

SAINT EVANGELINE

SUNNY O'NEIL

OUT ON
THE
SHELVES

Lorna only smoked on Friday nights. Friday nights that bled into Saturday mornings. Which bled into Saturday nights again. By the little hours on Sunday, Lorna saw no point in pretending she'd quit.

Three in the morning came and went, and still Evangeline sang the blues. She tapped her heel and swayed like a candle flame, shrouded in a haze of oil-lamp glow and coils of cigarette vapour. When Lorna cracked her weary eyes every so often, she imagined those fingers of smoke as her own, finding their home in the hollows of Evangeline's hips.

"Oh, lover," Evangeline crooned into that shitty microphone, her warm voice a salve to the throb behind Lorna's eyes. The pianist was weak, the guitarist forgettable -- the bassist came close, but even he fell short of Evangeline. The bar was sticky against her cheek, but Lorna was motionless, letting the song settle over her. "My pariah, oh love, they don't know about us."

On those lips, "pariah" was a compliment. Like, in some perfect, picket-fence world, dear Evangeline would call, "Pariah, I'm home from work," or ask, weary and half asleep, her silken palm to Lorna's cheek, "Pariah, kiss me goodnight, would you? Outcast, reject, leper -- hold me, I beg you." And Lorna, the idiot, would plant chapped lips upon her forehead and pull her close, whisper, "Goodnight," obedient as a dog, and hold her breath until she was certain it wouldn't rouse her.

In this world, though, Lorna waits at the bar. When they finally crawl into bed before sunrise, she'll treasure a few hours pretending to sleep before Evangeline crawls back out, finds her clothes draped over various furnishings, and slips out of Lorna's apartment before church, as always.

Scattered applause from the four other patrons struggled to patch the silence left behind. The pianist played his final note with theatrical grandeur; eyes closed, head back, as if his backstreet dive bar audience was Carnegie Hall, and he wasn't just passable.

Lorna shut her eyes once more, let that surreal state of almost-sleep wash over her until she felt a kiss on the exposed back of her neck. She breathed in -- tobacco and vanilla -- and conjured the strength to peel her face from the countertop. Evangeline, cloaked in fur, stood with her hand offered palm-up, Lorna's coat already hanging over her arm.

"C'mon, baby, let's go," she murmured, a fond smile tugging at her lips, which would've been enough to wrench Lorna from her stool if she wasn't already pushing herself up.



Darling Evangeline. Saint Evangeline, patron of Marlboro Reds and secrets. If she told Lorna she didn't like the sun, the woman would wrangle it from the sky.

Lorna interlocked their fingers and stood, relishing the rare closeness outside of her one-bedroom shrine.

Spurred on by clockwork gears, Lorna led the angel down the groove they'd worn into the ground, a path they'd followed so often that it was burned into her body -- she'd follow it back, eyes shut, until she was breathing Evangeline in again. Lorna was a woman of routine, a creature of habit. Her weekend liturgies set off like a Swiss watch every time -- off work at five, at the bar by eight, thirty songs and four cigarettes in by midnight. Sometimes, after she'd spent thirty-six hours intermittently sleeping, smoking, and listening to the blues, she'd drag herself out of bed at eight to pretend to pray in the backmost pew of the gospel church, where her lover sang again.

The two of them trudged down the street, Lorna stubbornly pushing forward, Evangeline tipping her head back and trying to make out stars behind the streetlights. Every lamp they passed under cast a gold hue over Evangeline's coffee-coloured skin, and she basked under it. Light took to Evangeline like a halo, spreading a shimmer of sunlight through the dark coils of her hair.

Lorna paused to take her in, to picture throwing herself at her altar, and Evangeline stopped with her. The soft hand in Lorna's slipped out of it to trace her face, moving from her cheek to under her jaw, fingers threading through the longer curls at her nape.

"You alright?" Evangeline asked, voice low and half-laughing. Lorna pressed her face into Evangeline's hand, thought about sinking her teeth into the wrist, tasting wine and being saved or tasting blood and going home alone. She willed herself desperately to open her mouth and beg Evangeline to set her free.

But Lorna nodded, even though her chest ached with emptiness. Saint Evangeline smiled, like she knew, and lit a cigarette for her. Lorna took it, breathed, and almost imagined she could quit her.

