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ISN'T IT PRETTY TO THINK SO

Girl Dynamo stood five foot ten at thirteen. After that she grew one inch more. I heard this and other stories about her many years later. Through her teenage years, she told me, she had tender limbs and often dreamed of floating. Her first boyfriends were athletes and farm boys, full of lust and ignorance. Supermen, they were. Bright faced. Cleansed of doubt. Fresh sprung, ready for life. They parked their cars behind hockey arenas, felt her up and asked for hand jobs. She listened to their dreams of million-dollar mansions. Shared major label beer siphoned into pop cans. Touched them quickly and effectively and thought whatever promise life had for her, it hadn't started yet.

Not that it wasn't trying.

One rainy October night when she was sixteen her best friend, Jealous Jenny, disappeared only to show up three months later, pregnant and engaged to her father's best friend.

She said, "Jesus, Jenny."

Jenny begged Girl Dynamo for support.

"Everyone thinks I'm a freak."

"Jesus, Jenny."

"I love him, you know. No one seems to get that."

Yes, love. Certain diagnosis of trouble. She told me she felt the need for it all around her. Wasn't sure she'd known it to do anyone any good.

Finally the day came when Girl Dynamo moved south. Out of her bedroom. Out of the suburbs. To downtown and the big university. Her portal to the world beyond.

Within weeks she'd met Jean, a Québécois documentary film student.

Jean said, "What is life? Nothing."

His eyes were a shade of green deeper than the purest emerald.

He said, "Emptiness—only emptiness."

They met in the library when he dropped his satchel of books on the study table opposite her and asked what she was reading.

She said, "Uh, Plato."

"Cool."

"Really?"

He'd read through antiquity in high school.

They spent their first night in his basement apartment sipping black coffee. They sat at opposite ends of his bed, hemmed in by movie equipment and milk crates full of books. At four in the morning a stillness came over her, a stillness he later said meant a lot to him, and she leaned forward and kissed him suddenly and with great force.

She knew one or two things about life. She could remember telling him that. Neither of which added up to much. For all she could tell things happened, then other things happened, and there wasn't much else to it. If life had an algebra equation it was a formula denser than she could grasp. Where she came from she'd been told it mattered where you came from. But she didn't go for that. The origins of the species may have been primordial swamps, but her own beginnings featured malls and broad avenues. Not decent growing soil, she thought. She complained to Jean about her parents. How they turned away from their neighbours; how they complained about their friends. "Their biggest energy use," she said, "is trying not to be different. They haven't had an original thought in years."

He said, "Original thoughts? Are there such things?"

He told her about a documentary he was making about Church Street hookers. The focus was a woman named Ginger. Born in Jamaica, Ginger was the result of a tryst between her fourteen-year-old mother and a German tourist.

He said, "A rape, really."

In the weeks that followed Girl Dynamo accompanied Jean on late-night research. She learned that Ginger was raised by her grandmother and came to Canada when she was ten to live with her uncle. Her grandmother thought the uncle had a good job in an office building but he actually built office buildings. When Ginger was thirteen she entered the first of a series of foster homes as a ward of the state. By sixteen she'd run away and was surviving trick to trick.

To Jean, Ginger represented something essential.

He said, "Her life is the way life is. Everyone does what she does. But in her life it's up front."

Three weeks later Girl Dynamo told Jean she'd seen enough. She wasn't ready to expect nothing from life.

She took a job in a diner and started writing poetry.

It was at the diner that she met Scruffy and later the Black Knight. Scruffy, whose real name was Bill, was bald. He had leukemia. He took no interest in her sexually. She felt drawn to approach him from behind and draw slow circles on his cranium.

He said, "You know I'm gay, don't you?"

She didn't.

She asked, "Always?"

Over the next fortnight her flirting became more elaborate. When he pointed this out to her she said, "I can't help it."

"But it's going nowhere."

"I know. That's why I like it."

She asked if he had a boyfriend.

"No."

"What type of men do you like?"

"The kind that aren't attracted to me."

She said, "See, we aren't so different!"

She hadn't seen Jean in a month. Had almost stopped thinking about him. What she did think about disturbed her. His penis. His hands on her breasts. His hot breath. At night she would hold her pillow close and think about the coolness of his skin.

It was nearly Christmas and her classes weren't going well. She thought of her parents. She hadn't seen them since she left home four months earlier. They knew nothing of Jean or Ginger or Scruffy. In the new year, she decided, the temperature would drop, the snow banks would grow. She would try a new path. Attend classes. Hand in assignments.

A decade later she'd a hard time explaining what went wrong.

I met Girl Dynamo when we were both working evenings for a polling company, calling disinterested citizens, nagging them for opinions.

She asked me out.

She said, "Next week's my birthday."

We went to a trendy French restaurant in Parkdale. I hadn't been on a date in over a year. She wore a black top that hung from strings looped delicately over her shoulders. For weeks I'd been staring at her lips while she interviewed people over the telephone. Now here we were, alone in an intimate setting, and I couldn't keep my eyes from drifting down to her breasts.

She said, "How are things with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's going on in your life?"

Girl Dynamo already knew the general outline. Ex-wife and daughter on the West Coast, a new wealthier-man-than-me in their lives. I'd worked in software design but had grown bored of the field. I asked her to tell me something new, something special. She told me about Scruffy. A year earlier he'd jumped in front of a subway train. They were roommates then. Why had he done it? Things happen, then other things happen.

I asked, "There's always more to tell?"

"The past is never past, you mean?"

I wasn't sure I knew what she meant.

"There's always more to interpret," she said. "Always more to say."

"That's probably true." I raised my wine glass and she lifted hers.

"Happy birthday," I said.

I walked her home afterwards. She invited me in. I held her for a long time before I kissed her.

She said, "What I like about you is you don't try to push things."

"It's not because I don't want to."

"I know. I like that about you, too."

Soon after that she told me what happened.

Jean started an internet porn club.

He came to the diner to look for her.

She was happy to see him. Returned to his bedroom. This time in front of the camera.

She told me, "I loved it, at first. All those people watching me."

"Really?"

"At first, yes."

It was like living without boundaries, like living in twelve dimensions at once. She hadn't slept with anyone in months. Her fantasies became alive.

"I thought about sex all of the time. I would lie in front of the camera with only a robe to cover me and wait for someone to e-mail a request."

Jean lined up other girls and she started kissing them, too.

“It wasn’t something I’d ever thought about before, but in that room I became someone else.”

She worked for Jean for five months. Jean called her his “Girl Dynamo.”

She said, “I didn’t mind at first but then I came to hate it. ‘Dynamo’ because I could go longer than anyone else; ‘Girl’ because Jean had no respect for women. I called him the Black Knight, which he thought was funny. I was an object to him. Something he could translate into money. Something he could use, like clay.”

“But you did it willingly.”

“At first.”

“For five months.”

“I had to go through it. I had to go deeper, deeper, until I came out the other side.”

Her real name was Alicia Fitzgerald. She was a full three inches taller than me. I’d never before looked up to kiss anyone. I discovered it makes no difference.

We talked about moving in together. The people at work knew about us now. The women were happy, the men jealous. Not everything was perfect but it never is. We didn’t fight—ever.

She asked, “How come we never fight?”

“It’s not my style.”

“I think we should have fights. If we don’t fight I’m not sure you love me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think there should be passion in the relationship. I think you should speak up for what you want and we should fight about it. You should show me more of yourself.”

I wanted to. I was trying like hell.

My wife, too, had asked for more. We’d married too young, she’d said. Before either of us were fully formed.

“I can’t believe I married a loser,” she said once.

I was playing dolls with my daughter at the time.

“What kind of man wants to play with dolls?”

Later, I cornered her in the bedroom.

“You’d think a woman would be pleased to see her husband playing with his child.”

She’d calmed down by then.

“You’re a wonderful father, Eddie. I’m not saying that.”

“What are you saying?”

“I want out. I need something different. I just feel like our life isn’t going anywhere.”

The next week she told me she had a new man.

Your life can change in an instant, I found out. I’ve found that out more than once and every time it shocks me.

One Tuesday morning I was home in bed with Alicia. We weren’t due at work until later in the afternoon for the evening shift. Afterwards she rose to make coffee and turned on the radio. Then the television.

She yelled, “Eddie, come here!”

I came running, a sheet draped over my shoulders. That day I wouldn’t get dressed until well into the afternoon. I took up a place on the couch beside her, one arm around her, the other pressed between my knees. Both planes had hit the towers. The towers were still standing.

Immediately we made a plan to visit the blood donor clinic. There was one close to our work. But by the time we got there they were turning people away. They were out of supplies.

The next day Alicia said she wanted to go to New York.

“Right away? Right now?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“But—”

“No buts!”

Okay. No buts. We went.

We saw all of the things others told us later they saw on television. Ground Zero. The roads blocked, the streets full of people, the buildings, billboards and traffic poles plastered with missing persons information, the airwaves full of official information, the haunted subways.

We got a room at a small hotel near Central Park. I’d never been to the city. Neither had Alicia. She’d wanted to find out how we could help but we just walked the streets and talked to people. Everyone said how different things were, how concerned they were for each other. Everyone kept asking, How are you? How are you? It was like the dust cloud that had spread over the city when the buildings fell had never cleared; it only blew through the streets, causing people to hold tight to their fears and look out for one another. A menace had arrived in their midst and no one knew how to deal with it. But they were dealing with it. One moment at a time. It was a more startling sequence of events than I ever could have imagined. I’ve heard people say it was like

watching a movie. But I find that a difficult analogy. All I know is, I walked the streets of New York thinking about my daughter, wanting to hold her until she slept in my arms.

We stayed three days, then came home and watched the news. For the first month it seemed that was all we did. Read newspapers. Sat in front of the television.

At Thanksgiving Alicia took me to meet her parents. I'd never seen her so anxious. When I asked her about it she just said, "They know so little about me. To them I'm still their little girl."

Shortly after we arrived her mother told me Alicia had never brought a boyfriend home before. Not from the city. They hadn't met any of her boyfriends since high school.

Alicia sat on the end of the couch, silent.

Her father circulated the wine.

"I feel sorry for your generation," he said.

"Why's that?"

Her mother answered. "It's a new world. It scares me, all of the things they talk about on the news."

She had seen a documentary on CNN about the Taliban not allowing women to work and denying education to girls. Executing people in football stadiums. Requiring all men to grow beards.

Alicia asked, "How does that affect us?"

"They want to end our way of life," her mother said. "They're against everything we stand for and I'm just afraid there'll be a war."

After dinner Alicia and her mother went upstairs to sort through some old photographs. Her father made coffee and I sat with him in front of the TV. We were watching a Raptors game with the sound off.

He said, "So what are your views about all of this?"

I could tell right away he didn't really care what I thought. He leaned over and took me by the arm.

He said, "Let me tell you something. You young people need to learn fear. It's your generation that's going to have to solve this thing, don't you understand?"

I nodded.

"You're the ones who are going to have to deal with it and it's not going to be a walk in the park. Hear what I'm saying?"

"Yes."

“I look at you and Alicia and I can see that you’re walking through the world in a fog. It makes me want to shake you and wake you up.”

On the TV someone made a basket. They showed the shot again in slow motion. The ball went high in the air, then came down straight through the hoop. Never touched the rim. The camera scanned the applauding crowd. Alicia’s father watched this with me, then reached for the converter and turned on the sound.

A month later Alicia said she wanted babies. She wanted to get married and own a house in the suburbs.

I said, “What are you talking about?”

“Kids, Eddie. Babies.”

She pressed her cheek against mine and whispered in my ear. “A house. A mortgage. Marriage. The whole deal.”

I thought that was the last thing on her mind.

I put my hand in the back pocket of her jeans. I wanted to ask her what she made of it all. This drama, this violence. This swirling, shimmering world.

One thing leads to another, I thought she would say.

But instead she made me sit down. Then she sat across my lap and kissed me.

She asked, “Are you with me?”

“For now and forever.”

“Okay, then.”

“Is that all there is to it?”

“You bet.”

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