

Matt & Matild

By Alexander Golin
Freshman Fall

Matthew, as he preferred to be called after abandoning his college nickname in favor of a more “professional” alternative, lethargically pressed his slender index finger to the silvery power key. The boot up tone of the computer echoed in the cavernous Tribeca apartment, reverberating on the expensive items within. Matthew slowly straightened his back, winced his eyes at the bright loading screen, and let his hand come to rest on the steely mouse. It was time to begin work for the night. He opened Facebook and hoped to see some notification or message that would demand his attention, but had no such luck and reluctantly opened his design software. He toyed with the Apple mouse, aimlessly scrolling through old blueprints for any shred of example of advice. After a few moments of everything but inspiration, he put his hands back in his dark-washed jeans and slid down in his chair, letting his shaggy yet styled hair flow down its leather back. Tea would help him think.

As he placed the kettle on the flame, the familiar sound of the industrial water pipes heating up filled the air and the shower sputtered to a start. Music began to flow out of the bathroom, accompanied by a woman’s voice, amplified by the tiled walls and high ceilings. Matthew was glad that he decided to make tea at the exact moment Matilda had begun singing, since he wouldn’t be able to focus on work anyway. He retrieved the stained mesh tea ball from the frosted glass cupboard and carefully packed it with his favorite herbal blend. Just as he removed the top of the stone kettle and turned on the stainless steel faucet, he heard the shower stop. Matthew returned to his desk and resumed scrolling through his most recent project. His father had demanded that he make the engine design more powerful, but Matthew couldn’t convince himself that he could solve the problem, no

matter how much his father pressed him. The peeling wooden door let out a gentle and calming squeak as a young, lithe silhouette stepped out in a luxurious towel.

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Matt's youthful eyes lit up as he caught the glint of the tuning pegs peering out from behind the patchwork stage left curtain. He had been waiting at the foot of the small, weathered stage for hours, determined to be as close to DeYarmond Edison as possible. He felt the crowd milling around him, but he remained rigid and watchful, save for one swift movement as he pulled off the hood of his brand new, purple NYU sweatshirt for a better view. The old, orange tinted lights flickered and went out and Matt broke into a wide grin. The small, underground room was silent except for the footsteps of the band members approaching their instruments; Matt hung on every creak of the stage. One rose tinted light flicked onto the center of the stage. He was so close that he could bask in the soft glowing warmth.

The anticipation in Matt's stomach grew almost unbearable until the acoustic guitar let out a lengthy yawn and Justin Vernon broke into his inspiring falsetto croon. Matt couldn't restrain himself from reaching out and pressing his hands to the worn wooden stage upon which his idols stood. He could feel the vibrations of the stage as he closed his eyes and fell into a blanket of sound, only to be jarred awake by the brutish push of another concertgoer drunkenly trying to pry his way to the front. A young woman next to him let out a small shriek, just loud enough for Matt to hear as the man shoved her into the foot of the stage.

Matt wasn't normally a man of conflict or confrontation, but his meditation had been interrupted. He turned to the tall, bulky man behind him and said, "Watch it asshole, some

of us are actually trying to appreciate the music,” as he gave the man a decisive shove back. The brute turned around and stumbled back to the bar muttering something about creative faggots and needing another beer. “You okay? I hate guys like that. I can’t stand how...”

“They don’t even care about the music! All they want is to be at the front so they can feel important,” the young woman interjected, completing Matt’s thought before he could himself. “I’m Matilda, and thanks, I’m fine. Ooh this is my favorite song!” Matilda exclaimed softly so as not to disturb the music.

“Me too,” Matt said with a smile. Matilda warmly reciprocated.

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The light padding of Matilda’s feet across the floor accompanied the music coming from the Bose speakers that she was carrying from the bathroom, each step in tempo of course. She rested the speakers on the mahogany dresser and slid open the drawers, gracefully releasing her grasp of the towel, allowing it to crumple to the floor. Matthew shifted his eyes to the right to try to catch a brief glimpse, his stomach still fluttering while he did so, even after nine years of being with her.

Matilda pulled out the memory laden, worn out NYU sweatshirt from Matthew’s drawer and strode over to the tea. She knew that Matthew liked his tea slightly under brewed and was able to effortlessly predict its completion without the assistance of the shrill teapot squeal. She retrieved two porcelain cups from the cabinet and poured the tea into each, taking caution to prevent any of the loose leaves from falling in. Matilda carried the tray over to Matthew’s desk and handed him his cup. “How’s the work coming Matt?” she whispered in his ear.

“You know the answer to that Matilda, and please, it’s Matthew now.”

“Sorry, sometimes I forget...”

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Matilda lay across Matt’s twin XL bed propped up on her elbows, playfully kicking her feet to the beat of the Volcano Choir song emanating from Matt’s record player. Matt sat at his desk, thoughtfully fingering the strings of his guitar. It was already three in the morning and the entire upperclassman dorm seemed dark and quiet, except for the few strings of lights Matt had draped across his desk and his gentle fingerpicking. “I like your decorations,” she said, her focus darting between the miscellaneous records and concert tees hung along the walls. She spun a paintbrush in her fingers and continued, “especially the hubcap you found and the guitar neck you hung up.”

“Yeah, too bad I couldn’t figure out how to fix Amanda after she snapped in half,” he said with a smile. Matilda chuckled and the song ended. There was an open physics textbook and miscellaneous problem sets strewn across an open calculus textbook on his desk, all marked with scribbled staff lines and clefs.

“So when are you gonna play that song you wrote for me?” Matilda asked. Matt stopped playing and thought for a moment. Her big green eyes stared back at his, her soft lips gracefully curling up as he playfully furrowed his brow.

“Okay,” he said, “but you have to show me that painting you’ve been working so hard on.”

“Deal!”

He cleared his throat and stretched his veteran fingers, which were shaking, a phenomenon completely foreign to him. He fumbled with his all too familiar capo before

finally placing it just close enough to the fret to satisfy the momentous situation. Matilda's eyes never strayed from Matt and Matt's eyes never strayed from his frets.

"Sometimes I can't figure out why you're an engineer."

"I told you Matild, my dad's not giving me a choice." Matt stopped his post-song improvisation.

"I wish you could hear what you just played through my ears. You'd realize that you should be a musician," she said, sitting up on his bed, her paintbrush no longer spinning in her fingers.

"Matild, I've told you how my dad is. If he saw the way I decorate my room, he'd call it trash. The music I listen to? He'd be ashamed. He's paying for my education; I don't have a choice! And besides, he's right when he says I'm going to need money... we're going to need money." Matt quickly removed the record from its player and pushed it into its sleeve, forgoing his routine meticulous inspection of its quality.

"What about what makes you happy, Matt?"

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"Can you please get out of that sweatshirt? And while you're over there, can you turn the music off so I can focus?"

"But you know how comfortable this one is Matthew... and this used to be our favorite song. Remember?"

"Why don't you wear something from your own drawer, that I bought for you? You look like the bums in Washington Square Park. We're better than that," Matthew turned back to his computer screen.

"You used to play guitar with those *bums* after classes... I used to paint them."

Matilda turned her back to Matthew and returned to the dresser, pulling the purple sweatshirt over her head, not bothering to fold it before returning it to Matthew's drawer. She slammed the drawer shut, causing Matthew to whip his head around. Matilda stood ten feet away from his computer, her hands on her hips, facing the dresser. He ran his eyes up and down the peaks and valleys of her pale back, which began heaving up and down as she audibly sobbed.

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Matt shuffled down the cobbled Tribeca street and entered his new apartment building, his father's stern voice still ringing in his ears. He climbed up the three flights of concrete stairs to the loft, each step feeling more difficult to conquer than the last. After flipping through every single key on his ring, Matt finally managed to push open the heavy metal door and enter the cavernous, box-filled apartment. "Matilda, I'm home." Matt said, expecting his voice to sound louder than it did. Music was playing in the living room, and Matilda was painting in the corner where the only unpacked box served as an end table for her paints and brushes, its contents carefully arranged beside the easel: a hubcap, guitar neck, and stack of hand-worn vinyl.

Matilda didn't hear the meek announcement of his arrival, and continued dragging and dotting her brush to the beat of the all too familiar song. "Matilda, I'm home," Matt whispered in her ear, finally alerting her of his presence. She swung around and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Matilda, the suit! You're covered in paint!"

"Look Matt, your song inspired me!" she said showing off her canvas.

"You've been listening to that for years," he said with a little smile.

"It still inspires me like it did the first time you played it for me in college."

Matt stopped inspecting his jacket for paint marks and stared at Matilda's constructed shrine. "I like your latest piece," he said, gesturing slightly towards the keepsakes.

"Thanks," she said, her soft lips turning up at the corners. "How was your first day?"

"Bearable. Dad decided to give me the company tour himself. That was fun," he said sarcastically. He moved his eyes around the bare walls of the loft.

"I'm sorry Matt. Want to play a bit while I paint to relax?"

"I'm sorry, I can't, I already have work to do." Matilda looked at him and wanted to plead, but kept herself silent for his sake. "Oh and would you mind putting on headphones or something? I can't let myself get distracted."

"Okay Matt..."

"I forgot to mention, Dad said Matthew sounds more professional. Would you mind helping me get used to it?"

Matilda took her iPod out of its dock and plugged in her headphones, never turning her eyes away from Matthew's, which had already become distracted by the light of his iPhone. "Sure," was all she could manage to say.

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Matilda opened her drawer and put on her jeans and low cut t-shirt and slipped on her favorite worn out clogs. "Matilda what are you doing? It's two in the morning."

"I need to go clear my head. I'm gonna stay with a friend tonight," she said, tears running down her face.

"Matilda come on, you're being irrational, please don't do this."

“No Matthew, you are! You’re not you anymore. Your name doesn’t fool anyone and I know it doesn’t fool you. Matt is still in there, so stop trying to drown out his music! I can’t sit here and watch you aimlessly scroll through your blueprints anymore. When was the last time you even opened your guitar case?” Matthew turned his head down, his hand still on the mouse, compulsively scrolling. “I just... need some time to think,” Matilda said. She turned back to the dresser, picked up her purse and iPod, and pulled her headphones over her ears. “Now you can work in peace and quiet and hopefully make some progress,” she said, turning off the expensive stereo and walking to the front door. She paused while opening the door and said, “I really hope you’re happy Matthew.”

“You know I’m not happy Matilda, that’s why I sit here and scroll. But look at the life I’ve made for us, the things we have,” Matthew said, gesturing around the loft.

She stepped through the threshold and lingered, staring back at Matthew, who could only stare back. She released the door and let its weight slam it shut. The loft became completely silent and for the first time in years, Matt couldn’t stand it.