THE NEW YORKER

SHOW DON'T TELL

By Curtis Sittenfeld

Audio: *Curtis Sittenfeld reads.*

At some point, a rich old man named Ryland W. Peaslee had made an enormous donation to the program, and this was why not only the second-year fellowships he'd endowed but also the people who received them were called Peaslees. You'd say, "He's a Peaslee," or "She's a Peaslee." Each year, four were granted. There were other kinds of fellowships, but none of them provided as much money—eighty-eight hundred dollars—as the Peaslees. Plus, with all the others, you still had to teach undergrads.

Our professors and the program administrators were cagey about the exact date when we'd receive the letters specifying our second-year funding, but a rumor was going around that it would be on a Monday in mid-March, which meant that, instead of sitting at my desk, I spent most of a morning and an early afternoon standing at the front window of my apartment, scanning the street for the mailman. For lunch, I ate a bowl of Grape-Nuts and yogurt—Monday nights after seminar were when I drank the most, and therefore when life seemed the most charged with flirtatious possibility, so I liked to eat light on those days—then I brushed my teeth, took a shower, and got dressed. It was still only two o'clock. Seminar started at four, and my apartment was a ten-minute walk from campus. I lived on the second floor of a small, crappy Dutch Colonial, on the same street as a bunch of sororities and the co-op, where I occasionally splurged on an organic pineapple, which I'd eat in its entirety. I was weirdly adept at cutting a pineapple, and doing so made me feel like a splendid tropical queen with no one to witness my splendor. It was 1998, and I was twenty-five.

I was so worked up about the funding letter that I decided to pack my bag and wait outside for the mailman, even though the temperature wasn't much above freezing. I sat

in the mint-green steel chair on the front stoop, opened the paperback novel I was in the middle of, and proceeded to read not more than a few sentences. Graduate school was the part of my life when I had the most free time and the fewest obligations, when I discussed fiction the most and read it the least. But it was hard to focus when you were, like a pupa, in the process of becoming yourself.

My downstairs neighbor, Lorraine, emerged from her apartment while I was sitting on the stoop, a lit cigarette in her hand; presumably, she'd heard my door open and close and thought that I had left. We made eye contact, and I smirked—involuntarily, if that mitigates things, which it probably doesn't. She started to speak, but I held up my palm, standing as I did so, and shook my head. Then I pulled my bag onto my shoulder and began walking toward campus.

Lorraine was in her early fifties, and she had moved to the Midwest the same week in August that I had, also to get a master's degree but in a different department; she told me she was writing a memoir. I'd moved from Philadelphia, and she'd moved from Santa Fe. She was dark-haired and wore jeans and turquoise jewelry—I had the impression that she was more of a reinvented Northeastern Wasp than a real desert dweller—and was solicitous in a way that made me wary. I wanted to have torrid affairs with hot guys my age, not hang out with a fifty-two-year-old woman. In early September, after sleeping at Doug's apartment for the first time, I'd returned home around eight in the morning, hung over and delighted with myself, and she'd been sitting on the front stoop, drinking coffee, and I'd said good morning and she'd said, "How are you?" and I'd said, "Fine, how are you?" and she'd said, "I'm thinking about how the English language lacks an adequate vocabulary for grief." After briefly hesitating, I'd said, "I guess that's true. Have a nice day!" Then I'd hurried inside.

It was likely because I was distracted by Doug, and our torridness, that I hadn't paid much attention at first to Lorraine's smoking. I could smell the smoke from my apartment, and one day I even pulled out my lease, to check if it specified that smoking wasn't permitted either inside or out—it did—but then I didn't do anything about it.

In the fourth week that Doug and I were dating, his work and mine were discussed in seminar on the same day. Mine was discussed mostly favorably and his was discussed mostly unfavorably, neither of which surprised me. The night before, while naked in Doug's bed, we'd decided to give each other feedback ahead of time. As he lay on top of

me, he said that he liked my story, except that he'd been confused by the beginning. I then delivered a seventeen-minute monologue about all the ways he could improve his, at the conclusion of which he stood up, went into the other room, and turned on the TV, even though we hadn't had sex. I believed that a seventeen-minute monologue was an act of love, and the truth is that I still do, but the difference between who I was then and who I am now is that now I never assume that anyone I encounter shares my opinion about anything.

The next night, most people went to the bar after class; it was only eight o'clock when Doug said that he had a headache and was going home. I said, "But getting criticism is why we're in the program, right?" He said, "Having a headache has nothing to do with the criticism." Three hours later, leaving the bar, I walked to his apartment. I knocked on his door until he opened it, wearing boxers, a T-shirt, and an irked expression. He said, "I don't really feel like company tonight," and I said, "Can't I at least sleep here? We don't have to do it. I know you"—I made air quotes—"have a headache."

"You know what, Ruthie? This isn't working."

I was astonished. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"Obviously, we jumped into things too fast," he said. "So better to correct now than let the situation fester."

"I don't think 'fester' is the word you mean," I said. "Unless you see us as an infected wound."

He glared. "Don't workshop me."

It's not that I wasn't deeply upset; it was just that being deeply upset didn't preclude my remarking on his syntax. I walked to my own apartment, and I spent a lot of the next week crying, while intermittently seeing Doug from a few feet away in class and at lectures and bars.

Also during that week, I knocked on Lorraine's door and told her that I could smell her cigarette smoke in my apartment and was respectfully requesting that she smoke elsewhere. She was apologetic, and later that day she left a card and a single sunflower outside my front door—when I saw the sunflower, I was thrilled, because I thought it

was from Doug—and, judging from the smell, she continued to smoke enthusiastically. I left a note for her saying that I appreciated the flower but would be contacting our landlord if she didn't stop. On Saturday, I returned home at one in the morning to find her sitting outside in the mint-green chair, enjoying a cigarette; I suspect that she'd thought I was asleep. She giggled and said, "This is awkward," and I ignored her and went inside. The next day, I e-mailed our landlord. After that, I'm pretty sure that Lorraine neither smoked as much on the property nor completely stopped, and I continued to ignore her. That is, I said no actual words to her, though, if she said hello, I nodded my head in acknowledgment.

Another month passed, and one afternoon a commercial airplane crashed in North Carolina, killing all forty-seven passengers and crew members. The next day, Lorraine was sitting in the mint-green chair reading the newspaper when I left the apartment, and she said, "Have you heard about the plane crash?" and I said, "Yes," and kept walking, and I had made it about ten feet when she said, "You're a fucking bitch." I was so surprised that I turned around and started laughing. Then I turned around again and walked away.

Once more, a single sunflower appeared outside my door, along with another note: "That outburst is not who I am. I admire you a lot." I had already repeated to my classmates the story of my middle-aged turquoise-jewelry-wearing neighbor telling me I was a fucking bitch, and the note left me queasy and disappointed. In the next five months, right up to the afternoon that I was waiting for my funding letter, I interacted with Lorraine as little as possible.

It was, obviously, a reflection of how agitated the funding had made me that I'd sat on the stoop. As I walked to town, I began composing in my head a new e-mail to my landlord. I would, I decided, use the word "carcinogenic."

Because there were still ninety minutes before seminar, I stopped at the bookstore. I ran into a classmate named Harold, who had recently said in seminar that everything I wrote gave off the vibe of ten-year-old girls at a slumber party. In the store, Harold told me that the funding letters weren't arriving today. His mail had already been delivered, and so had that of a guy named Cyrus, who lived next door; neither of them had received letters, and the newest intelligence was that the letters would be sent on Wednesday and probably arrive Thursday. Then Harold held up a paperback of "Mao

II" and said, "If DeLillo isn't the ombudsman of American letters right now, I'm at a loss as to who is."

"I've actually never read him," I said. Harold's expression turned disapproving, and I added, "Lend me that when you're finished and I will."

"It's not mine," Harold said. "I just come in here and read twenty pages at a time. But seriously, Ruthie—not even 'White Noise'?"

On Friday, a guy in his forties who wasn't famous to the general population but had a cult following among my classmates and me—a distinction I didn't then understand—was coming to speak, and some second-years who lived in a house across the river were hosting the after-party. The funding letters *still* hadn't arrived, or at least this was what I thought when I met my friend Dorothy for dinner at five-thirty at a Thai restaurant; we were eating early so that we could get good seats at the event, which would take place in a campus auditorium. But, when I sat down, Dorothy said, "I got a Franklin. Did you get a Peaslee? I'll set aside my jealousy and be happy for you if you did."

In fact, I hadn't received any mail at all, after another exhausting day of stalking the mailman. When I told Dorothy this, I added, "Or do you think Lorraine stole my letter?"

"Yeah, probably," Dorothy said.

"No, really," I said.

"No," Dorothy said. "I bet it's there right now. Should we skip dinner and go see?"

Even though I'd left my apartment fifteen minutes before, I considered it. Then I said, "I've wasted this entire week waiting, and I'm sure I didn't get a Peaslee, anyway. But if I don't check I can pretend I got one until after the party tonight. Like Schrödinger's cat."

"Ha," Dorothy said, then her features twisted, her eyes filled, and she said, "I don't mind teaching Comp next year, but the past few weeks have just been such a mindfuck. It's like a referendum on our destinies." I adored Dorothy, and her eyes filled with tears in

my presence several times a day, and probably several times out of it, too. A lot of the people in our program were nakedly emotional in a way that, in childhood, I had so successfully trained myself not to be that I almost really wasn't. Before entering grad school, I had never felt normal, but here I was competent and well adjusted to a boring degree. I always showed up for class. I met deadlines. I made eye contact. Of course I was chronically sad, and of course various phobias lay dormant inside me, but none of that was currently dictating my behavior. I also didn't possess a certain kind of feral charisma or mystery, and I didn't know, though I wondered a lot, if charisma correlated with talent. That's why Dorothy was right, that funding *did* feel like a referendum.

In the auditorium, Dorothy and I found seats toward the front, next to Jeff and Bhadveer, whom we referred to, unbeknownst to them, as our fake boyfriends. Jeff was tall and plump, and Bhadveer was medium height and skinny, and the four of us were all single and hung out often. In lieu of a greeting, Jeff said, "I'm not going to ask what funding you guys got, and I don't want you to ask me, and, if it's something you feel compelled to discuss, go sit somewhere else." Dorothy had entered the row before me and she glanced back and raised her eyebrows, and I mouthed, "*Rhetoric*?" and she nodded. This was the worst funding, besides none, which a handful of students did in fact receive. Or maybe Rhetoric was even worse than nothing, because, if you got nothing, you could find another job, but with Rhetoric you had to teach five days a week for sixty-four hundred dollars a year. Aloud, Dorothy and I said, "Sure," and, "No, that's cool."

The auditorium filled, which meant that about five hundred people turned out to hear the man with the cult following, who was a graduate of the program. He was wearing an untucked shirt, baggy jeans, and beat-up hiking boots, and halfway through his reading, when he stumbled over a line he had written a decade earlier, he said, "Fuck, man, I need a drink," and about seven minutes after that a guy from my program passed a six-pack of beer up onto the stage, and the man yanked off a can, popped it open, and guzzled. He said, "That's the stuff," and the audience applauded enthusiastically. I found the man brilliant and wrote down three of his insights, but the beer bit made me uncomfortable in ways it would take between two days and twelve years to pinpoint.

After the talk, in the building's crowded lobby, I was standing with Jeff when I spotted Lorraine about twenty feet away. "Eek," I said. "Can I hide behind you? I see my weirdo neighbor."

"The smoker?" Jeff asked.

"Yeah, it's that woman in the black leather trenchcoat."

"The smoker is Lorraine? She tutors with me at the Writing Center. She's kind of bonkers."

"Exactly."

"You know about her daughter, right?"

"Should I?"

"She had a teen-age daughter who died of anorexia. And not even that long ago—like two years?"

"Jesus," I said. "Maybe I *am* a fucking bitch."

"After that, I'd smoke, too."

"I already said I feel bad." There was a pause—the lobby was still crowded and buzzing—and I said, "Obviously, that's a horrible tragedy. But aren't her daughter's death and her blowing smoke into my apartment completely separate?"

Jeff shrugged. "Maybe not to her."

There had been some question as to whether the after-party would still happen, in light of so many people mourning their second-year funding, but word circulated in the auditorium lobby that it was on. Before we walked over, Dorothy, Jeff, Bhadveer, and I stopped at a convenience store.

"I'm not drinking tonight," I told Dorothy.

She was closing the glass door of a refrigerator, and she frowned and said, "Why not?"

It was the way that the man with the cult following had opened the beer onstage combined with my new knowledge of Lorraine's daughter, and I would have told Dorothy this under different circumstances—I told her everything—but it seemed like too much to get into, with Jeff and Bhadveer waiting at the cash register. I said, "So I don't throw myself at Doug."

"But if you don't drink you won't throw yourself at anyone else, either."

"Let's hope," I said. Doug and I had barely spoken since the first week of October. Following our breakup, we'd communicated only through typed critiques of each other's work—our professor required the critiques to be typed—and Doug's to me were one intellectually distant paragraph under which he wrote, "Best, Doug," which always made me think, How can someone who came inside me sign his critiques "Best"? My critique to him after our breakup was three single-spaced pages, and, in the sense that my comments concerned his story, they were impersonal, but in the sense that his story was autobiographical and he knew that I knew this—he'd told me about the fishing trip with his stepfather that it was based on—they were not impersonal. ("I think this would be a lot more compelling if the protagonist showed greater self-awareness and took responsibility for his role in the boat sinking.") After that, I didn't write him any critiques. I wasn't going to knowingly give him bad advice, but I didn't want to bestow on him another act of love. Or I *did* want to bestow on him acts of love—all I wanted was to bestow—but it was too painful to do so when my ability to edit his work was probably the thing he liked and hated most about me. Also, he'd begun dating an undergraduate named Brianna.

It was dark out, and on the bridge across the river I ended up walking next to Bhadveer, about fifteen feet behind Dorothy and Jeff. "Can you fucking believe it about Larry?" Bhadveer asked.

"Wait, is Larry a Peaslee?"

"Yeah. Remember that piece of shit he wrote about the Nazi soldier?"

"And who else is one?" I asked.

"You mean besides the guy who has two thumbs and loves blow jobs?" Bhadveer had made fists and was pointing with his thumbs at his face.

"*You* got one?" I said.

"If you're trying to conceal your surprise, try a little harder. Did you get one?"

"I haven't actually seen today's mail, but I doubt it."

"I bet you were in the running," he said, which seemed both chivalrous and like something he wouldn't have said if he weren't a recipient.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Well, at least one Peaslee has to be female, right?" he said. "And there aren't that many of you." This was true. Of our cohort of twenty-two, seven were girls or women or whatever we were supposed to call ourselves and one another—I myself was inconsistent on this front.

I said, "So you, Larry, and two we don't know."

Program parties were often weird—sometimes they took place at a farmhouse that a group of students rented a few miles out of town, and sometimes attendees did acid, so it wasn't that uncommon for, say, a twenty-three-year-old poet who had grown up in San Francisco and graduated from Brown to be found wandering in his underwear in a frozen cornfield—and I could tell as soon as we arrived that this party was going to be extra weird. A second-year named Chuck was standing by the front door, holding a Pez dispenser topped by a skull, and as people entered he offered them a candy, saying, as it landed in their palms, "Memento mori." By some mixture of intuition and strategically looking around, I knew immediately that neither the man with the cult following nor Doug was there.

In the kitchen, as Dorothy waited to set her six-pack in the refrigerator, the girl-woman in front of her, whose name was Cecilia, abruptly whirled around and hissed, "Can you please get the fuck out of my space bubble?"

Dorothy and I joined a conversation in progress among five people, and it soon emerged that one of them, Jonah, was the third Peaslee. Jonah's mother had starred in a popular nighttime soap opera in the eighties, and, to a one, Jonah's stories featured autoerotic asphyxiation, which I'd been unfamiliar with and had to have explained to

me by Dorothy. But Jonah's autoerotic-asphyxiation descriptions were artful, and the news that he was a Peaslee didn't offend my sense of justice.

The group of us speculated about who the fourth Peaslee was, and the consensus was Aisha, who was one of two black people in the entire program, and who was in her late thirties and had formerly been an anesthesiologist. She rarely came to parties, which I respected. I couldn't stay away from them—what if something juicy happened and/or Doug was in the mood to reunite? It was also technically possible that the fourth Peaslee was a woman named Marcy, who was in her early thirties, married, and had a two-year-old kid who was always sick. However, it was widely understood that Marcy was a terrible writer; more than once, I'd heard the suggestion that her acceptance into the program had been a clerical error.

I was in the living room, perched side by side on a windowsill with Bhadveer, when three girl-women converged in a group hug that lasted, and I'm not exaggerating, five minutes. These were the only women in my year besides me, Dorothy, Aisha, and Marcy. There was a fair amount of space around them, so that everyone along the room's periphery bore witness to the hug, which I assumed was part of the point. In the first few seconds of the hug, I thought, O.K., for sure none of you are Peaslees, which gave credence to the Aisha theory—or could it be me? Was there any chance? *Should* I leave to go check my mail?—and as the hug approached the thirty-second mark I thought, For God's sake, we get it, you're strong females who support one another, even when the system has screwed you, and after a full minute I was grimacing and I hated all three of them, even though under normal circumstances I hated only one, who was very performatively virtuous and often insisted on telling you about the meaningful conversations she had had with janitors or homeless people or about the healthy, nourishing whole-wheat bread she'd baked that afternoon.

Bhadveer said, "I'm trying to determine whether observing group hugs makes me more or less uncomfortable than participating in them."

"If you were participating, at least you could cop a feel," I said.

"I like the way you think, Flaherty." Bhadveer always called me by my last name. Then he said, "Are Genevieve and Tom in an open marriage?" Genevieve was a second-year poet, and Tom was her husband, who worked a normal-person job, possibly in I.T.

"Not that I know of," I said. "Why?"

"Because she's totally macking on Milo tonight. Look." Now that Bhadveer pointed it out, I saw that, across the room, Genevieve and a first-year named Milo were sitting extremely close together on a couch, talking intensely.

I said, "Is her husband here?"

"By all indications, no."

I scanned the room, and beyond it the front door, which every minute or two opened to admit more people.

"Doug isn't here, either, if that's who you're really looking for," Bhadveer said.

"Have you heard that everyone thinks the fourth Peaslee is Aisha?"

Bhadveer made a scoffing noise.

"Why not?" I said.

"Other than because her work sucks?"

I was genuinely surprised. "Aisha's work doesn't suck. Anyway, Larry's work sucks, and they gave him a Peaslee."

"I'm not saying she's dumb," Bhadveer said. "She got through medical school. She's just not a good writer."

I furrowed my brow. "Is the subtext of this conversation racial?"

"It wasn't, but it can be if you want. Enlighten me, oh suburban white girl." He took a sip of beer and added, "Aisha is gorgeous, right?"

I nodded.

"Great literature has never been produced by a beautiful woman."

I stared at him for a few seconds. "That's ridiculous."

"Name a book. I'll wait."

"Virginia Woolf was a babe." Of the many foolish things I said in graduate school, this is the one that haunts me the most. But I didn't regret it immediately.

Bhadveer shook his head. "You're thinking of that one picture taken when she was, like, nineteen. And it's kind of sideways, right? To obscure her long face. Why the long face, Virginia?"

I named a writer who had finished our program two years before we arrived, who was rumored to have received a half-million-dollar advance for her first novel. "Have you seen her in real life?" Bhadveer asked, and I admitted I hadn't. He said, "She does the best with what she has, but she's not beautiful." Then he added, "Don't take this the wrong way, but there tends to be an inverse relationship between how hot a woman is and how good a writer. Exhibit A is George Eliot."

"That's literally the dumbest idea I've ever heard," I said.

"It's because you need to be hungry to be a great writer, and beautiful women aren't hungry. Go ahead and contradict me."

"Joan Didion," I said. "Alice Munro. Louise Erdrich." But providing counterexamples felt distasteful rather than satisfying. I stood. "I could pretend that I'm going to refill my cup, but really I just want to get away from you."

As I walked out of the living room, the group hug finally broke apart.

The man with the cult following had arrived and was surrounded by a crowd in the dining room. I stood near a platter of program-sponsored cheese. I could get no closer to him than eight feet, not that I would have tried to speak to him directly, anyway.

"It's tin lunch pails at Yaddo," he was saying. "The picnic baskets are at MacDowell."

Someone nudged me. "I heard he likes getting blown by young women," Bhadveer murmured. "Maybe you should volunteer."

"Why would I do that?" I murmured back.

"Because then he'll help you get published."

"First of all," I said, still murmuring, "I would never give a blow job to a man in his forties. Well, not until *I'm* in my forties. Or at least my late thirties. Second of all, you seem really obsessed with blow jobs tonight."

"Flaherty, I'm always obsessed with blow jobs."

I rolled my eyes. "You should thank me for setting you up for that."

Bhadveer tapped his beer bottle against my plastic cup of water. "Thank you."

Was I imagining it, or had the question just arisen of whether I'd ever give a blow job to Bhadveer? Was he semi-ineptly flirting or simply sharing his sincere thoughts?

I said, "Are you already hammered?"

"Yes," he said, but it was hard to know which narrative this information supported.

We were quiet, and I began listening again to the man with the cult following, who was describing a recent dog-sled trip in Alaska he'd written about for a men's magazine.

"Wait," I murmured to Bhadveer. "Clarice Lispector."

Bhadveer looked momentarily confused then shook his head. He said, "Clarice Lispector was nothing special."

"Doug isn't coming tonight," Dorothy said. "I just heard from Harold that he's afraid you got a Peaslee, and he doesn't want you rubbing it in his face."

"Wow," I said. "How flattering and insulting."

"I was on my way to tell you it's O.K. for you to drink after all when I suddenly realized how to fix my story. I should shift it all to the omniscient point of view. Don't you think? Then I can include the innkeeper's backstory, and people won't be distracted wondering how the servants know all those details about him." Dorothy had been working on the same story since August. It was set in Virginia in 1810, it fluctuated between twenty and twenty-six pages long, and every sentence in it was exquisite. As a

whole, however, it lacked momentum. Several times, she had revised it significantly, and it always turned out equally exquisite and equally lacking in momentum.

"Sure," I said. "I don't see why not."

"I'm going to go try."

"Now?"

Dorothy nodded.

In another life—if I were still in college—I would have protested. But here it was understood that work, in whatever fashion and on whatever schedule you managed to produce it, took precedence over everything else. This is the lesson of graduate school I am most grateful for. "Want to get breakfast tomorrow?" I said. "You can tell me how it went."

"Definitely," Dorothy said. "But call me tonight when you get your mail. No matter what time it is, call me."

"Bhadveer said he thinks Aisha is too beautiful to be a good writer," I said. "He was just expounding on how great literature has never been written by a beautiful woman."

Dorothy made a face. "Aisha's not beautiful," she said.

There was a line outside the first-floor bathroom, so I went upstairs and opened the door to one of the bedrooms that I knew had a bathroom. A standing light in the bedroom was on, and atop the mattress Genevieve and Milo—the married second-year poet and the first-year who wasn't her husband—were lying with their limbs entangled, making out. If I'd been drinking, I probably would have apologized and backed away. But being sober when everyone else seemed increasingly drunk was like wearing a cape that made me invisible. Surely it didn't matter if I quickly peed adjacent to Genevieve and Milo's foreplay?

Indeed, they barely looked up, and insofar as they did I'm not sure they recognized me. Genevieve and her husband soon got divorced, and eventually she and Milo married, and later they became born-again, and now they have six—six!—children. Although I

haven't seen either of them for years, I have the sense that I was present at the big bang of their family, except for the fact that I'm guessing their family doesn't believe in the big bang.

At the bottom of the staircase, I saw Bhadveer again. "Arundhati Roy?" I said. I no longer had any idea if I was joking.

His expression was dismissive. "Don't pander."

Around midnight, the party started dwindling. Some people were dancing to "Brick House" in the living room and a participant in the group hug was crying in the kitchen, but a steady stream of guests were leaving. The knowledge that I wouldn't be hungover the next morning was so pleasing that at intervals I actively savored it, like a twenty-dollar bill I'd found in my pocket. Really, why did I ever drink?

I was talking to Cecilia, she of the space bubble, when one of the people who lived in the house, a woman named Jess, approached me and said, "Is it true you're sober?"

When I confirmed that I was, she asked if I'd drive the man with the cult following to his hotel. She said, "You can take my car, and I'll pick it up tomorrow."

In the living room, she introduced me to him. She said, "Ruthie will be your chauffeur."

He bowed clumsily.

Jess's car turned out to be a pale-blue Honda sedan with a plastic hula-girl figurine hanging from the rearview mirror. I wondered, of course, if the man would try to elicit a blow job. But from our first seconds alone together I could tell he wasn't going to, and I was both relieved and faintly, faintly insulted. Other than the fact that I was driving, the situation reminded me of when I was in high school and got rides home from dads after babysitting.

"Are you a first- or second-year?" the man asked as I turned onto the street that ran along the park.

"First," I said.

The man chuckled a little. "Dare I ask if you're a Peaslee?"

Because I didn't want to bore a successful writer with the details of my unreceived mail, I said, "I'm not. Peaslees didn't exist when you were in the program, did they?"

"No, they did," he said. "It was only fourteen years ago that I graduated from here. And I was a Peaslee. Not to boast." The man had written six books, more than one of which had been nominated for major prizes. His work had been translated into many languages, and he was a tenured professor at a prestigious school in California. As we crossed the river, he chuckled again and said, "Fourteen years probably sounds like a long time to you, doesn't it? Someday, it won't."

The car was silent—I did and didn't believe him—and he said, "Do you like the program?"

"I love it," I said. "I mean, some people are annoying. But even the annoying ones—they're usually annoying in interesting ways."

"Are you familiar with the narcissism of small differences?"

"I can probably infer what it is, but no."

"Freud stole the concept from an English anthropologist named Ernest Crawley. It explains the infighting among groups whose members have far more in common than not. I've always thought that if any two students in the program were co-workers at a big company, they'd become close friends. They'd be thrilled to find another person who cares about what they care about, who thinks about things instead of just sleepwalking. But when you're in the program there's such an abundance of kindred spirits to choose from that those same two people might be mortal enemies."

I thought of the performatively virtuous woman from the group hug and then of Bhadveer. After tonight, was Bhadveer on my shit list or were we about to start dating?

"Are you a good writer?" the man asked.

I laughed. "That's a totally subjective question."

"Do you think you're a good writer? Would you enjoy your work if someone else had written it?"

"Yes," I said. "I would."

"That's important. Hold onto it. Oh, and don't marry anyone from the program. If you do, you'll both end up cheating. Hell, if you're a writer, you'll probably cheat on whoever you marry. But you might as well decrease your odds."

Being the driver was making me feel like a kind of program ambassador, and it was in this capacity, as I stopped at the last light before the hotel, that I said, "Is there anything you need that you don't have?" I meant a toothbrush, but as soon as I said it I wondered if I'd offered him a blow job.

He seemed sad, though, and not lecherous, when he said, "Sweetheart, there aren't enough hours in the day to tell you all the things I need and don't have."

Since I didn't own a car, it felt strange to park in front of my own apartment; it was distracting enough that there were maybe three seconds when I wasn't thinking about my funding letter. But by the time I unlocked my mailbox, which hung on an exterior wall of the house, my hands were shaking.

The envelope was by itself, the only mail I'd received. It was white, with the address of the program embossed in black in the upper left corner. "Dear Ruth_,"_ the letter started. "For the 1998-99 academic year, we are pleased to offer you a Ryland W. Peaslee Fellowship in the amount of $8,800."

I screamed, and then I realized what I'd done, which was to scream at one in the morning. Also—really—I thought that now I'd probably never give Bhadveer a blow job. Giving a blow job to a Peaslee, it turned out, wasn't the best I could do, the closest I could get.

In the almost twenty years that have passed since that night, I have written—have had published—seven novels; all except the first two were best-sellers. As it happens, my novels are considered "women's fiction." This is an actual term used by both publishers and bookstores, and means something only slightly different from "gives off the vibe of ten-year-old girls at a slumber party." Several times a year, I travel to speak to auditoriums of five hundred people, no more than a handful of whom are men. On occasion, none are men.

While I'm sure I've sold more books, it's Bhadveer who has attained the status we all believed ourselves to be aspiring to back then—his novels are prominently reviewed, he wins prizes (not yet the Pulitzer, though no doubt it's only a matter of time), he's regularly interviewed on public radio about literary culture. He's the kind of writer, I trust, about whom current students in the program have heated opinions; I'm the kind of writer their mothers read while recovering from knee surgery. To be clear, I'm mocking neither my readers nor myself here—it took a long time, but eventually I stopped seeing women as inherently ridiculous.

A few years ago, by coincidence, Bhadveer and I both gave readings on the same night in Portland, Oregon. His was at an independent bookstore, and mine was at a library, and we were staying at the same hotel. We hadn't kept in touch, but I'd asked my publicist to reach out to his publicist to see if he'd like to get a drink, which we did in the hotel bar. Bhadveer had grown into a handsome man—he was no longer skinny but seemed very fit and also trendily dressed—and I found his company almost intolerable. He name-dropped the magazine editors who courted him and the famous people who were fans of his work and the festivals he'd attended in China and Australia. (I didn't say that I, too, had been invited to all the international festivals, though I hadn't gone, because my children were still young then.) He went out of his way to convey that he hadn't read my books, which is never necessary; writers can tell by a lack of specificity. I felt sad at how much I disliked him. I also felt sad that he called me not Flaherty, not even Ruthie, but just Ruth.

At the end of an hour, during which he consumed three Old-Fashioneds and I had one glass of red wine, he said, "It's funny that no one other than us is at all successful, isn't it? Besides Grant, obviously."

Both Bhadveer's career and mine are overshadowed by that of someone who was a virtual nonentity in graduate school, a very quiet guy who went on to write screenplays for which he's twice won an Oscar. He then started directing movies as well, movies that are violent, stylized, and enormously popular; if there are any women in them, they're usually raped and often decapitated. This is all bewildering to me, because in graduate school I was under the impression that Grant admired my writing, my slumber-party fiction, more than any of my other male classmates did. Though we almost never spoke, his typed critiques were unequivocally complimentary and

encouraging. It's for this reason that, despite his misogyny-flavored mega-success, I wish him well.

In the hotel bar, I said to Bhadveer, "Well, Harold has that collection, right? And Marcy has two novels."

"That have sold, what, twelve copies combined? I gave Harold a blurb out of pity, but I couldn't get through the first story."

I tried to decide whether to be nice or honest, then said, "Yeah, neither could I."

"Think about it," Bhadveer said. "Jeff's not a writer. Dorothy's not a writer. Your boy Doug's not a writer. Aisha's not a writer."

"You know the experiment in the seventies with the blue-eyed and brown-eyed students?" I said. "I sometimes wonder if we're like that."

"But Jonah and Larry were Peaslees with us, and neither of them is a writer."

As I said, this was a while back. It took months to determine how I wished I'd replied, which is: Yes, you can say whether people have published books. But you don't get to say whether they're writers. Some of them are probably working on books now that they'll eventually finish and sell; some of them probably haven't written fiction for years and might never again. But the way they inhabit the world, the way they observe it—of course they're writers.

On that long-ago night when I opened the letter at one in the morning, perhaps thirty seconds passed between my scream and Lorraine's door opening. She hurried out in a white silk slip and matching bathrobe and said with alarm, "Ruthie, are you O.K.?"

I extended the letter toward her. "I got a Peaslee! I'm a Peaslee!"

Lorraine hesitated, and I was startled. Was it possible that even inside our university, across the small divide of two similar programs, the significance of the Peaslee didn't translate?

"The fellowship!" I added. "I got the best kind of fellowship for next year!"

"Oh, Ruthie, how wonderful," she said, and she stepped forward and hugged me tightly. ♦

Curtis Sittenfeld is the author of six books, including the new story collection "You Think It, I'll Say It." *Read more »*