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Thoughts About It

“I don’t want him to be overborne,” his mother kept begging her phone, I mean, begging me. He went to school to wrestle and meanwhile she, Annette, leaned on his friends. I could picture her shifting her parlor doilies, fidgeting with a teabag and whispering a request to some tanned service man. My mind got me to see something small and sweet arriving for her, a nice snack to quell her fear. She brought me to lunch once and that’s what she got—a nice snack.

She said, “The school asks for exams and Ash’s span is so lean. Do you know all he’s asked to do?” She meant size, not subject, and I nodded without answering. In the old school I knew how Ash was going to make out. He was a trophy man, rewarded anywhere. As for myself, I can be brought to life but only through persuasion or some sly beguiling. We’re a good pair that way, he the opportunist and myself the opportunity. We had less than a friendship here, but I once did know him.

“The team gets no grief,” Annette said. She said, “Duane, it’s all Ash. They’re trying to take him down.”

I said, “He was always butting up.”

She said, “They want to see how far he’ll bend. They want to prove his bad raising. He’ll push too hard and I’ll have to fix it. You see why I can’t come myself?”

“You’ll prove it right.”

She was talking about a new school code and I thought about rules in my own home, at home. No new ones for two years, now, since the end of my school when Ash left with some others. Here I was peeling fruit in a bowl and sharing with my young brothers, doling out as I was asked.

With this transitional space I have room for dissection, role-play, hiatus, and temporary commitment, and I try to make the most of what’s left.

In view of this, my potential outweighs my motivation. Swept streets in fall bring me a familiar fear, like when something new starts. I’m always on a cusp.

“Won’t you come over? He sent his work.”

I acquiesced.

The next day, at the CVS, I was putting through photos at the photo machine. The man who waited was a large man with his long hands curled from work. This light was so bright it must have come from an internal source I couldn’t place. In it I couldn’t tell what kind of man he was.

Behind the counter another worker pointed out a print.

“Are these yours, sir? Is this pic what you want?”

A grim picnic, meat on sticks. People toasting some departure.

Much like Ash’s, the farewell was louder than the well-wishing.

At that party I had really come to, two worlds coalesced in a new way.

The long-handed man said, “Do you have the rest, man?”

Ash had done well that day, speaking about what’s-it-called when after a straight, far trek a path splits in two or even more, and the traveler has to pick the fitting road. Divergence. He was using language to cull again, the brave one. His rhetoric was mine and he wanted to test it, and he did—he called to me! Though, in public. “I’m so glad,” he said. “you’re a reason I got through it. Duane, bud, you belong to the future like any of us. Where you go you’ll bring something new and necessary.”

He was nice enough to ignore my effete gestures, using that silence to show off. I could be grateful if pushed, but I let myself feel frustrated. He should be silent more often.

The man cleared his throat and pulled at his neck. I had the photos, clearly, and my glazed eyes matted back to the present. I gave him the photos and was working again. The feeling was of relief, but not what I longed for. A cool drink, I wanted, and to be out of these red clothes and happily engaged in the getting of some new collection. Combs, shells, buttons, anything small and valueless enough to be tossed without huge tragedy. But instead I hauled tan boxes from the truck, scrubbed tile floors in back, priced underwhelming salves.

How was the work? I’ll say it as I would about anything at home. “Used but not loved,” I would say, or, “Loved but not seen,” and give a look.

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Visiting Annette's for breakfast brought other chores to the forefront. Sometimes I lived seeing parts of life with no reference: a key, a glove, a square of cheesecloth. A list of things to fetch or serve, all at once but without narrative. Annette said, "I prefer this table to that on the porch."

"I mean, the sun does have its perks."

"You forget we're here to mangia, my dear." She made it clear, she wouldn't roast while dining. She said, "Don't you need a second fork?" and she pet my hand with a circling motion. "You'll want to fill up so you stay sharp." Young man.

Ash's load doubled this week and she was pressing the issue. The indoor setting gave her some privacy. So, she was pressing a small envelope into my thigh. I had to look down at it and I could feel the cash.

Didn't I used to avoid these close moments with Mrs. Ash? She reached low, sometimes, and made clear her real intentions. It complicated my Ash arrangement, is what's for sure.

In school the codes kept things neatly compartmentalized. I knew Ash, an honor, but only because he sought after me craftily. In flashes of motion he'd raise a good hand or nod up-to-down, and I'd know.

It was an under bleacher thing. It was a furtive ardor thing. There was the brief reconciliation before an abuse, and he expected me to manage it. I did.

When it came home we called it tutoring. I could bring work to do while Annette was watching fondly.

Then, she leaving us for her night class, we would trail off and sense a stealthy tension. The speech was in code—this was essential, that it remain unnamed—but his laying me down and slinking into me, his curl-curl-curl until sudden exhaustion... I suppose it was wordless, too.

Now I was demanded again in that off-focus way! The arrangement had ended with the new school yet here Annette was, asking me to meet Ash for once.

In proper terms, she was a liaison for thwarted ambition. Or, maybe she was just dim.

She offered the cash for a room or to fill my tank, but I planned on that shack-up with Ash. For closure, I accepted it right away. That told her I'd go.

At Bloomsburg Ash aired himself out pleasantly. Without flourish, he gained footing right after arrival. He had swollen to take up more space. Every movement, every limb a stage direction to reiterate some man narrative. It made him cocky and strangely demonstrative. What I remembered was a sleek self but when we met his big body reeked of success. The reunion was without fanfare or even acknowledgment.

Ash said, "You know what it's on?"

I said, "It's the math thing, with scaling."

I can be crafty and analytical when the situation calls for it.

But is this all? Did he settle with a neat girl and push aside old boring routine? Or is the shape of his motivation still similar?

When he asked for it, I bore it.

(Repeat after me: I gave him the work and I bore it.)

On campus, the sky was a cloud threaded like a prim pants pocket button. In between class hours, when traffic died down and the ring of the hills echoed loud, I longed for a life like this—all kinetic. My motion still came from others' starts.

After the meeting, the wind leveled out and cleared the new leaves off the path. Clean.

The thing about these days is... It's like some stupid renaissance and usually it comes down to my having second thoughts about it.