

Elaine Hsieh Chou
In Which Ms. Swan Suffers Clarity



Ms. Swan ends up in situations without knowing how she got in them. She is at a Starbucks, she is at an ATM, the DMV, a candy store. Each time, she materializes from nothing. Ms. Swan does not even know where she lives. She exists in public spaces: airport security, a taxi cab, the Gorgeous Pretty Beauty Nail Salon where she works. Other facts about Ms. Swan: her first name is Bunny, she is two or a hundred years old, she is a fool for love.



Ms. Swan does not sleep or eat or shit. Her purpose is to confound and frustrate. When people ask what a certain man looks like, she invariably responds, "He look-a like a man." Ms. Swan tries to answer in more detail, but cannot. Her English is its own character. Her vowels flap in her mouth, her consonants clack and thud. What country birthed her accent? Her only clue is that she was first named Ms. Kwan.

“Where am I from?” she asks, but what comes out is, “Okay okay I tell you everyting.” She does not know the origin of these catch phrases. She suspects someone snuck them beneath her tongue.

Ms. Swan doesn’t even like swans.

Lately Ms. Swan has started thinking. The trouble began when she found a daily call sheet sticking to her slipper. Now she wants to know where she goes between the time spent at the ATM and the DMV. Who drove her to this Sharper Image? Where is she headed on this airplane? Her existence occurs in abrupt stammers: she opens her eyes and there are lights, a live audience, commercial breaks. She closes her eyes and she does not exist.

Ms. Swan struggles with a sense of time. The seasons are not bound by any logical pattern.

Ms. Swan considers if she is enmeshed in a repeating time loop where she wears the exact same things and says the exact same things. The audacity of such a thought unsettles her. “Lady, what is your problem?” the drive-through manager shouted at her. What *is* her problem? Her mother always said—oh that’s right, she cannot remember anything about her mother.



Ms. Swan wonders who she inherited her weak chin from, her bad knees.

Ms. Swan has been questioning the things she does with her face. She pouts, she winks, she winks an awful lot, like someone’s paying her to do it, and when she smiles, her eyes



narrow to slits and her mouth sours into a buck-toothed purse. She yanks up the corners of her lips but they snap back like rubber bands. She tries to make her eyes unsquint. They refuse.

Ms. Swan pretends to weep. She does it when the security guards and reasonable customers lose their temper, when they holler, “Don’t make me mad!” and “Why are you so stupid?” When she cries her soft little baby cries, they melt a little. They speak to her like she is both a child and an old woman—this exacerbates her flimsy sense of self.

Ms. Swan is inscrutable to herself and inscrutable to others, but everyone says adorably so.

Lately Ms. Swan feels something foreign swimming beneath her floral muumu and work frock, an orange gingham with feet sewn down the front. Ms. Swan never appears without black eyeliner and white face powder. She sports a cantaloupe-shaped bowl cut. When she looks in the mirror, nausea visits. She is nagged by desires she cannot account for. Her body resembles a ploy, a mad caper. A stunt.



Ms. Swan goes to the doctor but does not obtain any satisfactory answers. When she tries to explain, her words contort into riddles. She says she cannot remember her name but refers to herself in the third person. She confounds and frustrates the doctor. She leaves the hospital without asking, “Am I pregnant?”

Ms. Swan is familiar with sex because she once operated a sex phone line, where a surly customer shouted at her for having the wrong kind of breasts, the wrong kind of legs. But how did she become pregnant? She cannot remember having sex with anyone. Where would she have done it? In a packed movie theater, in a *Buffy*-themed graveyard?

The man wants to hear her talk and Ms. Swan has a lot she’d like to say (she dislikes dryer sheets; she is allergic to avocados; she is awfully fond of puddles), but instead she whines, “I not cute, I sexy!”



Sometimes Ms. Swan wants to cry, but her tear ducts are blocked by the face wallpapered over her face.

Ms. Swan takes a sip of nail-polish remover before the lights dim. She wills her eyes to stay open, imagines taping her eyelids apart. What is happening? She is unzipping. Her clothes are snatched from her body. Her hair is plucked from her head. Her voice stretches and wobbles. She is coming apart at the stitch. No—she is birthing something: an enormous white baby. Pregnant as she suspected! But upon closer inspection, it's not a baby at all but a grown woman from Illinois. Ms. Swan scarcely has time to say hello when everything FADESTO BLACK.

When Ms. Swan comes to, she is in another comic situation, a dating show. “I am not myself,” she cries. She totters in shock; her thoughts have manifested themselves. The audience laughs (that silly Ms. Swan!). She gathers herself and says, meaningfully, “Something is very wrong.” A man with a headset and a clipboard comes into view. He scolds her for breaking character. He threatens to cut her.

Cut? Oh no. Ms. Swan does not want to die.



Ms. Swan apologizes. She sticks to her lines, but she is thinking all the time. If you listen very closely, you can hear her trying to tell you who she is. And if you look very closely, you can see her trying to be seen.

“Sometimes I say things I do not mean because I am a complex creature”

—Ms. Swan, *MadTV Season 4 Episode 9*

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