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Bibelot

Your parents so rarely let you spend the night with me, so I want to make the time we get to spend together special. You haven't stayed over since the last time your big sister had to go to the hospital, isn't that right? Time is so long but it moves so quickly. Well, you've had your dinner by now and we've watched a movie. We got out the old cards and played Skip-Bo to exhaustion. We even made a little hot milk to have before bed, but now you're too awake to even get into your pajamas. I suppose you'll benefit from a story.

I have something good. I can tell you a story your mother doesn't know. How would you like that? To have this all to yourself, just between us? If you promise to keep it that way I will share it with you.

Okay!

Let me think. It was when Charlotte went to get dinner from—no, no. This story happens in Richmond, down south in Virginia, and there was no decent Burmese food to be found in the whole city. So maybe it was the Indian kitchen on East Marshall. I am always mixing up the names of the places in all the cities we stayed in when we were young.

This was our traveling year, the same year when earlier I broke my arm and quit my typist's position, when your grammy and I were yet a couple but before we married, living along the Atlantic close to where I was born. And this was... in Richmond, and maybe it was Mike's on Clay, or the halal truck further downtown.

Regardless.

We were in our thirties.

We were going to stay with Barry, a friend I met when I was a graduate student at Rutgers.

Hm? That's what comes after college. You go when you want to start becoming the best at something you love.

Now about Barry: Barry was a short man with a ruddy, disconsolate personality, and for as long as I had known him he had been hefty, quiet, and very nervous, as if he was waiting for the moment when he would be struck by something celestial and obscene. He was a few years younger than me, blonde, educated (but not very cultured), and remarkably thin. He had always demanded too much of his friends and, though he was kind, would time and time again drive his relationships to ruin. Yet, he was friendly. I liked him. I had contacted him hesitantly on the road the day before we got to Richmond, unsure of how I'd be received. I texted him a simple message, "Hey," and judging by his quick reply he would be eager to take us in. Or, if nothing else, at least he'd be eager to see us.

"How long has it been, now?" Charlotte asked.

"Since I've seen him?" I said. "Nine years. We speak maybe twice a year but our conversations are always so short."

“It’s so kind of him to take us in,” she said, and here is the first secret you’ll learn. Your grammy knows the circumstances of my friendship with Barry—she knows how we work together in public—but I did not, I have not, mentioned to her the many experiences we have in common. You know it was always the two of us, Charlotte and me, long before we had your mother. You know about the toil your mother and I suffered caring for Charlotte during her long years of physical pain. You know how hard we worked to get Grammy through the procedures, the therapies, the bills. We work best when we know the best parts of each other. There are certain conditions to a relationship that may feel unfair and you’ll always be working hard, working so hard to come to terms with them. I can’t share everything with her. But you’re young! And that sounds sad. I’m telling you something sad now but you’ll learn it yourself when you get older.

Tuesday night around ten we finally drove into the city. Charlotte let me out at the corner house near his apartment in Jackson Ward, where Barry was waiting, and went to get food for the three of us. I remember quite clearly what he was wearing: a poncho over a college sweatshirt, wool pants, and leather moccasins. When we hugged I could smell sweat on him. He seemed the very picture of quarter-life crisis. That is, of someone who really doesn’t know what he wants and only just figured that out, the not knowing.

I was holding him at the elbows, smiling. “Barry, I really can’t believe it. You look so well.” Truly he did, aside from his clothing.

He blinked at me like a friend would and he said, "I'm feeling well, Vic. Better having seen you. To be honest it's not been a great few years, but your sudden call yesterday and the news of you coming... Maybe things are on the up. In the short-term, at least."

"Good to hear," I said.

"How long are you two planning on staying?" he asked.

"Only a few days. We're passing through, heading south."

He said, "Yes, then, in the short-term."

I was already missing Charlotte. Fortunately, the food truck was close. She had parked and was walking over to us now, carrying a duffel and a plastic bag full of takeout. I saw her in her cropped outfit and couldn't help blushing. So thoughtful. All this time and I still blush, now. I am in thrall to her, too, for my devotion to her has made me tame. And, oh, she knows! She uses me benevolently!

"Hello, Charlotte," he said loudly. No waiting for her introduction. "I'm the Barry you've no doubt heard so much about."

"Hi, Barry," he said. She extended her hand, which he gazed at solemnly. "And I've heard something of you, too, little lady. Don't think you're the only one who gets news from Victor."

"Oh," said Charlotte. She was a little taken aback.. "Well, we won't need to waste time with getting to know each other, then!"

"I'll let you in."

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The house down the street was painted a mossy green. Everything about it was green. Its walls, trimmings, balustrades—uh, the little pillars that hold up a handrail—, its shutters, and even its concrete steps were green. And so were its open hallways, which in my memory was a supremely disorienting experience. You couldn't quite make out the outside from the in. It gave you the sense of walking without making progress, or else progressing sideways, never in. Or... you were already inside but never really getting where you were going.

It didn't help that Barry brought us to the third-floor apartment, leading us up the green, uneven steps until we'd reached the top. He motioned for us to hush, saying, "My roommate is undoubtedly sleeping," and opened the green door.

Looking back, the apartment was clearly not his. This was the home of a young couple, perhaps a gay couple, decorated with exotic, exquisite furniture—Bertoia?—and photos of the same two women around Richmond: eating dinner, sitting with a family, posing in front of the James, among others. There were lesbian interest magazines on the coffee table. I don't mean to say that kind of literature self-selects its readership, but the sheer quantity of it all gives me enough confidence to assume. And I don't want to teach you any bad habits. I'm not making a problem out of a personal question; I make of a personal question an absence of a problem. Do you follow?

Okay, I will say this: politely, nothing in the apartment was green, something I'm sure my friend would never have thought to do. Part of the secret is that we spent a lot of time together when I was in grad

school. I came to know his dorm room very well by the time I dropped out. For a time I had no job, darling, and lived together in his dorm for a few months before I managed to muster enough money to move out. We were not so stable in the past, Charlotte and I, as we are now. I owe so much of my survival to him.

Barry said, "Leave your shoes on if you want, Victor." He was making his way toward a tasteful love seat nestled between two ferns. He removed his poncho and set it carefully over the cushions, then lay supine, longwise. He turned to my wife. "Please take off your boots, Charlotte." He motioned toward the open kitchen. "Help yourself to anything you may want to eat, Barry."

Charlotte wiggled her way out of her shoes and offered, defensively, "Actually, Barry, I bought some Indian food for us to eat. I thought it might be a nice way to celebrate this reunion."

Barry scowled. The plastic bag of Styrofoam containers sat on the coffee table, warmly. It said, "Thank you, Thank you, Thank you, Thank you." It was as grateful to be here as Barry was loath to have it.

Are you keeping up? You do remember that Charlotte wasn't my wife then. I just made the mistake of calling her that. It's important you remember we weren't close enough to be married then.

Good. So. She unwrapped the containers from the bag and said, "If you have any drinks, however, I think we'd very much appreciate it."

"I don't know. If you want something you can go check," Barry said, a little curtly, I might add. Charlotte blinked shook her head in a small way

while she registered his tone, then looked to me. I shrugged, nodded, and waved for her to stay seated.

I rose and I felt him watching me intently as I opened the refrigerator and rooted around for bottles. I found some in the back, behind a tub of hummus.

“Pacífico! A strange choice for this time of year. Or is it just to your taste, Barry?” I laughed forcefully, placing three of them onto the counter and opening them with my keys. I was humoring him—what else was there to do? In what felt like a stranger’s house, stealing their things, dirtying their carpets.

Here I was, still wearing my trainers.

My beautiful wife, who was not gullible but could not have known any better, sat appreciating the décor. She was pointing to the various little trinkets, all the baubles and the bibelot that littered the walls, surrounding us. There were nesting dolls, ceramic steins, sterling spoons, paintings of hillsides and schnauzers and flowering dogwood, all of which, if I’m being honest, approached the threshold of bad taste but never crossed over into kitsch. It was a fine apartment.

She said, “You have such a beautiful space, Barry. Is most of what’s here yours, or did you and your roommate furnish the place together?”

“There are two of us, it looks like,” Barry said. “And what is in here belongs half to me, half to him, almost exactly. Though, and I don’t want to brag, but most of the nicer things in here do belong to me. Like. Like these.” He pointed to the commemorative spoons. “Most of these little spoons are from my aunt, who collected them herself and was always

showing them off. But she died, she, uh, she jumped from a height, and when it came down to it I was the only one in the family who wanted the things. Think of that! They meant so much to her and I'm the one who gets to have them. And they must be accumulating value as time passes. I'm sure of it. The ones she left and the ones I've bought in curio stores throughout the country. Priceless, soon, every last one of them."

"Amazing," Charlotte mumbled. "How thoughtful of you." She was defensive, unimpressed.

I sat on the couch with her, handing her a *Pacífico* and looking around as well. The spoons did look old. It was a believable story. I had not yet sorted through my feelings. These two Goliath presences in my life were at odds, getting worse. I was pulled in both directions. I had to please both of them but I also wanted to probe.

"Barry, please take your beer," I said, extending it. "Let's eat. I'm curious to hear how you've been faring. Has your startup been successful? Are you finding time to write? You were eager to do so much when I knew you, still just an undergrad. Life has brought you here, and now me to you. So, what's up?"

Barry rose from his back to a seated position and wrapped the poncho over his lap. He picked up a photo of the lesbian couple from the coffee table and contemplated it. "I told you outside," he said, looking up. "Victor, these past years have been unkind to me. I am a flexible man, an... innovator... frequently taken by strange and sibylline passions, but even I can find neither grace or morbid pleasure in the trials I have endured. I am brave and I am faithful, but I have never condoned self-

sacrifice.” His voice had changed in pitch, was at a half-tone, somehow dissonant with itself.

He continued. “There is a list of misfortunes I could read to you, financial, physical, familiar, existential. But a few key events will suffice. I want you to know—and you, too, little lady, being close to him.” He flicked a thumb at my wife and returned to the photograph, rubbing his thumb over the women’s faces.

Charlotte widened her eyes and furrowed her brows. She said, “I’m sure we’ll both love to hear it.”

I’ve got to be truthful with you. I wanted to hear it, despite my wife’s hesitance. It felt treacherous to do what I so desperately desired, immoral, against my nature. Hers is the relationship I’d committed myself to. Though, ‘what desire can be contrary to nature since it was given to man by nature itself?’ That’s a little Foucault for you, darling. He was a man who has a lot of thoughts about who can say and do what to whom. You’ll know who he is when you’re older.

Barry was prone to these moments of despair but he usually showed them only to me, in total privacy, and they were never as haughtily self-lacerating as this. The best I could think to do was shrug, nod, and grab at Charlotte’s hand. She looked at me and rolled her eyes. He had set down the photograph and was now chewing on a pad of naan, his eyes watering.

He continued. “Following your early departure from your graduate program at Rutgers, Victor, I fell into a dull stupor that hampered my

studies significantly. I was reading Foucault that semester, don't you remember?"

That's why I thought of that little quote, darling. I was channeling Barry's own words.

He was saying, "I was reading Foucault that semester and I was taking in absolutely none of it. There were some bits about monsters, some about love and madness—none of it, I tell you. I persisted via the thought of your success. And then you failed, and then you moved in. It was an unfortunate pairing. To have the man up to whom I looked as a model of success, of perfection... to have him rely on me in such an essential way was something I just couldn't understand. I stopped working. I failed classes. I appealed to the school for time off—you know when my workload lightened significantly! I would spend days wandering New Brunswick without telling you what I was doing, collecting cans and napping on benches. I was sure you'd spot me one day but even if you did you never said anything to me."

It was true, I had seen him sitting on a street corner once or twice, but for fear of his abandonment I asked him nothing.

"At the end of the semester, in May, I communicated with the school again. I was buffeted by proceedings. I received my leave. You left yourself, heading west. I returned to Pennsylvania. There I stayed for almost the entire duration of your absence, working odder and odder jobs that brought me into darker corners of my hometown, some as close to my mother as her own back yard. And, yes, some of them involved my own body."

“Barry,” I said. He had told me none of this over the phone. When we spoke in the past it had evidently been all frivolity. After I left New Jersey I lived for a time in Ohio, working manual labor and writing freelance, eventually securing a rudimentary position with a local newspaper. As for Charlotte, I met her there. We became friends and then lovers and decided to start a life and get on with the living of it.

Barry was a penitent kind of man and I had never thought him one to shy away from getting to the meat of things, but here we were, about to unwrap something sinister.

Meanwhile, Charlotte was fidgeting. She appeared—not pallid, that’s an exaggeration of my memory. But she was tense. I know she was tapping her fingers against my thigh. She said, “Barry, this is all so unfortunate. I don’t know why you’re telling us this—do you want our help?”

“No,” he said, unrelenting. “I don’t want pity. I want to be heard.”

“I understand,” I said. I could hear from the tone in his voice that he was looking for dramatics so I fished for an appropriate word. “...Let us be your salve.”

Charlotte scoffed audibly at this. It was always a flaw of hers, mocking my efforts at sincerity. She had a tendency to confuse pragmatism with plainness. My studies were in literature and she resented my literary tendencies. She did not have a working-class upbringing but she was a practicing Lutheran, after all. She liked to bring Jell-O to social hour after services.

“After moving home, I was plagued by a series of strange illnesses, each more painful and portentous than the last. I was beset by gout in both feet and for a month could scarcely walk. A rash of strep rendered me mute. A spate of shingles, blind. Migraines, deaf. I was as a martyr, suffering needlessly for the protection of an invisible following. I attempted therapies both scientific and holistic, finding nothing but coldness in the former and inanity in the latter. Needles punctured all around my body! Vacuum cups pulling great swollen wells of blood! And the essential oils... I was not sold.

“I was mugged, robbed, insulted by strangers. My bosses treated me with the utmost contempt. My bosses mugged me, robbed me, insulted me. In a fit of fever one summer I convinced myself, in a delirium, that I had contracted HIV. For a month I would not shave for fear of being my own blood. I turned ragged, desperate, wild. My family would not speak to me. Eventually they stopped speaking to me and I was forced to flee.”

He paused at last to take another bite of naan and an enormous swig of beer. He chewed wetly.

How much has your mother told you about your family? You’re young, still, but i’m sure you know what it’s like to be victimized.

What? I mean to get hurt or to get in trouble when it’s not your fault. That’s a feature of our family, you should know. We, unlike my friend Barry, are not “taken to strange and sibylline passions” nor “plagued by strange illnesses.” What strangeness occurs to us is an offshoot of others’, a curse affixed to us after unfortunate encounters. We are blessed but we are unlucky. Anyway.

By now the food was cold. I don't remember all of what Barry said but it continued for some minutes, unhindered. Charlotte was whispering to me still, begging me to leave, visibly—pallid—now.

“It was then that I arrived here in Richmond. On the word of a few childhood acquaintances, I came searching tourist tricks to turn, simple money. By their word the work was simple, plentiful, and easy on the eyes, nonetheless, both the men and the women.”

“Oh, my God,” said Charlotte. “At least you have your priorities in line.”

“I have already said I am no martyr but I had long since abandoned the sanctity of my own body.” He was getting louder, beginning to shout. “Unfortunately, though they were right, they had neglected to mention its peril, and I was soon arrested. I was promptly relieved of the remainder of my clothing, my possessions, and my money! I was released and since then I have lived on the streets, in shelters and under bridges. I have become one of the river people so often scorned by the residents of this city. I was meant to rise above the rest, to receive a transcendent mission, but I have been beaten down by a series I can gather pronounce nor conceive in full.”

The room was silent. Barry finished his beer.

My wife shook her head. I meant to stop her but in my stupor, in the face of my deference to her, I stayed put. “Do you mean to tell me this isn't your apartment?” she said. “Have we been using a stranger's house for the past half hour? Did you invite us to stay here? Are you intending

to leave us here or take us back to your cardboard box? Will you slaughter us? I shouldn't joke, I'm honestly terrified."

Barry's expression didn't change but a burning light in his eyes seemed to ignite. He hunched over, his hackles seemed to raise. "You shouldn't throw accusations when you yourself are at fault. I may be borrowing this home but you've taken Victor away from me. He was what kept me up and now I'm not only physically removed from him but you're in the way, too. Well, you're no pillar of salt and you're no other Mary." Is that right? He was trying to riff on something Biblical but it was catastrophically wrong and I can't even recall what he said. The image fell flat.

"What kind man are you?" Charlotte said, aghast at his falling apart. "And who do you think you are," she yelled, turning to me, "relying on the generosity of such a clearly unstable man? What's next, a drug den? We're going to be killed if you keep this up. You're deranged, Barry, and you're selfish, too, to expect us to suffer this bizarre—Christ, what would you say right now, Victor—this bizarre contrition!"

Upon this pronouncement Barry grew suddenly haggard and profane. He put on a face that shouldn't be looked at straight on. With a start he rose to his feet and pointed an accusatory finger at Charlotte. "I want you out of this place. I can't bear looking at you."

"That's absolutely fine with me. I want nothing to do with any of these goings-on," she said. "Let's go, Victor."

I coughed. Against my instincts, against my body and almost against my will I managed to open my mouth. "Charlotte," I remember saying.

“I need to talk to Barry.” I remember her storming out of the apartment and away from all the green. I remember a deep pit of regret in my stomach soothed by Barry’s being there. You’re getting shifty memories here, kiddo, but here’s the secret. Barry and I—how old are you?—we consummated our vow of companionship that night, and, as far as I’m concerned, that has remained unbroken.

And Charlotte had done it. Like us, she had fallen victim to the curse of luck or karma or... earthly retribution. Within a year she lost her singing voice, quit her job, became undesirably pregnant, and developed the beginnings of her fibromyalgia, the four tragedies of which haunted her for the rest of her life.

Oh! I don’t mean to say your mother was unwanted. Or, by extrapolation, that you were, either. As I’ve said, we are unlucky but we are blessed. We are good people, guilty of nothing. But the guilty person is only one of the targets of punishment. For punishment is directed, above all others, at the potentially guilty.

Hasn’t your mother taught you that? That’s Foucault, too, something I’ve taken to heart. Of course, Charlotte is long gone, so maybe your mom feels it unnecessary to teach you the workings of life at such a young age. But Charlotte and I feel otherwise, and as with all my lessons you’re free to make of it what you want.

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