Men

(and

Women)

in the

Town

“Do you ever wonder why some people blow things up?”

-Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*

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i

Municipal Castles are where men go. They, the Castles, are always on the sides of towns, not the centers—because a town’s center is too bright. The sun shines down on it too directly; and for Castles to stay standing, they need a certain amount of shade, to cool and slow the heat and speed of erosion. Municipal Castles are pale and yellow, the color of ink from a highlighter thirty seconds after its tip has been wiped across black letters on a white page. Municipal Castles are tall, but not as tall as one would think. Most people only appear shorter than them with their shoes off. Only men have the rights or credentials or reasons to enter Municipal Castles. (Women have no business there. Women have no business.) In the Castles are many rooms, the busiest being the Hot Hot House, where men gather to sit and sweat. In the Hot Hot House, men talk about their days and plans, but not their dreams. For them, plans are realer than dreams; plans are matters of business. (Women have no plans because they have no business. Women only have dreams, which they hardly ever talk about; they try to live them out instead, and that hardly ever works.) These men mostly talk about their projects of manhood, spending their lives lunging forward and extending themselves into the world. And for what? So they might know what a self is. So they might see a self for a period of time. So they might know one self in the world for a time. (Women don’t know anything. They imagine instead, spending their lives forming and feeling and remembering and recollecting for all time or no time—the two look the same in dreams.)

The Hot Hot House where men meet is always full of steam. Its walls are the color of sunlight in the late afternoon. The Hot Hot House is the color of hay or burlap or manila envelopes or Saturn or No. 2 pencils or sweet potato mash or the yolks of eggs laid by wild and healthy chickens or the morning urine of a person who did not drink enough water the night before after staring up at the dark midnight sky gulping whiskey and smoking cigarettes. (Women do not meet. They stand in their homes on their bare feet in cool corners the color of limes and eggplants and moonlit faces and grass in the night and cold fingers and water that’s just been run for a bath and dew and clouds moving in and blood that isn’t red or brown, blood that comes from the furthest, deepest, darkest, oldest parts of them, the parts of them closest to before they ever existed.)

What other rooms are in this town’s Municipal Castle? Well, there are rooms for sleeping, rooms for “drinking numbers” (Women call this playing lottery.), rooms for laying out plans on giant pieces of paper with special pens. There are rooms for “playing lottery” (Women call this drinking in numbers.) and rooms for sobering up. There are rooms to sharpen saws, for many men are in the business of cutting trees, while other men hold other kinds of employment. There are rooms for the black men and rooms for the white men and rooms for the foreign men. These separate rooms are remnants from older times when one white man decided that he and other white men were totally and completely different from all the black men they had brought to the town to cut down the trees that would become their houses. The white men who listened to that white man did not think they were that different from the foreign men who arrived a while later, mostly, seemingly of their own volition. (Some women think that the foreign men had been forced to leave other places, much like the black men were forced into the town.) They were, however, the white and foreign men, according to another white man, still different enough to warrant building yet another separate room in the Municipal Castle. But that was then and this is now and these times are modern and not olden—they are certainly not ancient—and so the need for separate rooms in all the world’s Municipal Castles has long been abolished. And today, most men, black, white, and foreign, meet in any and all rooms at any and all times.

No one—no man—should have sex in the Municipal Castle. Sex is probably the only activity that isn’t allowed to occur there. The men of the town talk about this with pride, about how other men might be, are often rumored to be, having sex in other Municipal Castles in other towns, but not in this one because, really, no one is supposed to be having sex in any Municipal Castle. (The women of this town know—for they have raised or are sisters or wives of—men who have definitely had sex in the Municipal Castle. “When the rest of your life exists within those walls, in such an intensely intimate way, and that is a choice you’ve made, willingly and joyfully, why wouldn’t you put yourself in a hole that is right next to you, whenever you feel like it, as opposed to tucking it away, going all the way home and having to get it up again? Or, if you were born with the desire to have sex with other men, which is a fine thing to be born with, because being born is such a fine and ordinary and miraculous thing to do, then what makes the Municipal Castle different from any other castle or building or dwelling or structure with rooms and walls and a ground to stand on, a ground to lay your body on so that it lies under or on top of the body of the one you want to jump in and then rest next to?” These are the kinds of questions the women rhetorically ask each other at the town market in the morning while picking breadfruit or plantains or pineapples or cantaloupe.)

Back at the Municipal Castle, in one of the many Snack-Break Rooms, a man (maybe he is the husband or father or brother or uncle of one of those women at the market) begins telling a story.

“This one time,” he chortles holding a crescent of cantaloupe cut by his wife who had bought it fresh and perfectly ripe at the market in the center of town this morning, “I fucked Josette so hard I thought all my seed would come out of her nose. I fucked her so hard I thought she’d be pregnant with a hundred—no, a thousand—of my sons; though, don’t get me wrong, little girls are great, too. Eight and a half months later came our baby Krystal. I must have really given it my all that night because Josette hasn’t been pregnant since.” The man bites into a bit of cantaloupe flesh too close to the rind and winces. “That was twelve years ago.”

(Krystal, who has been hiding in the Snack-Break Room behind a shelving unit to the men’s left, has never heard this version of the story of her conception and birth, and wonders if the loss of that last half a month—for at twelve years of age she had already learned nine months makes a full term—is where all her loneliness comes from.)

ii

“Clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack,” are the eight strikes of noise that wake Serge in the morning. The sounds come from inside the house, inside of its walls. As long as he has lived there, as long as his whole life, Serge has convinced himself that two birds—geese, maybe—behind one of the walls, start every one of their mornings with this argument of clacks that turns into a song. Or sometimes he thinks it’s the audible memory of whips hitting the backs of men who were not born in this house like he was, men who were brought into this house before it was even a house to cut the trees that would be sawed further down into wooden planks to build this house’s walls, the walls that go “clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack” in the morning.

He could cut a hole in the wall to find out what the noise is. He has a saw, for he used to cut trees, much like the men who were brought to this town way back when, those men who were whipped when they did not saw trees fast enough or whipped when they hadn’t done anything at all. Serge does not cut trees anymore. He quit. One morning, twelve years ago, he woke and did all the things he usually does, beginning with the hearing of the clacks. He left his home and started off to work. He was walking into town from the forest—his house sits at the edge of the forest—when the thought came into his mind to just keep walking. He did not know where it came from, this sudden, immediate, random, original, disconnected thought. He had no idea from where it had landed into his head. He was not a man of many ideas, though these days he’s full of them. That morning, twelve years ago, he walked past the town center, past the Municipal Castle, and headed straight toward the sea. The town was, and still is, so concerned with being a town that everyone who lived, and lives, there forgot, and continues to forget, that it actually was, and will always be, on an island. That is to say, the town is an island. And the other towns on the island are also islands in and of themselves, because there are so many ways in which a part can be a sum, ways that pieces are also wholes.

When Serge had arrived at the seashore he was not shocked to find rocks and shells and seaweed. He was, however, surprised to find rotted pieces of ships sitting still and dull in the sun and frost white bones poking out of the sand, gleaming in the day’s light. The bones far outnumbered the ship pieces, so much so that the imbalance made Serge dizzy, like he was suffering from head noises, like he was suffering from spinning round and round, too much and too fast. To regain his composure, to make the world stop spinning—a task much bigger and harder than trying to stop the spinning of a room—Serge clutched a pile of bones. He didn’t dare hold onto any of the shipwreck because just from the looks of it, he knew it couldn’t hold his weight. He knew it would crumble at first contact with his middle finger.

As the sky finally came to a standstill above his head, Serge took more notice of the bones he was leaning against. They looked like pearls. They looked like milk. They looked like the tops of the ice blocks the white man went door to door selling every morning. The bones did not look like the white man. They shined like he didn’t shine and shimmered like he didn’t shimmer. Serge picked up two bones and knocked them against a few other ones: once, twice, now in a numerous rhythm. The bones didn’t sound like the white man; they were deeper than him. Serge whistled along with the bones, making sounds he never could when the white man was near. He always held his breath when the white man came around, bit down on his tongue in his mouth waiting for the white man to pass. They were making music, Serge and the bones, in a way he didn’t think he ever could with the white man: in private, in peace, with the sky above and the earth below.

What knocked him out of his song? A gull had flown overhead, casting a shadow over Serge’s body, reminding him that this was no private place. This seashore, though forgotten by the people of the town, was still part of the town that had so much trouble remembering it was an island. And so, for now, Serge would also have to forget, or put something else into his mind, the way the thought had entered his head to walk here in the first place. This would be harder because he’d have to do it himself. He’d have to create an original thought and place it somewhere in his brain. He had to forget about the island because it would have been too uncomfortable; it would have made him too unapproachable, untouchable even, to go around singing about the sea when everyone else was so very deeply concerned with this business of tending to the land.

So, Serge slowly and sadly put down the bones and walked away from the sea and back into town. Before he reached the town center, he stopped at the Municipal Castle thinking he could get the smell of salt out of his hair with a quick steam in the Hot Hot House. He greeted all the men, distractedly asked them about their days, their wives, their children, their plans. He ran to a seat in the corner of the Hot Hot House, away from the others, so he could spend these last moments replaying in his head the music of the bones. Behind closed eyes, the drumming and whistling from just moments before rang loud and clear until it faded into a silent blur. When Serge opened his eyes again, he was surprised to find himself dizzy, though not as dizzy as when he had arrived at the shore. This feeling was fainter, but just as consistent, only going away when his mind replayed the music he made with the bones.

Though Serge has convinced himself of the secret lives of wall geese and often thinks of the memory of whips hitting men’s backs, what he knows the morning clacks are most reminiscent of is the sound of rain hitting the outside of his house: steady, torrential, and temporarily unrelenting. Between each of those eight strikes, “clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack,” exist several—seven—very real moments where Serge could be swept away in that rain, where it could come down so hard and so fast that it beats the air out of his lungs, filling them so he drowns with his eyes open, standing up. This could very well happen. And when Serge has wholly contemplated the possibility of his death immediately after dawn, after he has listened to the eight strikes of noise coming from inside the walls of his house, he rises to his feet, splashes water on his face, drinks a cup of coffee, and walks to town, not to work, singing, “My spirit levels are low, uncle, my spirit levels are low,” to the tune, in his head, of the music he made with the bones.

iii

While no one is looking, for all the men of the town are at the Hot Hot House (and the women have left their cool corners to tip-toe around their homes and cut onions and clean meat and make beds), Mr. Dixon walks up a path to a small cottage. (It is a sunny day and rays of light evenly hit the grass Agatha, who lives in this small house, asks the sky to water.) The day’s light is fair and doesn’t judge, turning everything, in equity, just a shade darker than Mr. Dixon’s skin, as if Mr. Dixon had wet his clean shaven face with the juices of oranges and lemons and limes and grapefruits and let it dry. That’s the kind of light shining out of the sky today. (Hearing ungraceful thuds plodding closer and closer to her door, Agatha goes out onto her porch to see and meet Mr. Dixon, who is standing at the top of her steps. She thinks it rude, but not odd, that he has already made himself this comfortable, already crossed one of her thresholds, standing there in all of his presence holding a bunch of bananas that he will try to—and succeed at—selling her. She rolls her eyes at the inevitability of this, this monotony of disappointment and lack of surprise, as constant and even as the sun that shines down on her house and skin every day, except for when it rains.)

“Hello there,” Mr. Dixon smiles loudly.

“Hi.” (Agatha beholds him with an immediate silence.)

“Glorious day to be eating fruit the same color as the light in the sky, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

“Would you like to buy some bananas?”

“How much?”

“I’ll give you a great deal. I promise.”

(Agatha does not need to buy bananas, but she participates in the transaction anyway because, honestly, what else is there to do? There have been lots of days, hundreds, even thousands, when she did not buy bananas and it was fine. She was not that hungry and her heart still beat and her breath continued to flow in and out and her chest rose and fell and the hair on her head grew very slowly and the hair on her legs hardly grew at all and the hair in other places—except for her arms, which were practically bald—grew so much faster than she could pick up a razor. She didn’t even really like to eat bananas. She didn’t hate them, didn’t strongly dislike them; they did not nauseate her or swell her tongue. She was not allergic to bananas. Bananas grew, and still continue to grow, in her front yard, the yard she shares with her neighbors because people in this town are not interested in lines of demarcation. They are hardly interested in lines. Everyone here, like everyone in the world, even men who go to Municipal Castles all over the globe, is born with fluidity in and around their bones, like marrow and blood, flowing constant and unrelenting in the body.)

Mr. Dixon stands next to Agatha and with zealous assurance says, “You sure like bananas don’t you? You practically bought the whole bunch!”

“I love bananas. Love them to death.”

(Agatha tells Mr. Dixon this small and extreme lie because there is nothing else to do and there hasn’t been for a very long time. She wakes in the morning, and with her body still working at close to optimal speeds, takes a bath, eats, cooks, cleans, and waits for Krystal to arrive. Krystal is the child of two of Agatha’s neighbors, a husband and wife who are nice enough or very nice people, depending on the day of the week and how long it’s been since it rained. Krystal is a twelve-year-old girl who does not spend enough time with other twelve-year-olds, instead choosing to saddle up, on her bare feet, next to people who are three, four, even five times her age and are twice, thrice, or even four times as lonely as she is. Krystal does not know why she is so lonely; can, at the age of twelve, surmise that she was not born in conditions that should foster loneliness; feels guilty, when her mother is braiding her hair or her father is cleaning the fish that he will cook with her spaghetti, that she is overcome by sudden and incredible bouts of loneliness; is drawn, in a helpless and dangerous way, to other people who are lonelier than her. Agatha is one of those people. Agatha is three times as lonely as Krystal is. Agatha lies to Mr. Dixon so that, for a brief moment, she might forget all her loneliness; so that, for a short time, she could pretend that she is a person who is not lonely, a person who likes to buy and loves to eat bananas, a person who is not surprised when citrus juice colored men walk up to her doorstep without appointments, a woman who is interested in the trade of fruit and the business of buying and selling in general.)

“They’re locally grown, you know?”

(Mr. Dixon is telling Agatha something she already knows. She heard him, before he plodded to the top of her stairs, cut the bananas from the tree in her and her neighbors’ front yard. She hears him do this every other morning. She used to hear Mr. Dixon, or his brother or someone who could be his brother, or maybe his father, march down to the river every day at sundown and fill giant tubs with water that he would drive home in his car, freeze overnight, and sell as fresh ice in the morning.)

“Oh, I had no idea!” (Agatha yells and lies.)

“Yeah! Bananas—and all foods, really—are better when they’re local.”

“That’s fascinating and useful information.”

“I’m giving you that for free.”

Mr. Dixon, still standing at Agatha’s side, figures he should mind his manners and not sit in one of the two empty chairs on her porch. He decides to wait for a sign and when it does not look like she is sending one, at least not right now, not today, he employs a patience that he has cultivated over years of getting everything he wanted and some things he didn’t even know he needed. Being able to distinguish between the two is how he learned patience. With a sigh and another smile, he bids Agatha a good afternoon, turning to leave without looking back because he is absolutely confident in his return and has no worry that his life might just stop, that it could just end. These are not concerns for Mr. Dixon because his life is so his.

(Agatha watches Mr. Dixon go down the path that leads to her house and, forgetting for a moment her standing appointment with Krystal, the business of bananas being so distracting, tries to fix him in her mind, just in case they never meet again.)

iv

(Josette had decided that night would be the night with Alain. She knew that it would be the first of many nights; and so for that reason, and a few others, including her disdain for unnecessary commemorations, she did not want to make a huge deal of it, of her skin tingling long after he’d touched her or the wetness in her underwear whenever he wiped the roof of her mouth with his tongue. She found no great emergency in the swell between her legs and how it felt like the bottom of her whole self was dropping out heavy, falling from a thousand feet in the air, at the thought of his teeth on her neck. These sensations were no special occurrences since Josette knew, and had always known, that bodies are bodies; and bodies do quite ordinary things that seem so fantastic and spectacular in their first and new states of occurence.

“This is so crazy,” Josette would whisper to herself whenever something happened for the first time, like when he squeezed her nipples and she screamed or when she held him in her mouth and he came or when she lied on her side alone in bed with her fingers slippery between her legs rubbing hard, until a sharp, hot bolt ran straight up into her abdomen and she collapsed onto her back falling deeply and soundly into sleep.

“If all that could happen for a first time and then again and again, imagine what it’ll be like when he comes into you,” Josette thought to herself nervously, excitedly, embarrassingly. The night’s crescent moon made for perfect timing. She and Alain had tried before, when the moon was full and it was too big, the light too bright. Everything was too much for him that night when he had said, “No, no, no.” And then there was something missing for her the next morning when she had said, “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.” That was months ago. They had both decided to give the moon and each other more time so that everything would finally be just enough.)

With his head between Josette’s knees, Alain’s ears are covered, so he doesn’t quite hear her when she asks, “Do you remember?” The bits of language, what he thinks he’s heard and what it would make sense he’s heard, don’t come together until many moments later, when he’s moved his face up to her breasts and holds one in his mouth. He realizes that she has asked him if he remembers. And since she said “do” and not “did,” he rules out any notion that she is testing his completion of a probably forgotten task. So what could she be saying? “Do you remember…Do you remember what,” Alain mumbles to himself with Josette’s other breast in his mouth now. He can’t think and suck at the same time, so he finally asks her:

“Do I remember?”

“Do you remember the first time.”

“Oh, do I remember the first time? Do I, do I…”

“I reminisce—”

“I recall you asking me to swim up into you, all the way up into you. Remind me how you begged—”

“Gently requested—”

“Pleaded with me to get lost in your darkness. I remember you suggesting that I find my way through touch and texture and taste and sound. I remember you telling me that if I felt like I was running into trouble I probably was and that I should panic. I remember you hoping I would panic, just a little.”

“Just a tad. And then?”

“And then I can’t recollect how I got out, but I did. I eased my way back into life. For a second there I thought I was going to die. I couldn’t see and I couldn’t breathe. You were surrounding me. But a sliver of light from the crescent moon in the black sky crawled into your bed and I grabbed it to guide myself. And then we both slept so hard.”

(With her eyes closed, Josette smiles when Alain finally puts his wet mouth on hers. She almost weeps, continuing to imagine and trying to relive that night so many years ago, when things were good and right and new and fresh and theirs and he wasn’t a man and she wasn’t a woman—at least not in the way the men in the Municipal Castle think—and they were so completely committed to discovering each other for no other reason than each was an other, a strange and present god, that the other felt a deep and fearless desire to approach.

Josette’s eyes spring open, swallowed out of their dark reverie, when she realizes that Alain has already come, that she herself is not quite there, that she is, in fact, miles and mountains away. Now her mind is stuck in a ditch thinking about that one time, after so many other times, Alain had dug into her so hard, had suddenly forgotten how to swim, trampling through her again and again, bumping into walls and throwing things askew. That night was the first night he had been to the Hot Hot House in the Municipal Castle, something she did not think fantastic or spectacular. It wasn’t ordinary, either: these men, shutting themselves off from the rest of the town and the world. To do what? To talk and drink and eat and play cards under a roof, under many small ceilings, when they could do all of those things, as they had always done, under the big, open, endless sky. The Municipal Castle had recently been renovated and was open for business after much anticipation. People, men in particular, were looking forward because it was first and new again.

Alain had returned home that night twelve years ago with a hazy and empty heat in his eyes, like there was nothing behind his foggy gaze. But he barreled toward Josette anyway, yelling at her—though she was sure he thought he was whispering—all kinds of things about what he was going to do and how he was going to do it right and how he wanted to look into her eyes when he did it, so that he could see his reflection. He told her how much it was going to hurt because that’s how they’d know he was really doing it. Josette was perplexed. All of this talk was confusing. She wanted to ask him about swimming and searching and slightly panicking and eventually finding ways back to safety in the dark. But Alain couldn’t hear her, so steeped he was in his mission to get it right, flawless and complete.

When Krystal came out of her eight and a half months later, Josette cried and whispered into the baby’s ears, “You started off in this world so perfectly.”)

v

Serge doesn’t spend that much time in the Municipal Castle anymore. He used to go every day, several times a day, without feeling guilty about it because he had no wife or children or mother to take care of in her old age. Serge was, and still is, a single man, whose singular goal used to be having up to ten steams a day in the Hot Hot House. He didn’t care what it did to his skin or his breathing or his insides. He thought he was better off with pores open enough to constantly cleaned themselves out as quickly as oil and dirt seeped in.

“No sex in the Municipal Castle,” Serge used to cheerfully sing, the loudest of the bunch, as if being the loudest meant being the truest. That was twelve years ago. These days, when he does decide to go, he has sex all over the Municipal Castle: in the Napping Room, the Room for Drinking Numbers, the Room for Playing Lottery, the Saw Sharpening Room. He never has sex in the Sobering Room. It is always full of men trying to recalibrate themselves and that is a liminal, almost sanctimonious, space that Serge has promised himself he will always respect. But all over the rest of the Municipal Castle, Serge breaks one of the cardinal laws, bending over tables and chairs and chaises or bending the backs of men who live in the north and behind the market and at the other edge of the forest. Serge and these men don’t speak when their bodies touch, in even more discordance with the general rules of thumb at the Municipal Castle. The Castle was made for speech, was built by speech, by white men yelling at the black men they whipped daily, “Up, up, higher, faster, “ and, after more cracks of the whip, “I am watching you.” So when Serge and the man from the south or the man who lives east of the market or the man who lives in the middle of the forest touch without speaking, grab without yelling, and squeeze without whispering, they are politely saying to the white men who built the Municipal Castle, “Thanks, but no thanks.” They are mercifully saying to the black men who built the Municipal Castle, “It’s alright, it’s okay.” They are screaming at the tops of their lungs with no apology.

Since that day twelve years ago when he started walking through town singing, “My spirit levels are low, uncle, my spirit levels are low,” Serge has broken all of the two laws of the Municipal Castle. In addition to ignoring the decree of no sex, Serge frequently allows a woman—a young woman, a little girl, really—into the Castle, as his secret guest, keeping her at his left hip whenever they walk past the lobby attendant and then letting her run off to explore the Castle’s rooms. Her favorite thing to do is hide behind all of the different shelving units in the Snack-Break Rooms and watch the men. Women in Municipal Castles are a big no-no and it’s been that way since the construction of Municipal Castles started all over the world. (Globally, women have absolutely no interest in entering Municipal Castles, imagining that the whole thing would be very boring and the bathrooms would be smelly and unclean.)

Eight years after he had first made music with the bones, Serge returned to the seashore. He had a dream the night before that in the morning he would meet someone there. A person he couldn’t quite make out would appear from behind a piece of shipwreck as if opening her kitchen window to let the day’s breeze in. He guessed it’d be a woman because he had never seen a man open a kitchen window. He’s watched men stand in kitchens. He stands in his own kitchen all the time. He’s watched men stand in kitchens boiling plantains. He watches his neighbor clean fish to cook with spaghetti, which Serge always thought was an odd meal. Anyone can open a kitchen window. But the person in this dream—this dream that had landed in Serge’s head while he was asleep eight years ago, not unlike the thought that had landed in his head while he was awake four years before that—was definitely a woman, for she was probably the one who had brought the dream to his sleeping mind in the first place. (If women have any business, it is the business of dreams. But women have no business, so they are left with their dreams.)

After hearing the “clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack” of the wall geese or the men being whipped or the rain against his house, Serge splashed water on his face, drank a cup of coffee, and walked straight through town to the sea. He was in such a rush that he forgot about his spirit levels and no one heard him singing to uncle about how low they were. When he arrived at the shore, just like in his dream, a young woman—a little girl, really—popped out of a piece of wreckage screaming, “Uncle!” Serge was not her uncle and it didn’t appear as if she had named him so, saying the word as quickly and freely as she could have said, “sky” or “cloud” or “cigar.” After a moment of silence, the little girl said some other words: “bridge float bulldoze cylinder.” So delighted was he by her freedom with words, her refusal to build things like sentences or walls with them, the way she pulled words out of an air seemingly foreign to this town, that Serge picked up two bones, just like he did that morning eight years ago, and knocked them against the other bones. This made the little girl squeal with so much joy that she stopped saying words and started making sounds, running around the shipwreck and dancing. Serge started to dance, too, knocking more bones, knocking air, even knocking the wreckage, its crumbles adding yet another layer to their symphony.

(When they were both breathless, the little girl said, “I am Krystal. Who are you?”

“I am Serge.”

“Serge holds the bones and beats the music from the bones and beats the music from the sky and lifts the dance out of me.”

“Krystal makes clear all the words in the world and the sounds in the world that help me make music in this town.”

“You are my friend, Serge.”

“Yes, Krystal, I am your friend.”

“That’s so nice.”

“It is.”

“You should go now. I’ll stay by myself a little longer.”)

The closest of friends since that morning four years ago, Serge and Krystal have a standing appointment every third Sunday when they walk together to the Municipal Castle. Serge offers her the same advice every time: “Always sit or stand to the left of a man’s eye; that way, he’ll never see you. And don’t spend too much time in the Hot Hot House. You’ll turn into a wrinkled mango, or ever worse, dried leaves to be boiled in water for tea.”

vi

(Every time Mr. Dixon leaves Agatha replays their time together in her head. Sometimes she laughs at one of his jokes harder than when he actually told it. Or sometimes she belatedly grimaces at something he said. Or sometimes she looks up, furrows her eyebrows, and shakes her head at the realization that Mr. Dixon had totally made something up, had pulled incorrect information out of somewhere that wasn’t even the sky and decided that what he was saying here in her town, the town he was not from, was the truth, even if it was a lie to her and the people who were from, and lived, there.

Something like that had happened yesterday afternoon, when, while they were taking a walk, Mr. Dixon decided he was hungry and asked Agatha if she would join him for a meal. Agatha obliged, checking in with her stomach and noticing that she was also hungry, starving actually, but had been so surprisingly caught in the rhythm of the walk they were on that she had forgotten she would have to, at some point, feed herself. So Agatha and Mr. Dixon stopped at a small pastry shop where sandwiches were also made and ordered two of each: sandwiches and pastries. Reading the menu, Agatha saw that the sandwich she wanted to order came with a side of pickles. She did not like pickles, hated them, actually, could never lie about loving them, but decided to order the sandwich anyway because she knew Mr. Dixon relished pickles, had ordered two pickle plates at a restaurant where they once had dinner, and therefore would not pause or hold his delight before eating every single pickle on her plate. When the food arrived, Agatha was disappointed to discover that there were also pickles on the inside of the sandwich, but still slowly picked them out to gift to Mr. Dixon.

“I hate pickles,” Agatha said, peeling the slimy green slices away from the bread.

“I love them,” Mr. Dixon expectedly replied. He surprisingly followed up with, “How can you hate pickles? I thought they were a staple in this town.”

Agatha shot Mr. Dixon a stupefying look. She was pretty good at going with the flow, at tempering her small and steady ripples in any larger and changing current, but this she did not see coming. It did not make any kind of sense, this planting of pickles in her town; yet she tried anyway to form a path between this moment and where he had received this information. When she couldn’t do it, when she was at a complete loss, when the path from here to there would not show up, she asked him:

”Who told you that?”

“Didn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t tell you something so completely untrue. At least not about pickles.”

“Would you lie to me about other things?”

“That’s not really the point. I’m trying to find out how you got it in your head that pickles are a food this town is famous for when there is no basis for such an idea.”

“Someone told me. I don’t remember.”

“I just can’t imagine someone from here telling you that. It doesn’t compute.”

“I don’t know. I guess I heard it somewhere. Can I still have your pickles?”

“Yes. Sure. Of course.”

Agatha sat there eating her sandwich, watching Mr. Dixon eat his sandwich and her pickles she did not want, the pickles she hated, the pickles she longed to launch into outer space, into another place far away from this town, lest anyone presume they were a local and popular food product.

Standing in her kitchen, Agatha suddenly remembers that pickles are imported from a city not too far from the town; not too far because it is a short plane ride away. Pickles travel here like pollen, over air and sea, landing in public restaurants, but not usually in private kitchens. She realizes what annoys her so much about this event from lunch yesterday is the pickles’ trajectory: arriving in the town under seemingly natural circumstances, like pollen, like the change of seasons. And when Mr. Dixon had so naturally questioned her about what he deemed an unnatural distaste for pickles, a chasm was created. There was an absence of understanding. She could not recognize or track where his information was coming from. She did not trust it.

Agatha’s suspicion of Mr. Dixon’s incorrect and unfounded knowledge about pickles bothers her because in certain moments—moments that she has not yet replayed or relived because they are still happening and therefore cannot be in the state of happening again—she does trust him: wholly and completely. She trusts Mr. Dixon as much as the present is the present, as much as a minute is a minute: in part and in sum.

Every time Mr. Dixon comes over, Agatha buys more bananas. She always gives him a different reason, as if she needs to confirm her purchase with a qualification. Today she tells him, “My nurse—not my doctor, he’s always at the Hot Hot House—told me I need so much more potassium.” Mr. Dixon gives her the bananas with one hand and takes her waist with the other. They walk across her threshold and into the house together. He sits at the kitchen table while she makes herself a fruit smoothie. He hates fruit smoothies as much as she hates pickles; they each have their reasons. He prefers fruits to remain fruits even as he peels, even as he chews them, even as they sit in bile-covered pieces in the pit of his stomach. She thinks they—we—all end up in the same place no matter what; so exactly when we morph from one state of being to another might not be the thing to worry about most.

Every time Mr. Dixon comes he tells Agatha he loves her, or more precisely, that he is in love with her. She tells him she knows and that she loves him, too. There is a great distance between his presently being in love with her and her always loving him. She had always loved him, loved him as soon as he cut the bananas from the tree in her front yard, as soon as he plodded up the steps to her house. She loved him when he, or his brother, or his father, sold her mother ice. She loved him because he was alive and in her life. And since her life was not hers, and might never truly be, she more easily recognized the life in other people, a recognition that went so far as love.)

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When she is older, Krystal will move far away from the town, to another town where the ruins of Municipal Castles still stand, and let men, one at a time, sleep in her bed. All through the night their forearms, wrists, hands, fingers, feet, and toes will touch. She will sync her breath with theirs. Their knees will fit into the backs of her knees. She will nestle her head in their chests. In the mornings, when she is wide-awake and the men are still waking, she will throw her arm across their chests and say,

“I was so sick last night,

like pregnant in the bottom of the belly,

like the consequence of a sin not committed,

like not even getting anything out of it.

And why?

And why?

And why?

I was just so sick and hot last night,

like a bloated whale with no chill,

like a pregnant sea lion with no chill,

like an expecting mermaid who can’t chill.

For what?

For what?

For what?

I make up

and fashion

out of twigs and

too short legs

brinks to throw my self against,

pillars to potentially drive into me.

These brinks and pillars ask:

Don’t you ever get embarrassed?

Aren’t you ashamed?

They warn:

You should be worried that someone might

hear

or even

see

you.

I don’t want to be pregnant with this anymore.

It’s no fun.

It makes me uncomfortable,

untouchable.

No one wants to stand in me

or in front of me.

They’ll stand near me, though,

next to me,

at my side,

to my right,

or even farther away,

for fear

that I might

squeeze

too much

or lean

too hard,

in comfort

that I’ll always be there,

like the moon.

I am always waning,

like your moon.

It gets dark at night.

I covered your eyes with history.

I covered your lips,

your mouth,

your words,

your arms,

your feet,

your legs,

your tongue,

your hair,

your ears,

your nose,

your chest,

your elbows,

your knees,

your hands,

your fingers,

your toes,

your wrists,

your teeth,

your intentions.

I can’t even see you.

It’s so bright out and I have no idea who you are.

What do I look like?

What do I look like to you?

And how did you reveal

my face,

my scalp,

my ankles,

my back,

my breasts,

my ass,

my stomach,

my thighs?

What did they look like?

What did they look like to you?

Where do I know you from?

Is our unrecollected past why I’ve welcomed you into my bed?

What do you remind me of?

You are not strange.

Rains of May have always been gentle.

They don’t hurt.

Maybe you used to sell me ice.

Maybe I always knew it would melt.

Maybe I used to leave it out in the sun

Dripping,

waiting,

starting over again.

Maybe we never spoke.

Maybe you used to sell me bananas.

Maybe I grew them in my own front yard

and watched you cut them loose from my tree,

walk up to my door,

and offer me fruit that was already mine at a reasonable discount.

Maybe you were a good businessman.

Maybe I was your best customer.

Maybe we built an economy,

that, unfortunately,

withstood the test of time.

Maybe we passed the exams of time,

to both our detriments,

with flying colors.

The latest you’ve got for me

is nothing

at all

in bulk.

But I already have

cartons

and boxes

and bottles

and vessels

and vases

and tubs

and pots

and cauldrons

full of nothing.

People have been coming to my door with that for years.

The rains of May might kidnap me

And bring me out to sea.

Take me to July—

no,

November!

That’s where it really started…

But please,

tell me about this ice!

These bananas!

This nothing!

How cold!

How sweet!

How empty!

I’ll take a few pounds of each.

It’s always such a pleasure doing business with you.

You are such a strangely familiar pressure.

Do you ever wonder why people blow things up?

Can you imagine the shrapnel?

Tiny bits

of ice,

of bananas,

of nothing.

Melted

ice

burnt

bananas

always

nothing.

What does this look like?

What does this look like to you?

To make this smoothie

I need

ice,

bananas,

and nothing.

How does that sound?

How does that sound to you?”