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**NOW AND THEN**

The neighbour's garden water-unit makes me mistake a sunny day for a rainy one as I awake, groggy, Venetian blinds shielding me from the hostile optimism of the day. Flies navigate the room in a choreographed dance, trying to find their way out the open window. I imagine that the room is an invisible pinball machine as they ricochet off invisible walls. I feel stones in my bed from having fallen asleep in my shoes. Or are they fleas? Moving to a more comfortable position and pushing away the grit with my feet, I turn to masturbate on my stomach until my hands fall asleep from the wrists down; the result of pressure from my hipbones. Fixating on release, I consult my mental rolodex of hackneyed fantasies. Let *X* represent *him*.

Give us this day our daily fuck. He had become a stranger; turned his back on me; left me in the night to an unperturbed, snuggle-free zone on the side of the bed close to the wall. He left the covers for me at least, so that I was lonely and warm, rather than lonely and cold.

He said he wanted to know what I thought when he entered me; read my expression with intent, his gaze quizzical, innocent, trying to crack the code of the feminine mystique. What I wanted him to think—decided submission: Petruchio's Kate; self-defeating obsession: Hamlet's Ophelia.

He awoke, avoiding touch even in stretch. My yearning transferred from sexual organs to bladder so that desire became an erotic need to pee. As he dressed I stared in lust at his perfect swimmer's bum and rock climber's wide back, finding it cute the way he fell off balance when getting into his underwear, half asleep and soft. The last time we had sex he absent-mindedly touched my nipples as if sending a message in Morse code and paused between thrusts to pull my hair out of his mouth, his expression like he'd taken a bite of spoiled food. I wanted to yell—*So I'll shave it, you stupid fuck!*—knowing a shaved head would be the end of us; the proverbial straw. He looked at my breasts as he would a traffic light about to change from red to green.

I feel the angst of a long, unfilled day that sags before me like an obese stomach. I go to the bathroom and shit—a small one, three hard pieces; even my bowels are reluctant to start the morning—hold down the handle to ensure it all goes, as is custom in this poorly plumbed house, head upstairs to the kitchen, pour myself a cup's worth of coffee, advise my roommate on whether she should wear the outfit she has on for her conference, and then come upstairs and get back into bed. I remind myself that future lovers might become queasy at the sight of faded period stains in the sheets. I am relieved that this recognition indicates that I have not completely capitulated to my depression. I turn on my music so as to not arouse suspicion that I am returning to bed on a Monday morning. My pillow: its faint scent of mouldy basements, a smell that has become synonymous with Vancouver, an odour

which I liken to the same sickening aroma of fried grease on clothes. I make a pile of hair on the bed—eyelash, pubic, cat, and head. This act of collecting hair sparks a rare moment where I experience a forgotten childhood memory as I might a *déjà-vu*:

My brother and I made a pile of assorted coniferous needles as a funeral pyre for cockroaches, painted them with acrylic to slow their escape and then dropped them on the heap. We aimed a magnifying glass at their writhing bodies and burned them with a point of light, leaving remnants of smoking ash on the rocks.

Time: Then. Now. If I had money I would buy one of those wall clocks with jumbled numbers that reads *Who cares?* at 12 o'clock. I remember being excited to learn how to tell the time, testing my time-telling skills against the characters in *The Polka Dot Door* who set the big and little hands of the clock at story hour. If I could afford cable I would try to find a channel that still airs *The Polka Dot Door* but it has likely been usurped by the *Teletubbies*. If I thought someone would take my ideas seriously I would write to television networks about the loss of quality children's programming and demand a resurgence of shows from the good old days that don't insult the intelligence of five-year-olds. I am trying to think of something that thrills me now as much as learning to tell the time and frying cockroaches thrilled my younger self but I am coming up short.

We were suffering in a long-distance relationship and it was at a make or break point I decided to move to Vancouver from Montreal. I told myself it was to make a change, to start over, make it work, see what might happen. He was late picking me up from the airport and, like a kid whose parent is the last to collect her from school, I waited with my bags by an automatic door, setting off the sensors multiple times and counting pennies in the fountain pond to keep myself amused. When he came through the door we shared a look that betrayed our fear. We exchanged greetings in voices that pretended things were going to be okay. I buried my feelings of ill ease in a quick hug and launched into an animated discussion about our new life together. After dropping my bags at his house, we headed out for a night on the town with his friends who were very enthusiastic and eager to assimilate me into their circle. Halfway through a very blue drink in a fishbowl with protruding exotic fruit, I retreated to the bathroom to relax my face from the strain of having to smile at strangers and pretend I wasn't feeling horribly out of place and terrified to be there. My reflection in the bathroom mirror revealed, bluntly, that I had made a huge mistake. An anchor dropped in my stomach.

Carpe Diem. I should be outside biking in the sun, trying to out-pedal the day that ages me. If nothing else, burning off the rage, keeping up impressions of vitality. A popcorn kernel is housed between my first and second molars; there since the weekend, I'm embarrassed to recall. I reflect on the process of manufacturing down-filled pillows while picking ingrown hairs on the underside of my thighs, my hands shaking in caffeine fury. I listen to the traffic; every car that passes road-kills my thoughts. I imagine a heap of dead animals accumulating in my frontal lobe. The median between east and west lanes is a cement structure dividing right and left brain. A crack in the asphalt adds syncopation to the white noise of tires and sets off a drumbeat rhythm in my head. I follow the strobe light of reflected sun from the car windows around the room, fading and reappearing with regularity.

I settled in by making his meals and inventing a short-term plan of action that would give me the autonomy I needed to stay this side of sane. I relayed my daily progress to him at dinner and recounted my exploration of the city with all the optimism of a tourist on holiday. It was on the fifth night when he gruffly asked me—*What the hell is wrong with you*—as I was crying myself to sleep. Had I a stronger constitution I would have said nothing, or come up with a practical rationale for my sadness, letting him drift off to sleep thinking it was my period or the aftereffects of jet lag. Instead, I opened to him with all vulnerability of a magnolia, its petals too large to withstand the slow weight of gravity. I provided him with a perfectly timed exit; my words opened the prison door and allowed for an easy break. The captain did not go down with the ship. In my darkest hour, I discovered he was not made of mettle. *I want to die.*

In an effort to make something happen with my life I have set my alarm and resisted the urge to cling to my pillow like a monkey to a branch, or burrow like a mouse into the corner with my blankets. I have risen and made it to the kitchen by 7:30. I am studying perfection from my roommate who rises daily at 6:30 and goes for a swim. However, a host of trivial things remind her that perfection is not attainable: she will never be able to get all the weeds out of the garden, or the little bits of food out of a drain after dishwashing; shaking a sheepskin rug, she never stops seeing dust. She has resigned herself to submitting to the universal order of things, accepted that the number of stains on white shirts is directly proportionate to the number of holes in socks. It seems her mood is easily upset while trying to find a lid to her lunch container but is as easily restored to a state of calm bliss when practicing yoga. She will soon be up; should we cross paths before I sneak back to my room to contemplate shapes in the water stains on the ceiling, I will need to invent yet another casual conversation starter that will conveniently avoid the topic of my depression. Should she inquire about *him* it will be a major motivational setback. I'm having second thoughts about being awake this early in the morning.

A friend of his called me and invited me to go to the Aquarium. I went with the anticipation that it would help me to be amongst the company of someone who could provide clues as to whether our relationship was salvageable. I went to save face, to send a message that I wasn't emotionally unstable. It was when we were standing at one of the tanks, looking at the moray eels that she casually suggested we get STD tests together. *Make a day of it.* When pressed to provide an explanation she offered, *as a precaution.*

At the walk-in clinic I was met by a young doctor who blinked incessantly and whose foot flipped at the end of his crossed leg like a desperate fish on the end of a fishing line. When he asked me why I was there I told him I wanted an STD test and a referral to a psychiatrist. I began to cry, losing my decorum in the presence of his professional questions: occupation, sleeping patterns, appetite; sexual history, method of contraception. He told me to consult family services for counseling, telling me that a referral to a psychiatrist was a lengthy process and the waiting period could be months. As a short-term solution, he prescribed Valium and instructed me to re-schedule a visit with another visiting doctor if my symptoms persisted.

I hide out at his house inside the shell of an ideal woman. His 70s style building,

or new condo, or artsy character home, or parent's basement. It is different each week: a naturopath from North Bay who attended the same university as *him*, a mountain bike racer from Chile who shares the same ancestry. An obscure Venn diagram that links my men like a sexual family tree or connect-the-dots picture; my lovers and the reasons I've chosen them. Most often it is to nullify the one who came before, obliterate the space of the heart's previous occupant. In their homes with their vintage record collections, or sports toys, or wine cellar, different packages of bachelorhood on display like a showroom, I lounge like a scrappy cat who has wandered in through an open front door in the spring. I become just comfortable enough to spend the night (after having established there are no other cats to contend with). I watch a movie of their choice while lost in a cuddle so intimate I am already their wife and have redecorated the living room. I look through their photo albums in my bra and his sweat pants. I look in the kitchen cupboards while they brush their teeth and assess the view from their bedroom window. I hide by loving each of them and never myself. Tell me, Doctor, is there something you can prescribe for this persistent symptom?

At the airport. The same number of bags I had when I moved here this time last year. I have sold all of my things and watched people take off with my belongings like ants from a picnic. It happened like this: I came upon a man in my misguided sexual adventures who, after sleeping with me a few times, didn't understand why I wanted to sleep with him. He insisted I was too good for him, that we terminate the physical aspect of our relationship but still remain friends. I accepted this as a common ruse of rejection until he called me a few days later, insisting that I accompany him over the long weekend on a trip with a couple he knows through his ex. Making the transition from sleeping with someone with whom you are acquainted exclusively in the context of sex in an urban environment to sharing a tent as a platonic couple in the wilderness for three days is nothing short of unusual. However, it was over the course of these three days that we exchanged stories of heartbreak from the loves of our lives. Looking over a bridge at a boat disappearing beneath us and leaving a spine of foam in its wake, he told me how she had turned his heart to mincemeat. On a walk on the beach I told him, as I watched the sea foam curl around a log and get caught like shaving cream behind an earlobe, that I had no idea how to begin again. When we returned to the city and he dropped me off at my apartment, he gave me a hug and whispered—*You've done what you came to do. You're homesick, go home.*

I remember a former flight, as a child. My mother had broken all traffic laws to get to the *Park'N Fly* only to find we had arrived and missed the last shuttle service to the airport, meaning we would miss our flight. She frantically pulled out all the contents of her purse looking for her wallet and yet couldn't find it, resorting to turning her purse upside down and emptying it on the floor like a kid emptying a Halloween loot bag, lipstick rolling under the counter like tootsie rolls. She got down on her hands and knees and ripped at the zippers of the as yet un-assaulted pockets. She began to weep. The *Park'N Fly* employee looked at my brother and I dressed in bright summer shorts and flip flips, parkas and toques; ready to shed our winter garb at the last minute. My brother and I looked at the *Park'N Fly* employee with wide-eyed, humiliated looks that we hoped passed for *Is there really nothing you can do to save us from this?* It was not clear to me at the time but my mother was not crying about the frustration of having lost her wallet. Remembering it now, I compare it with my present

circumstances which yesterday culminated in a tearful escapade at 7-11 after I had dropped a bottle of fruit juice on the floor. Pain compounds exponentially in relation to experience because I have to factor in that most horrible acceptance: I should have known better.

Under the incubator lights of the airport I patiently endure announcements about unattended baggage and missing passengers paged for final calls, their names badly mispronounced. I walk through the metal detector at security with wide open arms. As we forgive those who trespass against us. I remove my shoes without shame, empty my pockets without fuss. I resist the urge to hug the flight attendant when I see her name is hyphenated: Marie-Claude.

31E: his shiny, tanned bald spot looks like the taut roasted skin of a barbeque chicken, shellacked with hairspray that missed the few hairs it was intended for. University football ring sucking the marrow from his fat baby finger, cowboy boots splayed out from his exaggeratedly spread legs—legs which are clad in tight stone-washed jeans. Jeans of the variety that let you know his buddy is a right field man. If I had money, I would place my bet on his being drunk by the end of this flight. 31D is a skinny, sedate teenager who looks like he was recently released from expensive rehab. Large bug eyes with purple contact lenses, he pulls at his multi-coloured hair, sighing heavily, crossing and uncrossing his legs and arms with all the studied nuance of a newly famous rock star, unsure of the longevity of his celebrity. He plays with his lip ring, spinning the metal piercing through the hole until the shiny ball stops at his flesh.

*I should have known better* is a voice in my head. It is the voice of defeat, the liability of wasted time, the shackles worn by a perfectionist. *I followed my heart* is the voice of my soul. It is the voice of true love, a tribute to a great journey, the wings of freedom worn by a wanderer.

My handbag is safely stowed. My seat is in the upright position. I have consulted the emergency features of this aircraft from the pamphlet in the seat pocket in front of me. I plug in my headphones and turn up the volume to Gabrielle Roy's *The Tin Flute*. I say goodbye to Vancouver. At long last, I am going home.