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MUTE

EVERYONE WAS DRUNK. It felt like a Cheever story—or maybe I only thought that because he was all over the syllabus of our Character Development class, where the professor read stories aloud to us with beautiful enunciation and told us about the old days when he used to drink with Cheever. I felt as though I had ascended into this world where writers were real people you knew. I felt ashamed of having not yet published anything.

A month and a half earlier I'd moved to Baltimore to attend a graduate writing program. My classmates seemed overwhelmingly American; up until then I had lived in Halifax. Baltimore was a port city, but not like Halifax, where you always remembered you were near the ocean. In Baltimore you always remembered you were near drug crime. My classmates—there were nine of them—had New York or Southern accents, and they boomed over my head. Had I been this quiet in Canada? I couldn't remember. In bars, my classmates always knew what drinks to order and were decisive about where to sit or stand.

We were at a department reception at the faculty club. Rooms opened into rooms. Each room had a name: "The Nobel Room," "The Milton Eisenhower Room," etc. There was crown moulding on high ceilings and tall windows with pleated brocade curtains. All of the employees were African-American and dressed like Forest Whitaker in Lee Daniels' *The Butler*. They carried silver trays covered with bits of puff pastry and skewered scallops topped with pea sprouts and ginger miso cream. There was an open bar.

When I entered, I found five of my classmates discussing their midterm teaching evaluations. "I read mine after like half a bottle of limoncello," said Natasha, whose lipstick had left a perfect red half-lip on her wine glass.

"Mine were excellent overall," said Murphy, who was wearing a bowtie and speaking in a maybe-ironic voice. "I plan to address the constructive criticism over the next few weeks."

Most of them had received comments calling them inspiring and com-

plimenting their clothing or facial features. I could only remember the two bad ones I'd received, one of which said, "Though the course has the word 'creative' in its title, the instructor does not seem like a creative person," and the other, "Spoke a lot, but said little."

A writer approached us. I had developed a vague crush on him and wished I wasn't clutching a crumpled napkin full of empty skewers. The writer was an alum who kept attending all of the department parties after graduating. The two older female secretaries fawned over him. In profile, his hair was a tilde—a perfect sideways wave. His novel concerned a fictional protagonist who was also a writer and the same age as him and single and had a sibling with Down syndrome. Before sleep I fantasized about lying to him and pretending that I, too, had a sibling with Down syndrome in order to woo him by way of our commonalities. This was what someone on a Netflix show would do. I, of course, would not do this—partly because it would be deceitful and unforgivable and strange in real life, but mostly because I would be too nervous about being caught in a lie.

Along with the writer came Professor Coates—an older, imposing man who was known to scream at people in his office when the door was closed. "A delight to see all of you," he said, raising his glass. He began with small talk—"How are you all settling in?"—and then segued into a discussion of the program's long history and espousing on its notable alumni. I sort of lost track, as I was looking at the black cocktail dresses of the other girls in the program and realizing that I was dressed quite wrong. Earlier, when I had come out of a bathroom stall, one of the secretaries had said to me, "Oh, Nina, I knew it was you from the shoes."

Professor Coates and the writer were discussing a short story, but I couldn't tell which one. My classmates were all throwing in excellent comments about the story's restraint of language and the unmatched elegance of its ending; the writer made a pun involving the story's title that caused Professor Coates to laugh so hard he needed to hold his whiskey with both hands. By now, most of the class had gathered around, along with three faculty members. The air was filled with rhetoric.

"You—" said Professor Coates. I realized he was pointing at me. This was the first time he had spoken to me at all. Everyone turned in my direction, smiles depleting at his sudden shift in tone. "Why don't you contribute something to the conversation?"

I waited. I said nothing. I'd gone mute.

My apartment was infested. Every day I encountered a new insect, each leggier or craftier than the last. One morning I found a long house centipede curled in the water glass on my night stand. I had read that in Baltimore there were more rats than people. Online you could find an interactive map of health violations at local restaurants, and my neighbourhood was dotted with tiny rodent icons. In one section of the city a garbage truck had sunken into the street, swarmed by rats that had eaten through the ground below.

There was a rumour that if you raised your arms above your head at night on campus, sensors would alert campus police. I lived past the reach of their protection. Each night a man across the street from me stood on his porch and yelled “Where you going?” at anyone who passed. Once, when I’d ducked my head without answering, he’d followed me a few metres down the road. My right hand clutched my apartment key inside my pocket, ready to use as a weapon, and when I reached my building I walked past the door and around the block, back in the direction of campus, until I was sure he was gone. Now I used my building’s basement door to avoid him. The basement held a leaking washing machine and a trembling dryer, and the cockroaches travelled in packs like moving rugs. The abandoned bicycles of past tenants were piled into a sculpture against a wall.

When I first moved in I read the crime reports and thought about getting a gun. To calm myself I read Halifax newspapers. The familiar pictures of columnists made my heart ache. I unpacked a box of undergraduate memorabilia and found a rape whistle with my old university’s logo on it. I blew into it gently, and the sound was bird-like, unusually clear. The windows of my apartment didn’t lock, so I used thick rope to tie them to my radiator. I’d started having sleep paralysis visions of people climbing into my window at night.

This was Baltimore.

On the Friday after the reception I got a call from a guy in my program, Eli, who said a bunch of people were going to a bar called The Charles. He said that I should come along and that since we lived in the same area we should share a cab.

“Unless you already have plans?” he asked.

I’d been in the process of spreading Borax on the floor because I’d read that it was abrasive to a cockroach’s exoskeleton. “Just a night in reading Faulkner.”

“I’ll call you when we leave here,” he said.

I put heels on first, to stay high above the roaches. I had purchased the shoes after the department party and now lurched around my closet seeking a dress. A YouTube search yielded a makeup tutorial.

Once I was ready I went back to watching the MTV documentary show *Catfish*, where handsome young hosts Nev and Max helped teens investigate their online lovers. The lovers were often discovered to be an unexpected gender, race, weight, or height, or they had children or a glass eye. I empathized with everybody. As a teen in the late 1990s—before texting, instant messaging, Facebook, or Tinder—I’d formed these beautiful epistolary e-mail relationships with Australian men. I’d had one feverish and weird chatroom affair with a man in his forties. He phoned once, but I was too scared to speak and hung up the phone. I never logged into that chatroom again.

Watching *Catfish*, I would weep into my keyboard as a kid explained how he’d been honest about everything except that one thing: his identity. “It was still me,” he pleaded. The episode ended with an update in white text over the final image: “Chelsea and Marquise no longer speak. Chelsea has decided to look for a relationship outside the internet.”

I watched two episodes of the show, but Eli didn’t call. It was nearing 10:30, but how late did people go out in Baltimore? Probably later than in Halifax, I figured, remembering how I’d stumbled home at night over cobblestones, an arm thrown over a friend’s shoulder, my hair frizzing in the inevitable fog. I watched another two episodes of *Catfish*. Then it was 11:30. I paced the carpet, and my heels left a blotchy trail of Borax. I thought about texting Eli but didn’t. Maybe he did this on purpose, I thought, or more likely—and more embarrassingly—he just forgot.

At midnight I washed off my makeup and went to sleep. In the morning, my phone had one notification: a Facebook message. Anxiety bloomed and swirled in my chest, but it was only my grandmother, who had become a social media expert since moving into a home a couple months earlier.

Mother’s Day was lovely with all the loving notes, the little ones and my boys taking me out, and the orchid and carnations. Your dad even phoned from Fredericton. In short, it really was a nice day except that one of the women I have become friendly with here died suddenly. Hope your day was good, too!

I felt like I'd been sucked into this Nabokov story we had to teach in our intro classes, where all that happens is that this kid has a really shitty day. He goes to a party at another kid's family's estate and joins in a game of hide-and-seek, but while he is hiding between a wardrobe and a Dutch stove the others forget about him and abandon the game to picnic on bilberry tarts. At the end of the story he imagines faking his own suicide to make everybody else feel bad. I read one of the lines aloud in class—"One could hear a clock hoarsely ticktocking and that sound reminded one of various dull and sad things"—and then started laughing insanely. The students laughed along with me in this magical millisecond of connection. I felt so grateful that they got the joke.

That Saturday I escaped Baltimore. The Smithsonian had a Jim Henson exhibit, so I took the Amtrak to Washington and joined a tour group that stood in a semi-circle facing Kermit the Frog in a glass box. His green felt body looked inanimate and small next to all the humans, and the woman giving the tour referred to Kermit as Henson's alter ego. While she spoke, a scene from *Catfish* kept flashing in my head: this lovely, honest, ginger-haired girl fell in online love with a guy named Skylar, who turned out to be a guy named Brian, who only wanted to "freshen up his game." Hosts Nev and Max jointly eviscerated him.

"You understand this makes you look like a huge asshole, right?" asked Nev, as he walked the girl away.

"Yeah, yeah," replied Brian.

"So you're literally fishing and hooking girls, then just kind of tossing them back into the ocean with scars?" asked Max, who stayed behind with the camera.

"It is what it is," said Brian.

Then Nev said to the girl, "You've got an opportunity now." He put an arm around her shoulder as they walked back to Brian. She spoke without stutter. She pointed out every crack in his sociopathic logic. She demanded to know why he did it. Her voice swelled like a crescendoing orchestra.

The tour group rounded a corner into a hall of more muppets in glass cases. The guide said that to her this felt like coming home: "They taught us how to count, how to read...."

I heard somebody behind me ask, "So who's your favourite muppet?"

When I turned, I saw this big guy grinning at me. My first thought was

that he was so massive he could puppeteer Mr. Snuffleupagus. I wondered how long he'd been standing there, asking women this question. "Sweetums," I said.

"Which one is that?"

"He's the giant ogre," I told him. "In his first appearance he tried to eat Kermit, but later he mostly just sang Wagnerian operas." I had learned this minutes ago from a placard on the wall.

"Mine is Sam the Eagle," he said, "for his integrity." The guy had a dense black beard with fine wiry hairs; I thought of the Maritimes and the whittled wooden fishermen they sold at Peggy's Cove.

After the tour, as we wandered through the gift shop, I kept repeating in my head "Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon"—a name that I had memorized for a bizarrely specific weekly quiz. The inner chanting was calming. The big guy, whose name turned out to be James, read aloud from a children's book about an anthropomorphized stegosaurus, while I peered at turquoise and agate jewellery. We flipped through all the art posters in the rack, their plastic frames clacking together one by one.

"I hate to tell you this, but I have to get back to work," he said, motioning towards the door with his head because he had a souvenir magnet in each of his hands.

"Oh," I said. "It's Saturday." I imagined the next hour: taking the train home, turning the lights on in my apartment, watching the cockroaches scatter.

"I would love to make you a baked ziti sometime."

"Okay, sure," I said in an atonal stutter, but inside I was swooning—*baked ziti*. "I'm a vegetarian, though, and I live in Baltimore."

"No problem. Do you have an eight-inch square baking dish?" he asked.

He walked me to Union Station and said goodbye in a Kermit the Frog voice. On the train ride home I started mentally preparing a tiramisu. Out the window I saw a rat, but for once it was running in the opposite direction.

In the week before James made it to Baltimore, we had three euphoric phone conversations—conversations with no allusions to Philip Roth or drunken confessions or our fears of never getting published. He didn't even want to get published—he wanted a PhD in biochemistry. During our first

phone conversation he told me that bee venom is acidic. I told him I'd never been stung by a bee, but as a child I was obsessed with the movie *My Girl*, in which Macaulay Culkin's character is stung, has an anaphylactic reaction, and dies. I'd watched the funeral scene repeatedly, rewinding my VHS copy in my parents' VCR.

That week I added a long scene to a story I was writing, in which a girl gets dumped by her boyfriend and then buys ice cream at a convenience store near Point Pleasant Park. As she sits on a bench by the ocean, she becomes so engrossed in the rare sight of a crested caracara that she lets the ice cream melt.

We workshopped it promptly that Friday—the same day James was scheduled to come to my place and bake ziti. The professor was a woman who spoke firmly and eloquently, as though her words had an underlying rhythm. She had brown hair cropped an inch below her ears and a clear gaze that looked through you along with whatever you'd written. On the back of your manuscript she'd write a one-sentence critique. Reading it, your mind would oscillate and fragment and flower into a billion ideas. Sometimes, when she spoke in class, she was so brilliant that it made my heart ache.

Next to her was a lanky guy named Tom, who said, "There's a real opportunity here in the symbolism, but I don't buy that she'd be distracted by a bird for so long that the ice cream would actually melt."

"I didn't know anything could melt in the Canadian climate," said Murphy, a charming, affable fellow whose last story had been about keeping a woman as a slave.

"Is it meant as hyperbole, do you think?" asked Natasha, the only other female in the class. She wore her scarf looped in ways I tried and failed to replicate.

"The whole thing is very lyrical, as your work always is," said Graeme, quiet and serious, nodding at me, "but the sentences are long. Aren't we past long sentences? But beautiful stuff, undoubtedly."

"Can a type of sentence go out of style?" asked the undergraduate at the end of the table, who was auditing the class and evidently hadn't read the story. Nobody had bothered to learn his name. He'd been drawing continuously through the discussion, and he'd sketched the professor in black felt-tip pen on his copy of the manuscript. It didn't do her justice.

All of our classes were held in a room at the top of a brick tower. It had five tall, hexagonal windows without screens. A bright orange oriole had

once flown in, whistling and rustling around the top of the table before the caretakers managed to shoo him out again. Now the table had ten copies of my manuscript on it, dog-eared and scribbled over in various colours of ink. After the discussion they would hand their copies to me, and I'd go to one of those desks in the stacks of the library and read them one by one.

"I don't want to be prescriptive," said Tom, his long legs endlessly jiggling under the table, "but you gotta change the names of the twin brothers. One of their names, at least. Who gives twins rhyming names? Why would you do that?"

I could think of two pairs of twins with rhyming names: 1) on the TV show *The Bachelor*, where in season 15 bachelor Brad Womack had brought on his twin brother Chad to see if the women could tell the difference (they could), and 2) in a comic strip called "Ram and Shyam," a sort of Goofus and Gallant for the Indian Subcontinent. But I didn't say this. You weren't allowed to speak during your own workshop, though you had a chance at the end if you wanted to respond. The undergraduate used this as an opportunity to explain why everyone's criticisms of his story were incorrect. You could see him through the workshop not fully listening but storing up his responses like acorns in his cheeks.

Out one of the hexagonal windows I could see the grass of the quad and, farther beyond, an apartment building where F. Scott Fitzgerald had lived while Zelda convalesced in a nearby sanatorium. Our Character Development professor had told us this, gesturing to the building with his copy of *This Side of Paradise*, as I imagined Zelda writhing in a straitjacket worn over a flapper dress.

"The guy's motivations for breaking up with her don't make much sense," said Natasha. "He ends it because she refuses to ask for directions? Is this a gender thing?"

She was referring to a flashback scene in the story, where the couple travels to France and the girl wants to visit the best macaron shop in Paris, so they wander the 6th arrondissement but can't find it. The guy tells the girl that this is the perfect opportunity to practice her French by asking a passerby for directions, but she refuses and won't tell him why.

"Why won't she?" asked Murphy, and they all turned to me, even the professor.

I had the answer figured out when I was writing the story—mostly because the story was autobiographical. It had to do with fear, but also with

having made fear into a habit for so long that it was now instinctual. I was trying to think of how to articulate this, but I felt as though I had a cold metal ball rolling in my throat. The professor looked me in the eye for a second before turning back to the page and writing something down.

After class I walked straight to one of the lower levels of the library (its floors went deep underground, so it was exceptionally quiet). I tucked myself into a study cubicle and read the scribbled comments on each copy of my story, sucking in my breath, saving the professor's for last. When I got to hers, I went through every page, noting each word she'd circled and each question mark in the margins. Then I flipped to the back to read her final remarks.

"You can do better," she'd written. And under that: "The best macaron shop in Paris is in the 12th arrondissement."

James brought a backpack full of vegetables and dry noodles. He had a baseball cap on, and it seemed like he'd changed his beard, trimming it significantly or maybe shaving part of it off. He and the backpack overwhelmed my kitchen alcove, which had enough room for a table the size of a bicycle wheel. On to the table went the ingredients: a lump of mozzarella, a crisp white onion, a container of ricotta, and a paper bag full of mushrooms. I got out two cutting boards and two knives, and we began chopping—he on the table and me on the wedge of counter space. We hadn't really spoken yet, except hellos and a twenty-second apartment tour ("You own a lot of books!" he said). Prior to his arrival I'd swept up the Borax and put on every lamp to scare the cockroaches into submission. He complimented my embroidered Mexican pillows, and I wondered if he meant it sincerely before deciding that he probably did.

Conversation was difficult without the muppets. When we talked on the phone at night I said silly, flirtatious things—a mistake that was easy to make when the room was dark and you didn't have to make eye contact. You could keep your eyes closed, the cool plastic of your phone balanced between your cheek and the pillow and the only light coming from the year-round holiday bulbs dotting the eaves of the house across the street. He chopped the mushrooms clumsily. I felt this unexpected reverse homesickness at his being in my apartment. I wished that we were finished eating, that he was catching his train and heading back to Washington, and that I could comfortably end things by phone the next day. This was probably ir-

rational. I tried to recall if there was anything about this in my Myers-Briggs profile. I chopped the onion with robotic precision. He reached past me to get the can opener and paused to rub my back. It felt like the hand of a total stranger.

We ate the pasta on my bed while watching episodes of *The Wire* on my laptop.

“They filmed a scene in my grocery store,” I told James.

“I was on the same plane as McNulty once,” he said, leaning in and rasping against me with his beard. On *The Wire*, Bubbles gave an emotional speech at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. The ziti was mush in my mouth. The mozzarella had cooled into a skin. I set it on the floor by the bed. James moved closer, put his arm around me, and gave me this smooch sort of kiss—all gums and teeth.

“It’s bright in here,” he said. Then he stood up and turned off all my lamps. It was us and the neighbour’s Christmas lights, and I should have felt romantic. Instead, I thought of cockroaches rushing through drainpipes and silverfish slipping into electric sockets. I thought of the train that would take James back to Washington. Earlier I’d checked the schedule in eagerness at his arrival and noticed that the last train left at 11:15. When I took the plates back to the kitchen I checked the oven clock and it was already 10:30. It would take at least twenty minutes to get to Penn Station. That meant he had to leave by 10:50 to be safe.

When the episode ended he put on the next one and then settled back into place next to me. We had time for half of it, probably. He kissed me again, the brim of his hat joining our foreheads, his hand low on my back. I turned away, pretending to be invested in what was happening in the show, though I’d zoned out of several scenes and lost the thread of the story. McNulty was saying something about a serial killer. I kept thinking of the time and trying to guess how much had passed. James was cracking a topical joke, but I’d missed the beginning so I just laughed anyway. I tried to remember if he’d mentioned having a friend in Baltimore that he was planning to stay with. If he didn’t, I couldn’t ask him to stay at a hotel or take a several hundred dollar cab ride back, could I? And I certainly couldn’t afford to offer to pay for it. Had he checked the schedule? Had he assumed he was staying here?

I knew I should just ask, so I considered how I might phrase the question: “Do you know what time your train’s leaving?” or, more simply, “What

time's your train leaving?" But would that seem as though I were trying to get rid of him? It wasn't really that late for a date to end.

When I checked the time again, it was 11:00. James would miss his train. When the show ended, he stretched his long arms behind him, yawning. "One more?" he asked. "Or is that enough TV for one night?"

"That might be it for me," I said. "I'm getting sleepy."

He raised his eyebrows. "It's still early, but I guess we could go to bed," he said. "I've got a morning train ride tomorrow."

I went to the bathroom and changed into my PJs, which I buttoned austere to the neck. When I came out, James had undressed to only his boxers. We got into my bed, and I noticed how small it was for a long man whose knobbed feet angled out from under the blankets. The bed's size forced us close, a couple of spoons pressed coldly together. His beard was against the back of my neck, kissing gently. His hand roved over my hip. I made myself stay still. I impersonated taxidermy. James must have known I wasn't asleep. When his fingers passed my stomach, it was rigid.

"Be reasonable," I told myself. In the morning he'd catch his train and I'd never see him again. I could wait it out, just as I waited out my panic at the edge of Point Pleasant Park last summer, sitting on a bench facing the Atlantic, gripping the weathered seat planks on either side of me, trying to get ahead of my erratic breath. I focused on the caracara poised plumply on a branch, raising the finger-like edges of its wings.

From here it could fly to Portugal and never see a soul.