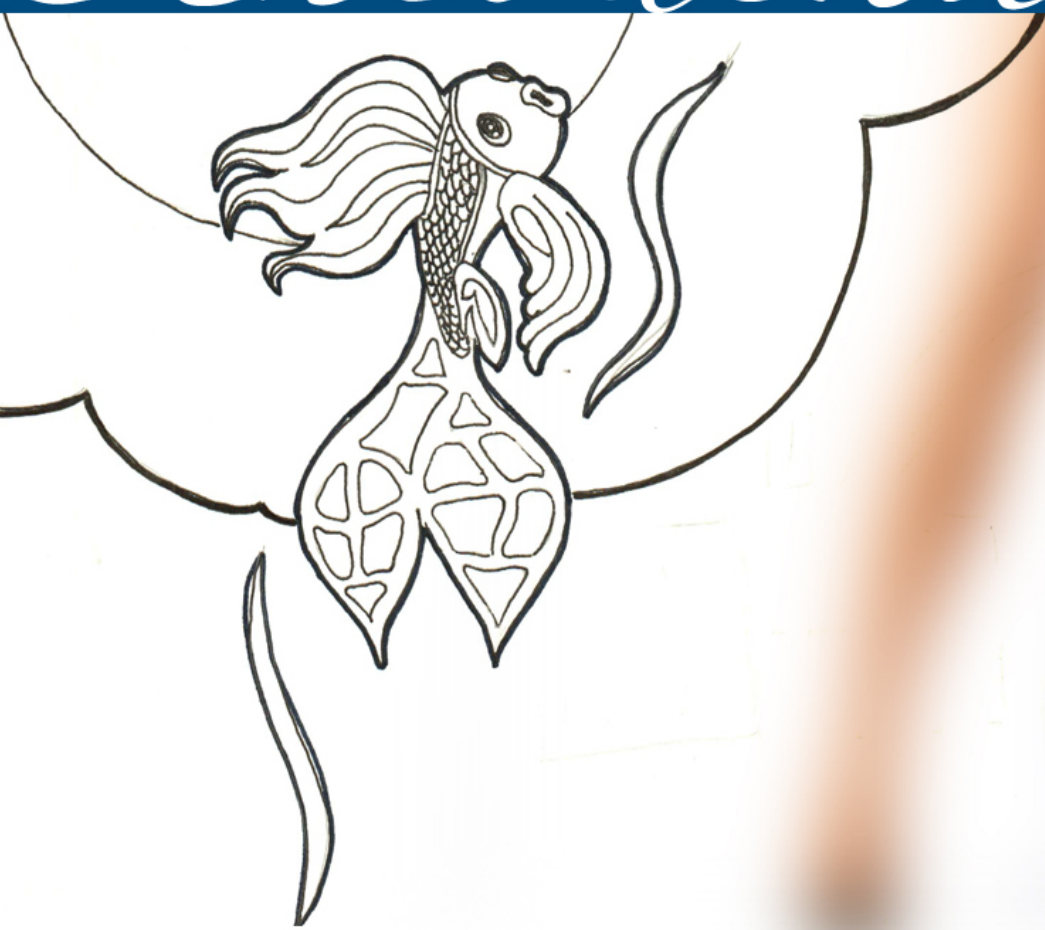




Untouchable



U N T O U C H A B L E

Untouchable

A Short Story by
Russell Warner

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Blinding Adoration

In which [Elsa](#) and [Jason](#) attend an art show.

The flash bulbs snap and pop like flamenco dancers on bubble-wrap and every flash is as blinding as the Sun, each one a translucent tile in a luminous mosaic aquarium being thrust up around them—the walls of which shift about them so fast that it makes Jason dizzy and a little ill. He holds on to her hand like an anchor. Her—his tall, blond German goddess—caught by means completely unknown to him (he suspects it might be the fish). From somewhere behind them the sound of girls' screaming voices mixes in with the low hoots of men, both of which sound simultaneously thrilling and threatening. All he can think in the rush and din and light and gold and red and speckled chaos is that he has no business in the firing line of such intensity, and after a moment that seems like forever, the photographers let him know it.

"Could we just get one of you, Elsa?"

"Elsa! This way!"

"Could you step aside, sir?"

"Elsa! Just one of you, honey!"

"Elsa!"

"Work that dress, dollface!"

The strobe light effect stops time as she turns slow and looks at him with sorry hazel eyes. Not that she's sorry she has to ask him to step aside—she knows he could care less. She just seems sorry for the world. He leans in close and smiles, "C'mon. Fuck 'em." He shrugs. "Let's just go in."

But she will not refuse them, and she has only to close her bronze and glittered eyelids in exhaustion to let him know. He steps aside for the pack to take their photos, each one calling for her to look at them—*just them*. With his hands in his pockets he tries to take in all the glamour and elegance so alien to him, but his mind is built to mirror and he can feel her growing pain. And Jason worries that they are going to take her from him, because she should never have been his in the first place. He just looks on as she gives the cyclops a look of utter contempt. Once he would

turn to Page 6 and think that "the look" was so coy, merely ennui. But now he can see that she hates them.

Then, this melancholy Freya is again putting her arm in his and dragging him toward the entrance to the gallery, and he thinks they really do both feel lighter without the weight of all those stares. Making their way inside to the coat check, they drop off her jacket and she reaches out to grab the lapel of the three-button, single-breasted Monaco suit coat she bought for him just for the occasion. He is sheepish as she makes her unnecessary adjustments, and she beams at him and says, "Why so blue panda bear?" to which he cannot help but laugh out loud—the fear clouding his face blasted away.

"C'mon," she says, "Drinks!"

She walks through the crowd like Venus on surf as the bodies part so that party guests can gorge their eyeballs. He jingles behind her like an accouterment, smiling like an idiot. They get to the bar that is three people deep but she somehow appears up front and the bartender is taking her order. *I love the beautiful people*, thinks Jason. *Good God I'd hate her guts if she wasn't with me*. She shoves a dry Gray Goose martini in his hand. "I will make you sophisticated if it kills you."

Letters to Elsa (1)

In which [Elsa](#) reads a message from someone who is not a fan.

jarhead3

alt.gossip.celebrities

Subject: Elsa Finch

12th July 2004 10:21:23 pm

What a cockwhore! Elsa Finch is so disgusting! She's a nasty bag of bones and she just just starve her stupid self to death so maybe she can finally fit in those gawdy fashion outfits

Happy Lucky Special Magic Fish

In which [Jason](#) purchases a fish which some claim to have strange powers.

The old man holds the fish bowl out, his arms fully extended, "No, no, you take!"

"Oh, I couldn't," Jason says.

"Yes. Vehy specia'. Bing you specia' happy ruck."

"Special luck, huh?"

Bringing the fish bowl back under his arm, the old man leans in conspiratorially.

"This specia' fish it... *magic*."

"It's magic."

From behind him, Jason hears Jess, his best friend, let out a giggle.

"No, no. Magic fish. You listen, see. I have maaaaany cats. No cat catch *this* fish. No cat."

"Cats can't catch this fish?"

Jess mumbles, "It's almost a tongue twister."

"No! *Nothing* catch! He magic. See?" The old man holds the bowl out to Jason. "You try catch!"

Yeah right, he thinks, like he's gonna' stick his hand in a fish bowl and look like a moron because he can't catch a stupid fish trapped in a fish bowl. "No, no. I believe you." To Jess, "It'd be fun to put it in the tub."

Jess laughs, "Ye-ah! That'd be cool."

"Okay. I'll take the fish. How much?"

"With bowlfifteen dolla'."

Jason thinks. "Twelve dollars."

"Magic fish! Twelve dollas!?"

"Twelve."

"Hokay. You lucky man now. He bring you goood luck."

"Awesome!"

The old man hands Jason the bowl carefully. Jason, in turn, hands it to Jess and gets out his wallet. In his genuine excitement the old man says, "You listen. When carp strong enough to swim up waterfall, it get wish and become dragon. This *legend*."

"Oh. Okay."

"Lucky fish!" The old man pockets the money.

When Jess and Jason get outside, Jess holds up the bowl and stares at the fish.

"Hey wife! I sell notha' cheap, dumb fish to stupid, white man!"

"Okay, okay."

"They always too stupid to put hand in bowl and test no-catch theory!"

"Shut up and give me my happy lucky fish."

"It's just like you to go out for a garden ornament and end up with a fish."

"Whatev!"

"Okay. So let's go to lunch."

"Sounds good."

"But not down here I don't wanna' eat in Chinatown."

"Well, then let's just drop the happy lucky magic fish off at my place and eat up there."

"Happy lucky *special* magic fish."

Letters to Elsa (2)

In which [Elsa](#) reads a message from someone who is not a fan.

asmodeus

alt.gossip.celebrities

Subject: Elsa Finch

12th July 2004 10:42:12 pm

She kind of looks like a cheap hooker. I would watch a porn flick that she made. I am sure there are a lot of them floating around.

Being Near the Famous

In which [Jason](#) thinks about the naming of things and talking to stars.

For two years Jason has not known the name of the little French cafe across Hudson Street from his apartment. And at this point he would rather not know. Names have a way of dominating things, corralling off thought-spaces the way apartment buildings cordon off courtyards. As the owner of a ground floor apartment, Jason also owns one of the few precious plots of land in Greenwich village. Shaped like a backwards Utah, his patio had a couple of chaise lounges on wheels, numerous potted plants (he especially loves ferns but there is also bamboo and bonsai trees). In the isolated nook at the far end, where two shoulder-high brick walls encase it, there sits a large, white, claw-footed iron tub. Green algae and Lilly-pads fill the tub along with a single brilliantly neon orange carp. Inside the courtyard was another world entirely. The noise of the city hardly entered. It was always

cooler than the street. And of course it was a luscious green. Paradise. A hidden paradise is what it was, but it was called a courtyard. Names had a way of destroying the very essence of the thing that they applied to. Apropos, Jason had refused to name the fish in the cab despite Jesse's protests. It would remain happy lucky magic fish. Or magic happy lucky fish. Or any of the first three components in any order followed by fish, so as not to constitute a name. Magic magic happy fish.

So there he and Jess sit in said unnamed cafe having dropped off the unnamed fish, eating sandwiches and looking through the Times for something to do tonight. Jason turns to the Metro section and spots an article about how the Famous live in New York. He laughs because he knows the drill—everyone does: Here they come. Don't look at them. And he never does. For all the Famous he's seen in the village, he's never once said a word to any of them. Would they even see him if he did say something?

"I'm sorry to bother, and I don't usually do this," (likely!) "but I really loved you in _____."

The imaginary Starlet looks at a point in the air somewhere just behind Jason's head. "Hey thanks. I had so much fun making that picture."

Then, feeling gregarious or maybe just needing to fill up the awkward silence rather than just saying goodbye to the pretty living art, he'd probably try to be too friendly. "So, do you live in the Village? 'Cause I live in the Village."

And the Starlet would be visibly uncomfortable and hem a little bit, "Um... well..."

Jason would totally accommodate the Starlet, "Oh don't worry about it. I know you all like your privacy. Just—you know—just makin' chit chat!"

"Okay!" the Starlet would say, relieved. Then her order would finally show up and off she'd sail on the breeze of casual glances. "Bye." She wouldn't say something like "See ya' around," of course, because that might imply that she did in fact live in the Village.

Jason is staring at the corner of his table. He looks back to the paper:

"It's always easiest for the stars to blend in with the super cool of the hottest neighborhoods, like DUMBO these days."

"Wow, Jason says, "you know it's cool when you don't even know what the hell they're talking about."

"What?"

"DUMBO?"

"Oh. Down underneath the Manhattan Bridge Overpass."

"Seriously?"

Shrugging, "That's what it's called."

"That's ridiculous."

"*That's* where we should be heading tonight."

"For real?"

"It's the new Billyburg."

"But it's Brooklyn."

"It's, like, one stop."

"I dunno."

"Aaaand there's a place there I want to check out called Superfine. You're coming."

"All right."

"You're a sorry excuse for a hipster."

"You're damn right. You didn't even hear what the article said!" Jason reads her the line.

In her best cheerleader voice, Jess responds, "Haven't you heard? It's the *supercoolest!*"

"Dear God."

"We're going."

"Fine." Jason continues absently flipping through the metro section and turns past a Chanel ad with an exotic, blonde German woman in it, so beautiful, so chic, that he doesn't even notice her.

Second to Last Square in Hopscotch

In which [Jason](#) and [Elsa](#) meet for the first time (no thanks to that meddling [Jess](#)).

When she comes over to talk to him from a few barstools down, all he can think is, *Really? Come on*, and then look around for the hidden cameras. Then, when she

speaks and the German accent spills out, he can't think at all and almost starts laughing. *Must resist.*

"I've been told zhat you are fascinating," she balances on 'fascinating' like the second to last square in hopscotch.

"Um," he swallows and looks around again. "I think someone is having a little fun with you."

"Vat's zat? No. *You* make robot art."

"Oh, that. Yeah, I guess." Jason takes a moment to try to compose himself, but she won't stop staring right into his eyes and he can't handle it. A goofy smile breaks out across his face and he looks up at the ceiling. "They're, uh, robots, and they make art. Well, there're different ones... and... I guess they're different pieces... each one."

"And you have catz."

He blushes. Why, he doesn't know. "Wow. You sure know a lot about me."

"I love catz." Her thin eyes grow cartoonishly wide and then she scratches at him and growls.

"Oh. Well. Right."

"And I love Audrey Hepburn." With this statement she puts her arms akimbo and in a slightly shaky voice, "I'm wearing pants like a man. Does that make you uncomfortable, pig?" For a moment Jason thinks that it's really a pretty good imitation for German. She leans in close to him and whatever lime flavored drink she's had, along with her perfume, ghosts across his nose and he practically faints from lust. Then he realizes that this whole charade is Jess's doing. He looks around the bar and sees her down where the German came from. Jess is looking too, and waves at him, a little too excited.

"Oh, your friend. Um. Jessica? Yes, she told me to come to speak wit you because she says you are fascinating," and she leans in close again on this last word and smiles luridly.

Is fascinating some weird code for something? Jason makes a face like maybe he's been had. And then thinks, *or maybe it's happy magic fish.* This is what he and Jess were looking for at Superfine in DUMBO, after all. It was the supercoolest and here was six-foot-two gorgeous living proof of that. He looks back to the leering goddess and she is quietly laughing. He makes a quizzical face.

"No, no. I am laughing at *me*, please." Elsa takes his hand. "Not you. You are wonderful."

But Jason leans out from the bar slightly to give Jess a dirty look anyway. Jess merely responds with an excited double thumbs-up.

The Huntress squeezes his hand to get his attention. "I'm Elsa."

"Oh. I'm Jason." He cringes, waiting for a big German laugh again for no reason, but instead her eyes widen in surprise.

"You are a hero?"

"I doubt it."

"Mmm. Vell, I am saying that your name is meaning hero."

"I guess."

"Mr. Jason. You *must* tell me more about yourself. I have decided I will not leave you alone until you do." She waits only for a moment before starting again, "But first we should have drinks." Eugene looks at his beer, starts to point it out, but Elsa says, "No. Beer is not for us. We will have cocktails. Cosmo?"

"Well, I don't know what it's like in... uh...where you're from?" he waits for her to fill in the blank.

"Munich."

"Right. Munich. But around here a cosmo's a little..." eye roll and quiet, "gay."

Elsa leans in and kisses him on the lips without warning. "Do you sink anyone will worry about you now?"

Letters to Elsa (3)

In which [Elsa](#) reads a message from someone who is not a fan.

sheltylover

alt.gossip.celebrities

Subject: Elsa Finch

12th July 2004 11:02:02 pm

OMG that stupid look that she always gives like shes serious or something. what an idiot. hello elsa? You are a dumb, pretentious, No-English speaking moron. Go away.

She Wants to be a Cat

In which Jess informs Jason of the “reality” of his situation.

Jess is taking photos of the carp in the tub. "Have you tried to catch it, yet?"

"No. But then, I guess the cats haven't either."

"So where'd you guys go?"

"Well, we went back to her place."

"Duh."

"We *could've* come back to my place."

"I just meant it's not like you parted company. You were pretty cuddly when you left."

Jason beams. "Well, the thing is, we did spend a lot of time talking."

"Oh God, please tell me you weren't a lap dog."

"No. We got some... business out of the way first."

In a deep guttural voice, Jess intones her best Brooklyn, "It's *bidness*."

"Anyway."

"So, that's cool. You slept with her and now you're pals."

Jason laughs her off, "Sure."

"You gonna' see her again?"

"Well, actually, yeah."

"No way! When?"

"Tonight."

"Get out!"

"Seriously. She really wants to see my studio."

Jess stops taking pictures for a moment and lets the camera hang around her neck. "Jason, she *likes* you."

"I guess so."

"Aw. And I set you up."

"Thanks for that, by the way."

"You *should* thank me! Holy crap. You should pay me some serious cash!"

"I don't know about that. I mean, in the end it *was* my charm that—"

"Stop. Stop now. I can see your head inflating as we speak. I'm dating a *supermodel* you know."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Man. That's so awesome, Jason." She smiles at him genuinely and then in her best Paris Hilton, "That's hot."

"Oh god. I'm having flashes of my future life."

"What if she totally wants to drag you to like... like... fashion week or whatever models do when they go places?"

"Actually, I kinda' got the feeling last night that's she's not crazy about all that stuff."

"I bet."

"She said she wants to be a cat because cats don't care about who's famous or pretty. And she said if she was a cat she'd want to be named Chamomile."

"That's a nice cat name."

"Yeah. She seemed really serious about it." Jason shakes his head. "It's hard to read her, you know. I guess it's just the language barrier."

"She seemed to speak English fine when I spoke to her."

"Yeah. It's something else. There just seems to be more complicated things going on in her head than what she says." He thinks for a moment, "It was weird too..."

"What?"

"Well, her apartment... there was, like, nothing in it. She had a few photographs, a few dishes and a bed. But it was a big place. It was a *nice* place."

"Well, she's from Munich, right? She's probably—oh, see—you're gonna' be her *American* fling." Jess starts nodding, putting the plot elements into place. "She's here for a couple of shoots and you're gonna' be her boy toy. There's one in Paris, one in Milan."

Jason laughs, "Awesome."

A Jason Gunn Original

In which [Jason](#) shows [Elsa](#) his studio and his work.

"So, there you go," Jason says as he picks the little robot up off the floor; a dome with "eyes" painted on it and three small rubber wheels. The automaton is not much larger than his hand. When he hands it to Elsa he notices again how amazingly long

and slender and pale her fingers are, like the branches of a birch. She's giddy as she turns the mechanical wonder over and over, this way and that.

The room they are in is just a concrete room—cinder block walls with large, industrial, frosted windows on one side. The other walls are covered in blank canvases, painted canvases, rolls of canvas, tarps, paint. Opposite the windows is a long beat-up counter with brushes, buckets, machine parts and tools, and pieces of electronics in various states of disrepair.

"Each one has a single color inkjet, right there." He points out the nozzle on the underbelly.

She looks up at him and smiles. "Jason Gunn, you really *are* fascinating." Then she leans over and kisses him on the cheek.

He feels the hairs on his cheek and neck stand up on end. "Well, I'm glad you think it's neat."

"Neat?" She gives him an incredulous look and begins walking around a canvas laid out on the floor with nine other robots whirring and painting, in her knee-high Manolo Blahnik Bulagro boots. They're huge on her thin frame and the "chok" of each heel on the concrete floor reverberates coldly through the studio. With her arms crossed in concentration, she takes on the appearance of a military officer inspecting her troops. In his mind, he sees her turn at him, furious, saying, "Zis is not art, you wimpy little man! Zis is sheitza!" He smiles to himself.

"Explain again why they do not always paint the same thing?"

"Oh right." Jason switches from bashful to explication mode, his tone quick and excited, "You see each individual robot takes in cues from the ambient light in the room right? So if we were to turn off some of the lights in here or even just move the whole thing outside—the amount and kind of light changes the initial direction and ink flow and path—like how much they turn and how often. I mean, the whole point really, for me at least, is that I can choose the initial conditions—things like the color palette and the bot's algorithms—but I never know what the painting is going to precisely end up like, see?"

Elsa's head is cocked and she's smiling at Jason as though he were from another planet entirely. She's clutching the painter beetle to her chest fondly when something clicks and then whirs. The wheels start to turn randomly and a small jet of orange ink sprays all over her white silk blouse. Startled, she screams out and

fumbles with the machine turning it over twice and stooping down before she can set it down on the canvas where it goes on merrily painting and rolling about.

"Oh God. Oh. I'm so sorry." Jason is moving towards her quickly, arms outstretched. But just then she bursts out laughing her fantastically loud, boisterous laugh and puts her hands, one of which is now orange, over her mouth.

"Oh man. I'm sooo sorry. The on switchit's like right there on the"

"No, no! Look!" Elsa holds her arms out. There are several stripes up and down her right arm and two big blotches on the right side of her chest. "Now *I* am a Jason Gunn piece! Wunderbar!" And she laughs again. Jason's still looking apologetic as she throws her arms around him and pulls him in. He squirms a little reluctantly at first because of the wet ink on her, but looks her in the eyes. Their eyes are even with one another. "I am going to wear this shirt and when my friends say 'Elsa! Where did you get this shirt?' I will smile and tell them, 'It is a Jason Gunn original. It is the only one like it in the whole world.'" Then she kisses him. He relinquishes himself to the wet ink and puts his arms around her tight. He's amazed because when he looks at her she seems so gigantic in every dimension, like a billboard come to life. Her motions, her stride, her laugh, all of them seem huge, but in his arms she feels positively small and fragile. They kiss for a while as the robots busily scrawl their brightly colored lines.

Letters to Elsa (3)

In which [Elsa](#) reads a message from someone who is not a fan.

bitchslap

alt.gossip.celebrities

Subject: Elsa Finch

12th July 2004 11:32:02 pm

I'd only punch her in her fake nose after i'd finished raping her. prolly break every bone in her skinny slut body

Four Story Elsa

In which [Jess](#) tries to toughen [Jason](#) up.

"Don't look now, but there's your girlfriend."

"What! Where?" Jason looks around eagerly but feels stupid for doing it at the same time. Two months. Two months of a few days of crazy infatuation and lust and attention inevitably followed by days or weeks without a word. No emails, no returned phone calls, silence until she would surface again as if nothing had happened.

"Up there." Jess points across the intersection of Houston and Broadway up toward the top of an office building where Elsa stands four stories tall in a grey bejeweled Chanel gown against a flat white background. She is standing with her back to the street and is turning around to look over her shoulder as if someone has disturbed her and she's angry about it.

"That's great."

"Well, look, let that be the last time she comes into your head tonight, okay? We haven't been out on a Friday night in waaay too long you're not gonna' not have fun on my watch."

"Yeah. All right," he says, uncommitted.

"Whatev."

They kept walking deeper into Soho while Jess tells him about a shoot she'd been on a week before, and about how, oh my God, the model was so ridiculous. Late, for starters. And she seemed totally out of it. But Jason just winces because he can't help but feel like Jess is making unfair comparisons. She's not. He knows. She's making light of the situation, trying to get him to laugh. But no matter what, he wants to remind Jess that Elsa is not like the others.

Three whiskeys into the night at Merc Bar, Jess says, "You just don't get beautiful women, Jay."

"Oh, c'mon," Jay says, rolling his eyes.

"No. You genuinely don't understand," and she points at her head to illustrate. "They're not like normal people. They grow up in this society surrounded by televised image of privileged, pretty people. They grow up realizing that they can have whatever they want—that they're worshiped."

"Yeah, well, Elsa grew up in Germany, not the US."

"It's not malicious. They don't know they're doing it, you know. I mean, do you think about it when you act all quiet and bashful with a girl to get her to like you?"

"I don't do that."

"Not on purpose, but you do it and it works."

"I don't do that."

"Well it's not like you're Steve McQueen. Jay! You've been moping for the last two hours. I know you. When was the last time you saw or heard from her?"

Jason was silent.

"You're just *waiting* for her to call. She's got you." Jess pauses and then, "How many times has she done this to you since you started going out?"

"Four."

"And, not a word? No 'I'm gonna be busy for a few days, hon? No calls to say good night. C'mon, Jay. I'm not picking on her. If you did that to someone I'd tell you you were being an asshole."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I mean, you're an asshole anyway, of course..."

He sighs. "You're right."

"You know what's worse?"

"What?"

"If you say anything to her about it, you're gonna sound like a *girl*."

"Wh-at?"

"Yeah. We got sacked with that suck-ass stereotype." She puts her hands up to her face in distress. "You don't call enough. You don't come around enough. We don't talk enough. All that crap."

"I guess so."

"It sucks."

"That is sort of a girl-thing." Jason sits back in his seat and spins his glass. "So what do I do?"

"I think the next time she comes around you gotta tell her you're busy. You gotta throw her off her game."

"Ya think?"

"You're not a challenge to her right now. I mean, I'm sure she thinks you're cool—I'm sure she likes you—but you're a pushover to her. You need to let her know that you're not on-call."

A Letter From Elsa

In which [Elsa](#) writes a response to those who hate her.

chamomile

alt.gossip.celebrities

Subject: Elsa Finch

12th July 2004 11:32:03 pm

I hate that no one sees anything wrong with saying such horrible things about her. How could you say she should starve herself to death? How can you say that you would do these things to her? How can you say such a thing? I do not understand and it makes me so sad.

Unannounced Bounce

In which [Jason](#) is merciless.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Jason?"

It is hard to hear her over the noise of the bar. Jason mouths "Elsa" to Jess who makes a stern face and points at him. He gives her a thumbs-up and takes the phone outside.

"Elsa?"

"Jason, where are you?"

"Where am I? Where are you?"

"I'm at your flat."

"My place? What're you doing at my place?"

"Well, you gave me a key."

He did. He had. Casually, you know, like, oh hey drop by whenever, it's cool— one more unsuccessful attempt to reel her in. "Yeah, well, like hang around for a few days and *then* come by unannounced, you know?"

"Are you angry?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am. I haven't seen you in a week and a half and now you call at," he checks his watch, "Twelve-thirty! It's twelve-thirty and you just bounce over to my place?"

"Please, Jason, don't be angry."

"Look, it's not—it's just not cool to treat someone the way you've been treating me. It's not."

"I know, it's just"

"I'm not on-call, Elsa. You can't just *show* up. I'm not on-call."

"Please, Jason, please..."

"Look, I'm not—you don't have to leave—sleep there if you want to—or don't—but I'm out with my friends, and I'm staying out with my friends."

Silence.

"I'm a nice guy, Elsa but damn it, I'm not a pushover." The word makes him mad. Pushover. Wimp. Toy. Puppet. "I gotta go. Goodbye." And then he hangs up. He surprises himself. For *once* he'd been merciless.

Catch

In which [Jason](#) regrets his actions and falls for [her](#).

Here now in the dark of four in the morning, the din of the clubs and bars from earlier in the evening still roaring in his ears, Jason is cautiously approaching the tub in the courtyard. In his hand: an empty prescription bottle from inside his wrecked apartment. Nearby, perched up on the wall, two small cats watch the tub as well; a noble gray cat named Muriel and a small calico named Marilyn. The pair sit cuddled side-by-side and peer with usual cat disinterest as Jason breeches the shadow of the nook, and the city's ever-ambient light fills the scene bluely. There in the dark water of the tub is Elsa in an H&M summer dress. She looks up at him, drugged, but smiles. "I caught him." she says and then laughs.