Making Love with a Boston Fern

Lauren Aimee Curtis

One night I watched my neighbour making love with a Boston fern. It was all ooohs and ahhhs and heavy breathing––she was caressing the stems and whispering something I couldn’t hear. I saw the silhouette of her big body from my balcony as I stood in the dark watching her. Earlier that night I’d had trouble sleeping after hearing muted thumping and wet panting. It was coming from Babette’s room next door.

In the mornings, and sometimes in the afternoons, I liked to watch my neighbour while she tended to her plants. She was always trimming or spraying the leaves, pulling down her rosy pink shades to shield them from direct sunlight. I thought it was a lot of fretting. At night I’d watch her inside her bedroom through the glass doors while she changed into her fluffy pyjamas, or while she sat typing at her computer, her large stomach resting on her knees. I imagined she wrote some kind of vampire-romance fiction and that she was wildly rich because she rarely left the house. When she did, I’d watch her waddle down the street.

Babette was always asking me how often I masturbated. She liked making me blush, and I suppose she thought I was still a virgin. Whenever she’d get this way our other housemate, Bill, would leave the room out of politeness. *He’s asexual,* Babette would say to me. Something else she liked to say was––*between you and him, I’m living in a nunnery.* But she didn’t know about my first boyfriend, and all the things he liked to do in his car, or in movie theatres, or in his classroom, although we were extra careful when we did them. Nobody knew, except my mother, and that was just fine with me––I’ve been keeping secrets my whole life.

At the department store where I worked I had two bosses––one fat, one thin. They were having an affair. The fat one was small and round and wore too much make up. The thin one was tall and balding with a stringy patch of dyed black hair he kept in a low greasy ponytail. He had pimples on his neck. My only friend at work was a girl named Karina. Her boyfriend had recently been released from prison and she’d often talk about how attractive he was, how once she’d glassed a girl for just looking at him. Karina had green eyes, fake red nails with delicate Chinese symbols painted on them, and a piercing on her clitoris. I knew this because she showed it to me one day when we were hiding in the change rooms. She was telling me about a bender she’d been on with the boyfriend when all of a sudden she stood up and pulled her pants down. I nodded a few times and then stared at the wall in front of me. We didn’t have much in common but I liked her. All the other women in the department store were older, suspicious. They hated Karina. They liked me because they found me non-offensive and non-threatening. They were always patting me on the head.

About once a week the fat boss and the thin boss would call me into their office for meetings. It was a beige room with no windows and hospital-coloured lighting. Inside it was hot and stuffy and often it smelt like microwaved sausages. I’d watch them while they talked, sitting side by side at their communal desk and I’d imagine them having sex on it, or eating microwaved sausages, or doing both simultaneously. When I’d pay attention the thin one would be talking and winking and saying something about hunger, how I had it, that I’d shown promise, and was I interested progressing up the ladder? I’d shake my head and tell them I wasn’t ready yet but one time they called my bluff: *You think you’re better than this?* Of course not, I’d said. I knew where I stood. I spent my working days with women who wore pearl necklaces and three hundred dollar scarves. They were always returning things. There was a lot of tut tut tutting that went on. When I first started working at the department store Karina and I would take our breaks together. We’d go to the food court and eat a samosa still dripping with oil or fried chicken wings and she’d talk about shaving her boyfriend’s back while I listened with my head down. But Karina lost shifts, and after a while I found myself having lunch in the break room with twenty other women––everyone sweating and eating salads, watching daytime television.

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When I left Hobart I told myself there was no going back and my mother had agreed this was for the best. I’d arrived in Sydney knowing no one, found myself a job and a place to live but these small victories did nothing to squash the tightness in my chest. At night I’d dream about the old boyfriend. The dreams were hardly nightmares, there was nothing sinister to them and yet this made them sinister. What was the point? It was the boyfriend talking on the phone, or getting dressed, or sitting at his desk smiling. Once it was him just drinking a strawberry milkshake––that was the whole dream.

At home, age twelve, and my mother told me that my imagination was too wild. When she was angry, I’d notice the little bits of sweat on her upper lip. *These lies,* she’d said later on about the teacher, *they hurt people.* She was ashamed, she only hoped it wouldn’t get out. But in the days after I told her she looked at me differently and I could tell that she knew it wasn’t a lie, and perhaps she could tell that I knew she knew, and we both agreed to go on pretending in this way, just to make it easier.

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In February there was a heatwave. For three days in a row the temperature broke forty degrees and each night an apocalyptic-looking sunset blanketed the city. Babette, her boyfriend, Bill and I took turns having cold showers but there was little relief. On the third night we drove to the beach. The hot air and the warm water made everything slow. All around me I saw couples sliding their hands down each other’s swimsuits. Their skin melting until it looked like the same flesh. A giant orgy started on the sand––I watched it from the water. Everything was peach-coloured and buzzing. Even the ocean looked red.

When summer ended Babette broke up with the boyfriend and started hanging around the kitchen in a terry towel robe and drinking wine in a way that seemed like she really wanted us to know she was drinking wine*.* Bill and I started eating out just to avoid her. We went to the same Chinese restaurant most nights and sat on opposite ends of the room. Me with my book and him on his phone, pretending we didn’t notice one another. One night it was crowded and they sat us together. He ordered food for three––dumplings, sung choi bao, chicken spring pancakes, and when it came he ate all of it with his hands. I looked down at table and pursued my noodle soup in small, non-offensive sips. I asked him about our neighbour, I called her *the obese woman.* He said he’d never noticed her. I told him she wrote romance novels. I made up all sorts of things. He was holding a bit of pork mince in his fingers and a shiny layer of grease coated his lips and cheeks. I thought about licking it off. I imagined climbing on the table and grabbing his head with both hands, licking his entire face.

Sometime after that night I began writing letters to *the obese woman* anonymously and when I wrote them I held my pen differently, like I imagined a man would. *I want to see you bent over,* I wrote, *I want to split you open from behind––*that kind of stuff. At night I’d watch her while she sat in bed reading and when her light went off I’d go down to the street and walk right up to her front door, slip the letters underneath.

At the department store there was a woman who came in early everyday, just as the glass doors were unlocked. She wore purple or pale green pantsuits, oversized sunglasses, and her hair was beehived. Sometimes she carried a large basket of vegetables from the Seven Star. When she’d walk past you could smell it on her: she was the kind of woman who drank before breakfast. We called her Red Hands because she wore red leather gloves, even when it warm. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that this woman was mad. And yet, there was something attractive about being as mad as this woman. Secretly, I was envious of her. It was obvious she had money underneath all that madness, some kind of safety blanket. Her madness was eccentric and not dangerous, and it seemed to me that this distinction had everything to do with money.

At the beginning of July, an Ashram appeared on our street. At first we heard the sound of *Hare Krishna* singing wafting in through the window accompanied by faint drumming. Then we saw two men in sarongs dancing down the street. A week later, four new members playing a tambourine, cowbells, and a triangle were added. Bill said he found it strangely calming but it was Babette who took to it completely. Soon she was wearing sarongs over her jeans, anklets with tiny bells, and swore off certain foods including avocadoes and pears, which Bill and I thought strange and unnecessary. Each time she came home she told us she felt lighter. She practiced yoga, she meditated in front of the television, and sometimes we heard her repeating affirmations in the bathroom. Mostly she talked about being enlightened, but when pressed, couldn’t articulate exactly what that meant to her. It seemed obvious. She hadn’t changed­: only her devotion had shifted.

At the end of July the department store threw a party to celebrate the end of the financial year and we were told attendance was compulsory. It was held in the break room where a sad looking piece of crepe paper was taped to the wall. Everyone danced to a song that sounded like one long siren. I stood in the corner of the room with Karina and we watched everyone drink until their mouths softened. Their bodies followed, they hung loose. Soon they were hugging one another. An old Greek woman was telling anyone who’d listen about her son who was recently divorced and childless. The two bosses drank with their backs to each other and their partners stood next to them smiling and nodding and the night went on and on and on. I was waiting until everyone was drunk enough so that I could leave unnoticed. Karina disappeared into the bathroom every few minutes and when she’d come back she’d lick her lips and brush her hair manically with her hands. The bosses brought out a cake. I accidently locked eyes with the thin boss and he winked. Karina took me with her to bathroom and when I followed her inside the cubicle she pulled out a little plastic bag of white powder. *Eat this*, she said. Out in the break room the night had escalated, the siren seemed to be on loop, and everyone’s faces looked grotesque. I felt nauseous. I ran back to the bathroom to vomit and when I came out I saw the thin boss standing against the door with his pants at his knees, playing with himself. He looked straight at me. I went back inside the cubicle and locked the door. I counted. I got to seventy-six. I could hear him and I could hear the taps running and when, at last, I could hear nothing, I left.

When I got home that night I found Babette in the backyard burning her sarongs, I didn’t ask why. I sat in the shower for what felt like hours. I thought about going home, showing up at my old front door, and even though part of me desperately wanted to, I decided it was too cheesy. For the first time in a while I let myself wonder about the teacher. That night in bed I tossed and turned but when I finally fell asleep I had no dreams.

Three days later when the thin boss finally showed up at work, he found me standing at the cash register with Red Hands. She was showing me the lettuces she’d bought––she’d arranged them from smallest to largest on the desk. *My darlings––*she was saying, gesturing to the lettuces, *my little darlings.* I felt his eyes sizing me up. He walked over and placed his hand gently on Red Hand’s shoulder, she slapped it away. I could tell by his body language that he remembered what had happened, and I knew he could tell that I hadn’t told anyone, and once again it was that too familiar feeling that we would go on pretending we didn’t know these things.

I left work without telling anyone and walked aimlessly around the city wondering about my job, whether I could still go back. I watched the buskers. The ones who brought amps and props or their son to sing with them, and as I watched I felt that sinking feeling I always felt when someone was being so overtly earnest that it felt false, like a performance of being earnest. I decided to go home and when I got there I saw my neighbour on her balcony tending to her plants. She wore pink gloves and a rose patterned blouse and her usually pale body was flushed red. I sat on my balcony and decided I’d watch her instead, because it’s always better to watch someone who doesn’t know they’re being watched. She was planting basil and rosemary and something else I couldn’t make out. She even took some of the more sad-looking plants down and left them out the front of her house next to the bins. I sat there until the sun went down. I watched the bats fly from the city to the east. When it was completely dark I watched everyone on my street through their apartment windows while they ate, undressed, and eventually, lay down with one another. I watched them until they closed their curtains and their lights went out. I admitted to myself, out loud, that I was lonely, and then immediately took it back. Later that night, when everyone was asleep, I went down to my neighbour’s house and took the yellowing fern and drooping palm she’d left back up to my balcony. When I looked up I saw her watching me and we locked eyes for the first time.

>>>>Bio<<<<

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