUN WILL RISE SOON, BUT I DON’T MIND. TIME SEEMS TRIVIAL. WHEN I’M ALONE WITH THIS MAN, IMPULSES RULE, AND NEITHER OF US WANTS TO SLEEP ANYWAY.

“DO YOU THINK THE EYES ARE TRULY THE WINDOW TO THE SOUL?” I ASK.

HE LEANS HIS HEAD BACK AGAINST THE WHITE TILE THAT SURROUNDS THE BATH.

MY LEGS REST ON TOP OF HIS AS WE SIT FACING EACH OTHER IN THE WATER. HIS THIN HAND SWIMS GENTLY BACK AND FORTH. THE BATH BOMB WE DROPPED IS STILL BURSTING LAVENDER JUST BELOW THE UNBROKEN MENISCUS.

“YES AND NO.”

YES AND NO’ IS WHAT A PERSON SAYS WHEN THEY MEAN ‘I HAVE A LOT OF THOUGHTS ABOUT THAT, AND IT WILL TAKE SOME TIME TO EXPLAIN’. I WAIT PATIENTLY AS HE SEEKS THE WORDS. WATER GLISTENS ALONG HIS STRONG JAW. HE HASN’T SHAVED IN DAYS, BUT SOMEHOW HE PULLS OFF THE SCRUFFY LOOK. ANISOCORIA MAKES ONE OF HIS PUPILS BIGGER THAN THE OTHER. IN THIS PALE BATHROOM LIGHT, THAT DIFFERENCE IS ALL THE MORE APPARENT. WHEN I MET HIM, HIS ODD PUPILS REMINDED ME OF DAVID BOWIE. I IMMEDIATELY PUT EVERYTHING THAT I LOVED ABOUT MY IDEALIZED BOWIE ONTO THE BOY I HAD JUST MET. THAT WAS SEVEN YEARS AGO. BY NOW, I REALIZE THE MAN I’M SHARING A BATH WITH IS NOT AT ALL THE ICON I HAD DEIFIED WHEN I WAS YOUNGER... FOR ONE THING, DAVID BOWIE WASN’T BORN

WITH ANISOCORIA. HE INJURED HIS EYE.

I SCOOP THE STILL BURSTING LAVENDER BATH BOMB INTO MY HANDS AND ENJOY THE SUDDEN KISS OF BUBBLES AGAINST MY FINGERS AS THEY RUSH TO THE SURFACE. HIS ANKLE BRUSHES AGAINST MY THIGH AS HE BENDS HIS KNEE. IT SHOULD BE DIFFICULT TO FIT TWO IN THIS SMALL PORCELAIN TUB, BUT WE NEVER FEEL LIKE WE’RE CLOSE ENOUGH TO EACH OTHER ANYWAY. I DROP THE BATH BOMB BETWEEN US, SIT UP, AND THEN REST MY HEAD AGAINST HIS DAMP CHEST. WARM WATER FALLS DOWN MY SPINE AS HE STROKES MY BACK.

“EYES ARE ONE OF THOSE PLACES YOU CAN SEE MAGIC. THEY CAN DECEIVE, BUT THEY OFTEN EXPRESS TRUE EMOTION AND MOTIVE TOO. SOMETIMES... YOU REALLY CAN SEE THE UNIVERSE THROUGH THEM.”

I SLOWLY SIT BACK. THE WATER’S GENTLE MOTION ECHOES THROUGH THE TILE BATHROOM. HIS PALM TRACES THE SMALL OF MY BACK TO MY KNEE. WE MEET EACH OTHER’S EYES. HIS ARE HEAVY WITH EXHAUSTION, PALE BLUE. THEY HAVE ALWAYS HAD A RESOLUTE DARKNESS, COLD

The Cipher: Binary Code

AND KIND. MAYBE DARKNESS IS A LENS INTO TRUTH THAT CAN'T BE EXPRESSED WITH WORDS.

HE LIFTS HIS OTHER HAND FROM THE PURPLE WATER AND BRUSHES A LOOSE STRAND OF HAIR BEHIND MY LEFT EAR. HIS WARM FINGERS LINGER AGAINST MY TEMPLE.

"WHEN I FIRST MET YOU, I NOTICED THE RINGS AROUND YOUR PUPILS RIGHT AWAY. I THOUGHT THEY LOOKED ELECTRIC AND FULL OF LIFE... BEAUTIFUL."

I SMILE SOFTLY AS I LOWER MY GAZE TO THE STEAMING WATER. MY HEART WARMS. FROM LAVENDER DARKNESS, MY WARPED REFLECTION

SMILES BACK AT ME. MAKEUP IN A MIRROR, MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH FRIENDS, AND MAKING LOVE TO A MAN. SURELY, THIS MUST BE WHAT IT IS TO HAVE A SOUL.

