

Woman and Girl and Papaya

The children were a cell. If that's the word I want. Well, they were pulsing, alive, a whole unit. They were the log you pick up before you realize it's teeming with ants. From across the gallery, if you were to glance over, they would've looked still. They were not still. Children of that age are never still. Girls! The girls! They fiddled with their stockings, tugging out the bit that cased their ankle-bones 'til it became loose—like the third layer of onion skin, the filmy one. The girls! They reached behind their heads and felt the bows in their hair like they were pets about to run away. They picked their noses. They watched women in black, heeled boots click past. The boys! Boys—the boys! They chewed on their shoelaces. They picked their scabs. They did not poke each other. They tugged their collars. They felt the sweat between their still-fat fingers and at their spiky hairlines. They tried to be still. They watched their friends: *"how do they do it? How can they be still?"*

The teacher was a museum employee who'd specialized in Education. Who cleaned beneath her fingers with the right kind of tool for that. She was a woman who wore cotton underwear most of the time but definitely had silk panties but definitely kept them languishing in the back of the drawer because she only wanted to wash them when she had to, after dates. She was 28. She was someone who'd once been led to think I was in love with her, by me. It was not intentional.

We are in the Impressionist room. The children are collected in front of a Cezanné and a Pissarro, hanging side by side.

“Why would I show you these two pictures together?” asks the teacher.

Seven hands spurt up. I am surprised. I’d expected ham sandwiches to be digesting in stomachs, expected the Catholic triptychs and Ancient Greeks with no noses and long pee breaks with twisting, mostly female lines to have worn them down. *But*, I remember, *they’re moving*. I wonder if their brains are squirming in there, too: frontal lobes trying to get comfortable, sweating and spilling on themselves, protesting from their crawl spaces: “Hey! Hey! We’re already much too old for this! Is there a bigger room available? Hey!”

“Yes.” She calls on a boy whose edges are pleasantly rounded, his elbows bulky as potatoes. He’s uppercrust—you can hear in his voice the Mum with a season subscription to the opera and a Dad who’s apathetic over tea.

“Because they’re two pictures of the same thing but painted in a different way,” he says.

“That’s right. That’s a brilliant way of saying it.” There’s no gushiness in the way Lenore says this. No cuddliness, no lip service. It is cold and clear and true. It is brilliant, what he’s said, right here. Something even the curator couldn’t spit out. Even though he had eight interns and his wife proofreading before they printed his gobbledy-gok onto shiny stickers and stuck them to these grimacing white walls.

Two pictures of the same thing. They’re pictures of bridges. The Cézanné is crisp! Its light is twilight; yellow and lavender. Pissaro’s is all grinning sunlight and pouring fourth. But both bridges.

I’m one white room beyond them, my front supposedly facing Impressionism but by now I’ve turned to watch the class. There’s a placard in my peripheral vision,

which I hate. It's the high culture version of the TV tuned to the sports channel in a bar and grill. Even if you're riveted by your date and what she's saying, you still can't help but stare over her shoulder at a Marmite commercial. We're all words people, after all, so we turn and read the placard that's gonna decode the art for us. I'll speak for myself: I'm always disappointed, because it never does.

But I always read them anyways.

Gauguin, Paul. (1848-1903)

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"My art is slowly disintegrating," wrote Gauguin in a letter to friend Jean Chardon in 1893. "Soon, my libido and conscience will go as well and then there'll be no reason not to get on the market floor with the vahine and sell tomatoes." This work was comprised right around this period, and Gauguin's greying mood is reflected in his dreary color palette..."

I once had a professor—an older woman, about sixty-five or so—say, in her thick Czech accent: "You know, when I was a young student you would study the life and work of someone. There was this idea of life and work. Now, we've gotten a little away from that and it's the work, the work itself, just the work." Too bad Gauguin, Proust, the Greek tragedians weren't around for that shift. Now all the post-modern novelists, in their bandanas and unwashed hair, get pissy if you ask them: "How much of this is autobiographical?" If you so much as drop in the word "autobiographical"—the life, the work, the work, the life. When I was an undergrad and dabbled in creative writing classes, my Dad would ask to see the work—ask formally, like it was pro to pro. He would use all these terms: "synecdoche,"

“narrative distance”. We would speak about it, seated in the living room, my legs tucked under me, my mind on what high school girl was waiting in what bed for my sophisticated, home-from-Uni touch. He would speak about how he “read” the “intentions” of “the author”—as if “the author” wasn’t the disheveled son in front of him. I make fun, but it was respectful. It was also only a pretense. In the more heated moments of our lives—like the time I didn’t make it home for my mother’s birthday dinner and instead showed up at eleven that night with a dead chicken molting all over the backseat and a thirty year-old Cuban named Jorge in the passenger’s side—in moments like that, my father would work himself into a fury, pulling the air towards him like in a sailboat on a still day. “My friend (his seething-mad moniker for me), you can write about wife beaters and alcoholics—clearly that’s your view of me—as some kind of Godzilla with you and your mother in my grip (he never stopped writing, not even for a moment) but by God I’ve done well by you both, and it’s immature the way you keep flinging your Freudian exercises about in print!” The life, the work, the work, the life. Even this esteemed British novelist, who wrote about the Amazon warriors and Harlem bucket-drummers and beeswax processing plants, even he couldn’t see past his own nose when it came to his son’s writing. I wrote, in my stories, “father”; he saw his reflection. Maybe Gauguin could no longer afford the saturated pigments: the chalky magenta, the tangerine. Maybe he’d seen Degas and wanted to try something drippier. My father’s chief arrogance was in assuming that the compass he’d given me wouldn’t allow me to explore.

“Rudi?”

Lenore is at my shoulder, and as I turn from the placard to her, her pressed and civil expression twitches like a candle flame. She's trying "polite".

"Hi."

"Are you here to see me?" She readjusts the leather strap of her bag, her long face hanging like a coat between all that blonde hair.

"I did hear that P.S. 12 was coming for a visit, yes."

She makes this semi-disgusted sound from the back of her throat, looks away.

"Well, do you have anything to say?" This like she's talking to an autistic person.

"Hello Lenore how are you?" She thinks I'm being willfully obtuse. She thinks I decide to be a puzzle to torment her. I don't. I'm a puzzle the way a dog drools: neither of us had any choice in the matter, and we hardly do it for a reaction. I struggle with what to say; the colorful drivel is what comes out. I'm not trying to be Oscar Wilde—or even Oscar Wilde in a bad raincoat. I'm just trying to get in from the rain. Museums in London are free.

"Rudi, it was fine meeting Thursday, having a chat, but you can't keep showing up in my life like this. I'm working."

I'm looking over her shoulder: "Where'd the young ones go?"

"Rudi. Rudi. Look here." But just as I do, she looks away, and her eyes are moistening, like from staring in to the wind. "Shit. I wasn't gonna. What do you want?"

"I told you. I'm retracing my steps. Like you do with a scarf you've left in a cab?"

“I am not a scarf.”

“Oh no, you’re not the scarf in this scenario.” I drop my hands deeper in my pockets. A paperclip end pokes my thumb.

“Well then what-“

“The scarf is. Well I’m not quite sure what it is. I guess that’s why I’m looking for it. My life maybe? My dignity? My direction?”

“What is this.”? She looks down at her feet, in sweet brown clogs. Oh Lenore. I have this sudden urge to wrap her in a bear hug, to brew her tea. She sways back and fourth. Head still down. “Fuck. I wasn’t gonna.” She squints at me. “You don’t miss me, do you?”

I denature the paperclip in my pocket. I can picture it in there: just this strange, metal musical staff. There’s something I need to say. These are the moments when women drag unbaited hooks in the water but men know to clamp down, feel the sting anyways, like some piscine duty. There are things I should say to further pad Lenore’s fall. But I’m dealing with issues of my own clarity over here. I need to cut the oil with water, ‘til it runs clear.

“No, this is mainly about Kevin.”

“Wow holy shit Rudi. What the fuck, you know?” Lenore doesn’t swear often. She hasn’t gotten a lot of sleep. I can tell because her left eyelid is twitching ever so slightly. I’ve kissed that eyelid. And that thought brings me back to the road, turns on my headlights. There was a sequence, to things. Lenore, and then Kevin.

“It’s my problem, Lenny. He really sent me spinning and I’m just figuring that if I can get back in the zone of certain times in my life before him then I’ll be able to-“

“Wow. Fucking wow. Are you autistic? You know, I’m standing right here in front of you. Me. M-E. You know? Lenore? Another person? Someone who’s not Rudi Schwartz?” She bends her knees—somehow, for emphasis. “Your words might have an effect, on me?”

“Lenore I’m sorry.”

“You know my Mom’s really sick?” It’s a good thing the children are gone. It would put them all out of whack to see the majestic museum lady like this: runny-nose, lump in throat.

“Oh Really?”

“Yeah. She leaves hair everywhere; she can’t remember what my Dad’s name was. My sister’s talking to some legal folks she knows. I’m gonna have to deal with that.” She pauses. I pause. “ So basically, like, back off. And, uh, I got a promotion-“

“No kidding Lenny, that’s really-“

“Well, it’s more work same pay but they wanna start planning an educational center. Want me at the helm, for special projects and- oh my god,” she puts her hand to her forehead, in an almost old world, scarlet-fever-esque gesture. “You do this to me, you know.”

“What do I do to you?”

“I always end up scrambling to explain myself to you. When I really don’t need to.”

“No. You don’t.” We wait. The thing to say would be to acknowledge that I’m the one who owes an explanation. I can feel her stomach grumbling for this.

Kevin. Kevin. Something in me says *Kevin*. “Well, good luck with your mother.”

“Thanks.”

“And congratulations on the-“

“Is there a question you wanted to ask? Was it about the sex?” In a room full of nudes, Lenore whispers this word.

“Lenny-“

“I mean, did you come to ask me if I could tell by the sex, near the end, that you were-“

“Do you teach the children Michelangelo?” I ask.

She waits so long we hear a guard’s five footsteps down the hall.

“So you know where he is now?” she asks.

“No.”

“Do you miss him everyday?”

“Yes, but-“

“Yeah, well, it gets better. I gotta go. Please don’t confuse me anymore.” She switches her bag from one shoulder to the other. “You know, a lot of my friends were like pissed at you for me when I told them. Probably because they thought that’s what I wanted. Like you were using me as a—you know, biding time because you were a coward or something? A lot of them said that. And I defended you. I don’t feel that way. I know. The heart, it-“ She waves her spread palm in front of her chest, as though warming it by a fire.

“Yes. The heart,” I say. A moment. She nods. “Uh, thank you.” I say.

Again, she nods, and I watch her click out of the Impressionists, leaving pointillism and wine bottles, Matisse and me, behind.

Kevin. His name is lying under the shade of every leather bench in the gallery. It is swimming through my bloodstream in hot, orange pockets—like goldfish. “Ruud- do you think you could go to the movies and just *go* to the movies, one time?” Is what he used to ask me. Playfully. In that way you do when you’re still in love with someone’s pots and boils, their neck acne and their clinginess. When whatever mess they keep piled in their lives still looks to you like home. On the good days, I see my projections, the tracing paper I place over my environments, as charming notes in the margins of a used book. On bad days they’re picking up someone else’s martial argument on your cellphone: abrasive, unstoppable, and you can’t abide it. Turns out I could not go to the movies and just go to the movies. Why didn’t you teach me how, Kevin, while you were still here? Then maybe I could shut my eyes and click my heels and unscrew my head and there would be no names reclining on the marble floor, and my blood would carry oxygen, not marine life. I would end up places where I could articulate my reasons for being there. Things would be simpler. I would be a person with an umbrella, and groceries, and an address folded in my pocket. As it is, I don’t even know where to put my eyes on the street.