

## absolute recoil

Dark eyes – sharp, private. I saw them clearly, up-front – moments after I had looked at him for the first time he had looked right back, and I immediately peer at the wall behind him and pretend to wonder why it was painted in such a ghastly metallic industrial shade what a ghastly palette how bizarre that is. After a few seconds, I tentatively look at him again. He is already looking at me. I look back at the drab wall, then back at him again. He is still looking; eyes glinting in the pale moonlight. *Are you?* I ask. *Yes*, he responds. *Yes, I am*. I smile, even though I know he won't see it, and even though I didn't ask anything, and even though he said absolutely nothing at all the entire time.

Reading every word, scanning the answers for errors. Pencil gripped tightly in well-worn fingers. Clearly a bright mind. Sure, he says, I can do it. The instructor nods, appreciative. He walks to the front of the classroom, picks up the chalk. Fills in the expectant blank spaces on the blackboard with expressions in propositional logic. His carefully combed brown hair shakes imperceptibly as he writes out his seven-step proof in stubborn chalk. The answers are all correct, even though the instructor is pointing at the third step with furrowed eyebrows and he is slowly erasing his answer.

The cold eternity of the photograph. I pretend I have loose wrists like one of those *педикс* and hold my phone at outlandish angles: a forty-five degree rotation left, then one hundred seventy two upwards, then a three hundred nine swivel about the perpendicular radial axis. After class I scan through the camera roll and find the best images. I'll practice looking into his eyes, and they'll practice looking into mine. How deep they go, deeper than the dark blue depths of the churning ocean, even though the surface of the Earth is as flat as paper.

No, Marx was most certainly an idealist, a utopian. Fiery eloquence drenches dense passion. Really, I say. I look over at his paper and scribble down his solution to problem seven. Even with the materialist analytical method and all. Yes, he insists. The dialectic of history will never end, never resolve, it keeps on churning, always, forever. He looks directly at me, into me. His concerned eyebrows are raised,

bent, wrinkled; a shaded overtone in blur; unbent, bent again, animated. He was right, of course.

Utopia is a tautological falsehood. Marx was an idealist.

Legs crossed, looking blankly forward. Many empty seats. I walked to the seat one space away from him. Not too close – to start with, anyway. Can I sit here, I said. No. A pause, maybe too long, too long to have any claim at social innocence. What to do now. No, you can sit here, he says. I sit down. A funny joke, although I am not sure if he is one for comedy. Maybe that is the most divine comedy of all. I try to smile, but he's not looking.

Scrolling through lines of well-spaced black-and-white serif text. Right leg crossed over the left, erudite pupils tracing left to right, down, left to right, down, pause, left to right, down. I ask him if it is The Wall Street Journal. He scoffs, maybe as a joke. No, I don't want to read about stocks and bourgeois financial scandals. I look closer. It is The Washington Post. I ask him if it is The Washington Post. Yes, he says. He begins reading a new article about international rhetorical backlash against the treatment of Uyghurs by the Chinese government and shakes his head the entire time. His carefully combed brown hair shivers, shakes.

The instructor calls on students down the row in an effort to compensate for sparse participation in a poorly attended lecture hall. We think we are next to be put on the spot but he begins with the student in the next row. Yes, he whispers, drawing out the s, and pumps his fist. We smile.

His eyes trace the path of the arcing shuttlecock at the momentary pinnacle of its parabolic path. He raises the racket and swings; the radiance of a beautiful athlete. It hits the side of the wiry metal frame and falls dismally to the ground. He hangs his neck in faux shame, flashes me a nervous smile, then bends down to pick up the fallen shuttlecock. I see the sweat drawing dark lines between his ass. He wears tight pants, almost always. They look good, always. He returns every serve for the next two hours, even though he misses some. He tells me when we're returning the rackets that he's never played badminton before. Impressive.

The blistering mental calculations of an erudite academic. The pride flows out of his eyes in great bursts of thought. He says he could win the Jeopardy College Championship but since participants can only participate in Jeopardy once their entire life he is waiting until he can go on and win Jeopardy for real. The thirty sixth president, I ask. No one memorizes presidents. He begins counting backwards. Reagan is fortieth, then Carter thirty ninth, Ford thirty eighth, Nixon thirty seventh, Kennedy thirty sixth. Kennedy, he says. What is Kennedy, I correct him. He smiles. What is Kennedy, he repeats.

Dostoyevsky is an incredible writer, he says. Crime and Punishment is my favorite book. The well-read eyes of a worldly reader, a worldly mind. I like Crime and Punishment, I say. In particular, I appreciate Dostoyevsky's deeply felt psychological portrait of troubled guilt. A pause. Too long. Too long to have any claim at social innocence. Well, that's really all there is to it, he replies. Of course. That was a stupid thing to say. I ask him later what he thinks of The Brothers Karamazov. It is definitely not as good as Crime and Punishment, he says. Yes, you are right, I agree, even though I have not read either.

He asks me for the answers to problem seven on the homework. It has twenty seven banal sub-questions, all are non-trivial permutations of each other. I send them to him. Thanks, he says. Did you actually work them all out. I confess that I held the instructor at gunpoint until they provided me with the answers. He tells me he knows what he is doing on the midterm now. I might have to tell the police and then the instructor will fail him on the exam, I say. He responds with a logical proof. Proof: He has a gun (premise I). He shoots the instructor (premise II). By premises I and II, the instructor is dead and cannot fail him on the exam. Done. I smile for a long time. I have trouble thinking of a wittier reply.

Eyes beaming, an accomplished student. A one followed by two zeros in the blood of a pen. He looks at the midterm exam cover to cover, then places it on his desk. He looks over at mine. It has the same marking. He smiles at me, and our hands touch in the air, just for a little bit.

Kerosene burns slowly, at low temperature. Simmers in serrated edges, along shivering razors. I hate self-deprecation, he says. You try to neutralize your insecurity by proclaiming it out in the open in fear that someone else will do so before you. I'm so stupid, the student five sets next to him exclaims, a little too loudly, I'm bad at prepositional logic. He shakes his head. Once, twice. Shivers, shaking.

Eyes uneasy. We talk about the general epistemic inadequacy of computer science students in reasoning seriously about the ethical and sociopolitical involvement of their work over pizza. We agree, mostly. He thinks that the ethical relationship is at the core of a philosophical system. I disagree. Ethics is downstream of epistemology and metaphysics. He disagrees. The trolley problem is a caricature of ethics. We both agree on that. I ask him if he has read any Ayn Rand or structuralist theory. He doesn't like Rand and doesn't know what structuralism is. The sky darkens. We agree to stop for now. I walk with him to his dorm because I feel awkward leaving him until I have to. I ask him why he jaywalks, why he flaunts the law, such flatulence. It is a joke, maybe. He tells me in exasperation, possibly faux, that firstly he's pretty sure that's not how you're supposed to use the word flatulence and secondly that I clearly have never been around here and that everyone does it, that is jaywalk, and that this is again principally an ethical question. I disagree. Jaywalking is an ontological determination of bodies and places. He says that moral principle, even if unconscious, prefigures any metaphysical dimension of jaywalking. I disagree. We are silent for many seconds.

Alright, my dorm is around here. Tense eyes strung taut over subtle agitation. I am curious, even though it is probably not the time to be curious. Which building it I ask. He answers by nodding his head vaguely in all directions – a forty-five degree rotation left, then one hundred seventy two upwards, then a three hundred nine swivel. I learn nothing, besides that he clearly does not want to be there. He stands there, waiting. I stand still for a few more seconds. He's looking at me, but not at me. Maybe at the wall. I say alright see you in a bit and he nods again, in some direction. When I walk to the end of the street I turn around and he happens to look back at the same time, and we look through each other at walls far and distant before the sky collapses upon us.

How did the final exam go. He responds good how about yours. I say good too but that seems a bit dry so I add that I wish the proof problems were more difficult so the exam would have been more interesting to take. He doesn't respond for weeks, months. I don't push him. I think of his agitated eyes, the serrated edge.

When I get my final exam back with one followed by two zeros in the blood of a pen scrawled across the front cover, he is not there. His face blurs in and out of the ink. Lost potential seeps from ambitious red. But it is gone now, blank, no response, time quivers.

He runs excitedly to me through the golden fields of the midlands, a golden boy in a golden world: his grandmother passed and that much has been on his mind, he has been grieving, he tells me. I am happy it was his grandmother and not me. But I don't tell him that. He invites me to his castle, a beautiful antique of kings who never knew time would outrun them. We talk all night about the metaphysics of death. The moon kisses the swaying swathes of idyllic grass. He cries. His grandmother was close to him. I hug him. He laughs, lies his head on my shoulder, falls asleep. We wake up in the morning in the dungeon and make love, then visit the grave together afterwards.

His phone broke down, he says. Dropped in the ocean, sunk into the dark blue depths. He wasn't able to talk to me for all these months. I understand. We walk down the stairs, away from the fire, into the flooded basement. Hand on his shoulder, we wade into the depths of the ocean, and we burn forever before we drown.

I finally confess to him that after all these months I had never read Crime and Punishment, or The Brothers Karamazov. He says that he hasn't read them either, that he just wanted to talk with me this whole time, and I say what do you know that was what I was doing too. I sympathize with Raskolnikov though, I tell him. He agrees. He says Raskonikov broods like I do. I tell him no, it's the other way around. We read The Idiot together under the crickets while the stars chirp until the sun goes down at the beginning of July during an extremely hot spell towards evening a young man left the closet...

He tells me he had an emergency operation after tragically slipping on the waterlogged stairs outside of the chemistry building and crashing into a needle disposal bin. The syringes mutilated his leg, he says. The doctors tell me there will be permanent scarring, and that the synthesized compounds smeared across the sharp tips are known to react cancerously to organic material so they will need to keep him heavily medicated and monitored for a while. I visit him in the hospital. I hear from his family that he gets much better after my visit. When he comes back after four days, his leg is beautiful, healthy, fresh; fits well into his tight pants, like I remember. We marry under the three moons of the celestial spring, under a softly pink orchard.

He tells me he was robbed by a masked thief who took not only his phone and his wallet but also his shirt, pants, and shoes at gunpoint, and that this happened five more times throughout the week, at the same spot too, and that he had to keep on buying new clothing because it kept on getting stolen. I should rob you too, I say, just to see what is under there. I squeeze his leg. He laughs. We drive to the park to pick him up from the retirement home, even though he's fairly young. I don't tell him that I have an accumulating pile of tight-fitting sweat-stained pants and badminton rackets in my closet.

He tells me that he jumped off of the roof of the chemistry building. That must have been hard, I say. Why did you do it. He says he couldn't deal with being a schwuchtel, a dirty schwuchtel. Педик, 同性恋. I said ich bin auch ein Schwuchtel, я тоже пежик, and we jumped off together and fell through the flooded flattened earth until we hit the flames. Педик, педик, педик, педик, педик, педик, педик – мы педики.

He tells me that he was walking home from the exam when he was suddenly attacked by a large mob of geese. They surround him and viciously eat away at his beautiful face, his beautiful body. The grass stains red; flesh and organs strewn across the bloodied ground. Their bills, hard as bone, painted burgundy, dig deep into his eye socket; decapitate both eyes. Animal saliva coalesces and foams in place of eyes. He was blind for a long time, he says, until they were retrieved at the bottom of the lake and put back by the judge. An unfortunate encounter, I note. But he is still as beautiful as when I last saw him, even though I know he can't see me clearly anymore.

He tells me in an email from his family that he was killed in a car crash after driving home from the exam. I am devastated. I keel over in the middle of the lecture hall. My students are concerned. I tell them that my husband has just told me that he has died in a car crash. Gasps, hands covering mouths. One of the students, an excellent one who always sits in the middle of the second row, rises and comforts me. I embrace him back. His brown hair smells like aerosol. His hands leave chalk marks on the back of my dinner jacket. When I finally look at his eyes, they gleam with a familiar erudite sheen.

He tells me he is with another man. He is tall, handsome, athletic. I walk to the restrooms and look at the ghastly metallic industrial shade on the walls of the stalls for hours.

He tells me he is with another woman. She is tall, handsome, athletic. I smile. I am happy for him. He is already looking at me again, but I walk away before she also sees me.

He tells me he had been imprisoned for holding his chemistry professor at gunpoint for the solutions to the final. I laugh. We break into the professor's office at three in the morning and make love all over their books and papers. In the morning we hold an anthropology professor at gunpoint for solutions to the final, even though we aren't in their class and there's no exam and we aren't even in college yet.

He tells me he is going to order a small black coffee. I grimace. But this is a joke. He gets it, he laughs, pokes me. He uses half a packet of sugar. I ask for coffee without milk. The barista says they do not have any milk left, it will have to be coffee without sugar. I say that is fine too. We find a small table by the window. I thought we got really close a while ago, I finally say. He nods. The rain falls damply against the concrete outside. A houseless man slowly readjusts the thin cover over his head, his bundled body packed into a small covered rectangle along the sidewalk. Two one-dollar bills flutter off his cold body. Cold eyes trace the parabolic trajectory, the dance of the wind. I look back at his black coffee, then back at those familiar eyes. I liked you a lot, I finally say. He does not say anything. His eyes look down into the dark mirror. The surface shakes imperceptibly, slanting. Did you, I ask. Yes, he replies. I smile. Yes, he repeats. I smile, yes, yes. *Yes*. Yes, he says. *Yes*, I whisper, yes. Yes, he says, I can do it. He

walks to the front of the classroom, picks up the chalk. The instructor nods. All of his answers are wrong, even though he doesn't admit it. I fall through the dark mirror, into the cold flames. *No*.

He tells me he loves Crime and Punishment but this is his first time reading The Brothers Karamazov. It was in the laundry room. I saw a boy with his ass perched on the washers reading The Brothers Karamazov; eyes – intent, careful, intelligent. Reading every word, scanning the answers for errors. I told him I think Dostoyevsky is a brilliant writer, that my wife's father has some sort of distant familial relationship with him, that I once loved someone who loved Dostoyevsky, that I suppose Dostoyevsky is my grand-lover. He beams, gives me a copy of The Idiot to read. I tell him that he may just like Alyosha's genuine kindness more than Rodion's murderous generosity. He tells me that to be honest he finds Rand dirty but appealing, that she offers a strong materialist deconstruction of structuralist ethics. I disagree, but his load finishes before we can talk more. When he is leaving, I see residual washer fluid drawing dark lines between his ass, I do not have time to tell him that he left a pair of pants in the dryer. I take them and store them in my closet, for safekeeping. I will give them back when I see him again, even though I know I will never see him again.

He tells me, write about me on your Russian midterm. I beam. Of course, *милая*. Конечно, конечно, сейчас. We are asked to free-write about our family. I write about him, because he is my family, он мой парень, но, мой муж, я женат; нет, я замужем; я замужем и я тоже мужчина; ах, ах; он красивый, handsome, симпатичный; мой лучший друг в жизни, all of it; очень умный, brilliant, intelligent; мой возлюбленный; я гомосексуал, я педик, педик, педик, педик, педик, педик, я замужем и я тоже мужчина я не знаю, является ли он тоже педиком - нет, нет, он тоже педик педик педик, мой педик, мой любимый педик; только на русском языке, only in Russian, только на русском языке. When I get the exam back, I see a one followed by two zeros scrawled in the blood of a pen. He smiles at me, and our hands touch in the air, just for a long time.

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The wintry wind whistles past the window; the sleet rains hard onto the slick street outside. An unread translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* lies on the shelf, underneath *Das Kapital* and a fresh print of *The Idiot*. The closet is bare; sparsely populated with old shirts, rusted wire hangers. It's not used much anymore. A dusty copy of *The Washington Post* from several months ago occupies a lonely place on the desk, next to a broken shuttlecock and aerosol hairspray. Neither has been used for a long time. Red-inked paper lies crumpled in the wastepin.

He's holding an unreturned copy of *Crime and Punishment*. He flips through the pages; through the murder and the tense pursuit; the illness, the delirium; the brooding, the quiet hostility. Through the dark charity, the jaded generosity; love, faith, the confession; the beginning of a redemption cut short. He reads the final words several times: "He did not even know that a new life would not be given him for nothing, that it still had to be dearly bought, to be paid for with a great future deed..."

He places the broken book in the corner of the closet, then walks out.

How often the imagination wanders where the ghosts of dreams dance, in the blank spaces of broken books' last pages.