Happy Birthday from Edward Hopper

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The rain beat down on the pavement. “Such a clichéd day to be going here,” she thought bleakly. The linoleum was wet around the mat. Tiny tributaries of water ran down her face and became streams on her raincoat, tumbling in miraculous falls to that wet, checkerboard floor. The heavy impermeable shell fell off her shoulders with a shrug of someone who was accustomed to it all. “I must be related to that man in Hitchhiker’s Guide. Damn the perfect rain,” she muttered under her breath.

Five swift steps away from the door, the windows and the rain, she mounted a red vinyl stool. The feel of a swiveling seat never fails to excite; it’s the spinning. She could spin herself into a dizzy oblivion – she just knew she could. But no one does, not even once; appearance matters. It mattered to her if just for today. Gazing at herself in the reflective chrome edging of the counter, she knew it all too well.

The man behind the counter leaned up, rag in hand, and all she kept thinking was, “God this is so cliché!” He asked for her order, drawing a pencil out from behind his ear. “I’ll have coffee. . . . ”she uttered confidently, with the swagger of a movie star stare. Not catching her joke, he began to jot it on his nostalgic little pad. She relinquished to him, “No, sorry, it fit the moment. In truth I’ll have a side of bacon, a piece of apple pie, and a chocolate milkshake.” He glanced up at her with a look that said coffee was a better choice. He walked back to the kitchen through the swinging door. She was left on her own in the empty restaurant.

It felt like Edward Hopper, just like it was supposed to. There was no one around, only an old diner with big windows, cold chrome, comical black to white linoleum and rain, all that perfect rain. Everything was so cold; she couldn’t help but shiver. She fiddled with the napkin dispenser and rearranged the sugar packets. She glanced up at the icy white lights. Her fidgeting did nothing to soothe the feeling. It was the feeling she had come in search of.

Her toes were slightly soggy; nylons and high heels in the rain never equaled comfort. What had she always wanted to do? She should do those things. “Mani-
festo for the 21st year!,” she said raising one finger in the air and spinning on that squeaky stool, “I will regard my impulse above all else.” She spun around again and again. The server emerged with her milkshake. She stopped spinning, laughed loudly, and grinned. “Thank you,” she called to him as he left. He glanced back at her, slightly afraid, and lumbered back to the kitchen. Through the portal in the door she could see the silent stove, the industrial fridge, the resting machines. Some TV hummed in there; obviously it held the key to his happiness.

She sipped her shake greedily and then stopped abruptly. She retrieved the purse hanging with her coat and found a shiny silver pen. She grabbed a napkin. Red nails kissing pen and pen kissing napkin she wrote;

21st year Manifesto!
I will regard impulse above all else.
I will not be afraid of censure.
I will tell people what I really think.

Pen drawn to mouth she stopped, crinkling her brow. “That’s it for now,” she chimed. She left the pen sitting next to the napkin and took another desperate breath of milkshake. Standing, she adjusted her skirt and picked up her purse. She took twenty steps towards the bathroom. The door with the perfect little lady swung inwards with a push.

The mirror reflected her image -- lipstick too brightly red, blush too heavy, mascara running slightly from the rain, hair escaping from its confines into curls and fuzz. She scoffed at her visage as she set her purse next to the sink.

She wrestled with the pantyhose and finagled her skirt. “Hell in a hand basket, it’s hard to be a woman,” she thought. The first thing she noticed as she sat on the seat was just how uneven the tile floor was. The ridges and valleys were their own little landscape with dirty grout roads crisscrossing its expanse. The stalls’ plastic partitions were worn too. She was almost sure they had once been shiny black with flecks. Her finger tips ran over the space above the roll absent mindedly.

M.J. + G.B.  
Michelle is a whore  
I want to die  
God is love  
Kiss my ass  
Fuck love  
M. loves Brian Anthony David  
For a good time call 352-6794  
We are all just passengers on spaceship earth  
I <3 Michael  
Sparky is soooo hott.
All those markings were little remnants of people. They were calling for
attention, longing to make contact. It was a combination monolith. An art piece
dedicated to all those girls on their jilted nights.

That Hopper feeling resurfaced. She pulled up her panty hose, straightened
her skirt and flushed. The soap was the foamy kind. Her sister loved that foamy
kind. Her sister didn’t love much, so that was something. She squished its pinkness
between her fingers and washed the memory of those etchings from their tips.

Picking up her purse, she returned to the counter. She swung herself back
up. In the far corner now, there was an old man sipping his coffee behind his paper
beneath his archaic hat. His hands looked like paper. The really expensive type
found at craft stores; the kind there is no practical use for but one can’t help but
stare at just the same because it is beyond comprehension. Her food was sitting
there, waiting. Bacon steamed on its plate over the sea foam green bill. Her sister
loved sea foam green, too.

She grinned and picked up a warm crunchy strip. She wanted him to look
up from his paper. She wanted him to look up and be reminded of some pre-war
day and a love so passionate that time couldn’t steal its fire. But he kept his eyes on
his paper and his lips to his oatmeal colored coffee mug.

So she concentrated on the bacon. It was burnt. The corners of her mouth
inched up into a smile. It was best burnt. You almost couldn’t tell it had been a part
of something that was once living. The neon and chrome clock read 6:12. She was
now officially 21. Later her friends would take her out, and she would oblige. She
would dress as if it mattered and dance to their noise. They would try to make her
drink; she would refuse vehemently.

The rain was plummeting even harder outside the window. It pounded the
puddles of streetlamps in the slipping darkness. The bell over the diner door rang --
ing. Two more old men entered. They looked tired and weary and wet. They sat
at the end farthest from the other old man but he raised his head nodding in their
direction.

“Hey, Ed,” the fat one in flannel said to him, sitting without waiting for ac-
knowledgement or response. The two of them kept to themselves.

Soon it would be daytime, and the sunlight would be fighting the grayness of
the rain. Right now though, she sat. She tried to seem absorbed in her manifesto,
but it was complete. That feeling was so heavy now.

She lifted a forkful of pie to her mouth. She didn’t really like apple pie. The
bite rolled behind her teeth invading the buds that told her she really didn’t like apple pie. She gulped. It was done. The crackling of the final bit of milkshake through her straw was supposed to be the end -- the end of Hopper. But it wasn’t.

It wasn’t real. People couldn’t possibly be isolated from each other despite closeness. It wasn’t real, was it? It couldn’t be. If it were, she would have to be content with just herself; happy with only the physical collection of cells that followed her and the echoing thoughts in her head. It couldn’t be all there was.

It was growing now, her heart beat, only her heart, tell-tale or otherwise; it was a sign of her alarm. She needed to know there was more. She needed speech. Her voice was gone. She got up quickly in her paleness and distress. The pay phones in the alcove caught her attention.

She had always feared the telephone’s possibility. One wrong number and you end up talking to someone so different from who you had intended. A slip of the finger was the difference between stranger and friend.

She walked up to them. A quarter lay on the ledge. The universe was apparently tending to her needs. She picked up the receiver, slid the quarter into the slot and dialed the first number that came to mind.

Her hands moved slowly over the numbers; this was a matter of destiny or chance. So obviously it was serious. She punched them slowly, one at a time, with purpose. Of course the buttons gave their own satisfaction, as buttons often do.

3-5-2-6-7-9-4.

It rang, once, twice, three times. She hadn’t even considered the hour. She didn’t recall where the numbers came from, but they seemed familiar. Rings five and six were discouraging. Halfway through the seventh someone picked up.

“Hello?” It was a feeble morning voice, but there was something strong to it, his age probably. She could see him in her mind, laying there suffering from intermittent sleep and waking. Half-dressed, heavy lidded, and vulnerable in this moment, he was alive, and he was hearing her.

“Hello,” she said gently, friendly, with the weight of fate.

“Who is this?” his voice cracked.

“I don’t know, do you? Nonetheless, you can talk to me anyhow,” she replied as if she knew what to say all along, “...it’s my birthday.”

“Well happy birthday,” he responded in gentle tones, seemingly intrigued and genuine.

“Thank you. ... Have you ever seen a painting by Edward Hopper?” she replied, leaning into the vestibule.