

Crazy Life

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Melissa had made Dorie take the class with Ronnie. That's what she did: pushed Dorie into going to parties, to an animal-rights protest in the city, to that strange silent Luis Bunuel movie with the eyeball and the ants – even now, thinking about the opening scene made her eyelids shudder. You can't not do this, Melissa said in her breathless way, just about levitating as she sat cross-legged on the bed. This was *the* Ron Freundlich they were talking about, cofounder of Ubu Moon, the notorious theater group best known for a performance where the actors, him included, had all been arrested for a climactic scene involving naked bodies and raw meat.

You might not have thought Dorie and Melissa would have been friends, let alone roommates. In fact Dorie had pretty much written her off at first, as some kind of bouncy, 'Up with People Person', till last spring, when the demonstrations swept through schools after the killings at Kent State. Teachers, facing empty classrooms, had ended their courses in mid-semester. Students clustered anxiously under stunning blue skies to argue over the bombing in Cambodia, the injustice of the draft, the very legitimacy of schools like theirs. Dorie watched as, without a word being said, Indian-print shirts and bell-bottoms disappeared, to be replaced by overalls, jeans and workshirts, all black and navy—what workers wore, or at least what students thought they wore. Dorie herself had adopted a sober look she put together with leotards and a black miniskirt.

But Melissa traveled among the different meetings with her cheery grin, wearing little print shirtwaist dresses, or flowered Calico Corner shirts and matching shorts. Kind of a public service, Dorie thought, reminding them all of more innocent times. Gutsy, too: most girls had hidden those clothes in their bottom drawers. It was a grim and confusing spring, and she'd found herself spending more time with Melissa, letting herself be carried along on the waves of her different enthusiasms. They agreed to be roommates if school started up in the fall—nobody was sure of anything then; but it did, and they did.

So when Melissa found some unbelievably rock-bottom student fares to Barbados for the February break, of course she pushed Dorie to come. Dorie had never been to Barbados, or any other tropical island. But being seriously broke, she stayed through the break, putting in work-study hours at the deserted psychology lab. Dorie heard what happened from Melissa's parents: while Melissa was riding her rented bike back to the hotel outside Bridgetown, a truck ran her off the road and into a ditch. The bike flipped, her neck broke and that was it. Death was instantaneous, Mrs. Breese had said. There was no pain. The dean had let Dorie keep their double room for herself, quite a favor considering the shortage of dorm space. Now, the March wind gusted wet but mild, and the dark fell later, but Dorie kept checking the sky as she walked the path back to her room. Alone in the dark was when she would see Melissa lying there in the ditch, surrounded by

lime-green grass, with golden palm trees rising behind her against a hazy yellow sky.

Walking to Ronnie's first class in January, Dorie felt the cold biting at her legs, right through her pants. In the heat of the classroom, Melissa's hair had crackled straight out from her head as she pulled her coat off—static, but it looked to Dorie like her excitement had charged the yellow filaments. Ronnie walked in, went right past them to the back wall and began silently lifting empty chairs into a pile. The students stood up, unsure at first, but then began following his lead, depositing their chairs till they made a metal and pale-wood mountain against the wall. Then he sat down in the open space they'd made, and they settled into a rough circle on the floor.

"What just happened?" he said. No one spoke.

"You just made theater, people." A drained and neutral voice, like he was a doctor giving a life-changing medical diagnosis. A participatory theater event, he explained, where they were the actors *and* the audience. Political protests were theater too, no matter how small or how big—a march on Washington, one person shouting on the street. Even the ridiculous bravado of the White House was a kind of mannered, court theater, like Kabuki. As he got rolling, Ronnie stood up and paced around the outside of the circle. He looked pretty together, Dorie thought, shifting her butt on the dusty floor, for someone who'd been arrested for rubbing meat on himself: gray sweater, his sandy, shoulder-length hair slicked back neatly, his waxy-pale skin making him look strangely calm, even as his words speeded up. He promised to start on Greek theater the next time.

As the second class ended, he made an announcement: anyone interested in coming to an informal performance practice circle should meet him back here, that night. They would be acting on some of the ideas he'd been discussing in class, looking for ways to reconnect with the original principles underlying ancient Greek drama.

Melissa had to go to a committee meeting after dinner, some faculty-reform thing she had been working on, but she persuaded Dorie to go on without her. When Dorie showed up, the door to Thornton was locked. She and about eight others, mostly women, stood on the steps in the cold January night, bouncing a little to keep warm under the security lights, sharing notes on Ronnie till he finally showed up. He motioned them to follow him down the path to where the neat blanket of grass gave way to trees.

They stumbled into the woods, blinded in the dark, their feet catching on roots under the dead leaves. She gulped in bitter cold air, and it stung her cheeks and her ears as she followed the others, more by voices and movement than by the sight of them. She heard Ronnie up ahead, giving directions. They stopped at a big rock, where the ground ended at a jagged rise over the creek. The stars splayed out over them, hard and white.

"Now it's time to scream." Ronnie stood facing them, his face hidden in shadow, talking in his low, intense singsong. "Scream at the stars, scream at the war, scream at the assholes who run this place." Some tittering around her. He looked straight at her, making her aware of her stomach, shrinking from the cold seeping up under her coat. His voice continued, even quieter: "This scream has been building up inside you for a long time. Centuries. A thousand years, two thousand." He threw his head back and bayed up at the sky, and they all joined in. She felt it coming out of her more than heard it, mixed as it was with voices all around. Taking a breath after the first long wail, her throat and lungs opened up to the cold and the searing noise. Her head expanded. Ronnie came up behind her, put a hand on her back and another on her chest, while he bellowed next to her ear; then he moved on to another girl. One of the guys arched his back and threw his face flat to the sky. Some women rocked a little to the sound. Finally they stopped. She felt herself vibrating all over in the silence. She wished she could see nothing again, like in the woods before her eyes had accustomed to the dark. But by now she could see them all clearly in the moonlight, their mouths fallen open and eyes wide, like thirteen-year-old girls at a Beatles concert; and her mouth hung open just as wide.

As they threaded their way back between the saplings, she felt his hand on her back again. This time it stayed there, pushing her along lightly as they rejoined the asphalt path. Her nose was running, but she didn't reach up to wipe it, just walked silently with her hands in the pockets of her pea coat, still vibrating. When they got to where the path turned of toward her room, she felt the hand pushing her in the other direction.

"Where are we going?" she said stupidly, tasting the runny mucus on her upper lip.

"You're shivering. I need to warm you up." She nodded. He was right; the vibrations had turned into shivering without her noticing.

He didn't wait for her to take her coat off in his room, just pushed it up and bit her stomach as they both fell back on the rumped bed. It felt like she was still breathing in cold air as she somehow shed the coat, her sweater and workshirt, then her jeans, while his mouth roamed over her body. His chest and limbs were a pale as his face, it turned out. After, she remembered the way the top of his head looked, the sandy hair flying off every which way; and being pulled into and out of her body, on sharp waves of her breath. And every detail of the poster hanging beside the bed, for a performance by Ubu Moon: *The Good Soldier Schweik*, in jagged red letters like torn paper. All the other words were in Polish. They said nothing till they were done, though sounds escaped from their mouths. Then he lit a joint, lay backward over her and talked to the ceiling. In a low monotone, interrupted only to suck on the joint or pass it without looking toward her head, he spun out a synopsis of an article he was working on. A friend of his had staged play in the mountains of Iran, using actors, villagers, dogs and sheep, that had lasted

seven days and seven nights. Ronnie had been part of the cast, and this too took her breath away. He wanted to use that performance to advance an idea—that extreme measures were now needed to bring theater back to the way it had worked before Aeschylus and Euripides. He began waving his arms more and more, till finally he got up and started pacing around the room naked. Then they had sex again. The night was so different from the gentle, candlelit, Ravi Shankar-scored languors of her evenings with Jeffrey that she had a hard time thinking of them as the same activity.

Their relationship lasted a week. If you could use that term for something anchored by two encounters, with a bunch of imagined ones strung between them. In his class, she felt every movement he made as if it touched her body; her shoulder buzzed for minutes after he grazed it once, while crossing behind her. By Thursday, they hadn't talked alone since that first night. She showed up at Ronnie's office at the end of his evening hours. He nodded at her over the head of the girl who sat across from his desk. After the girl left, he closed the door and pressed Dorie against it. While they kissed she thought to herself, This is what people used to do after the first date. Then he pulled her back to his chair. She half-stood, half-sat on the armrest of his chair while he sat there, running his left hand over her, writing on a pad with his right hand. It was the article he had told to her in bed, she could see, as his hand moved lightly in her hair, then down her neck and back, then up and under her sweater. She kept glancing at the dark squares of the uncovered window, sure that passing students were watching them from outside. She felt tears burning at her eyelids. When he began to spread his fingers down across her stomach, under the pants, she slid to her feet and rushed out, saying something idiotic about having to work on a paper.

As his next class was ending, she watched Ronnie lean over Melissa, and whisper something that made her laugh. Her ponytail fluffing up and down, her cheeks pink. What would you call what he and Melissa had? A fling maybe, an affair? Had their time together lasted long enough to call it a relationship? Long enough, for sure, to congeal into some small, hard thing between Dorie and Melissa. Even sunny Melissa, lit up even brighter with this new turn of events, couldn't make that go away when she came back to their room for her early-evening pit stops, before running out to meet Ronnie. Probably she had thought of the Caribbean trip as a peace offering to Dorie, if only Dorie had gone along. Now Melissa was stone dead, and Dorie felt stoniness traveling up her arms, and hardening the muscles around her mouth.

A blue envelope stuck up from the papers in Dorie's mailbox: news from home. She glanced through the flyers—a call to attend the new Women's Health Circle, a reminder to return her work-study papers for next year, a form letter from Falon, her advisor—and threw them all in the trash. She launched out into the after-class rush of bodies filling the hallway, picking open the letter from her mother. Same lined steno paper, same looping letters scattered with exclamation

points and describing a family coincidence that seemed so distant, the logic of it so arcane, it required some Cliff's Notes version that she didn't have. Scrunching her eyebrows over the blue paper, she bumped into someone's outstretched hand.

"Whoa, Dorie!" Jeffrey. Even though he'd seen her first, his face showed surprise, or apprehension. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she answered flatly, crumpling the letter into her coat pocket and addressing her answer to the girl at his side. Dorie knew her slightly from last year's sociology class. She wore her beautiful reddish-brown hair in a braid that would bounce against her back when she walked. Almost as tall as Dorie.

"Tracy, Dorie." Jeffrey dipped his chin between them, his curls shaking around his head. "We're going downtown to hear Kate Millett. They wouldn't let her talk on campus. Wanna come?"

"Can't. I've got this rehearsal thing with Ronnie." Which was almost true; the meeting didn't actually start till ten.

He pulled in his breath. "Yeah, right, the thing for Melissa." The three of them stood in an awkward triangle for a moment, looking at each other's shoulders. Then he said, "Sure you're okay?" As he hunched his thin frame down toward her. They hadn't talked since right after the news had flown across the campus. When, over and over, she'd had to think of answers to people's timid, tender approaches. She breathed in his smell, mixed with the wet March air rising from his overshirt, and remembered how his legs would scissor between hers when they lay in bed together. At this moment she couldn't remember why, after being together almost a year, she had broken up with him. She didn't want his eyes on her, but also did, and her throat started to close.

"I'm *fine*." She turned pointedly toward Tracy. "You should come too. It's open to all women in the junior class, not just Ronnie's students."

"I'll think about it, I really will." Tracy twisted uncomfortably, glancing at Jeffrey. "But I didn't really know her that well, you know?"

Dorie pushed out the door to the wide portico that was the college's public face, and looked down the long path. It was later than she'd thought. The sun already down, the sky turning deep gray. The wind skittered a few twigs across the flagstones. She started down the hill. In the fading light the trees and bushes fizzed softly around the edges, losing their outlines. No, it wasn't dark yet, she wouldn't see her. Dorie put her head down and walked faster down the path. But then she glanced down to where the bushes met the ground, and that was her mistake. In the shadows, the darkness rolled over and reshaped itself into the head of Melissa. Lolling sideways, loose, almost like it had separated from the body. Yellow hair frothing out like it used to when Melissa woke up in the morning, not in the neat ponytail everyone else saw. Eyes staring, the mouth open. She clamped her jaw shut, kept her eyes on her boots as they moved faster over the ground. Her back tingled. Now she could see the dorm windows shining yellow through the tree branches; from one window, she heard the comforting wail of Mick

Jagger begging sympathy for the devil, smoking out into the night air. She wouldn't be able to let out all her breath till she felt the heavy front door close behind her.

Inside the field house the heat blasted, but Dorie kept her coat on. Pacing around, Ronnie turned sharply as she entered, and she just managed to avoid making eye contact with him. The ones from his classes had known to start a circle on the floor. Dorie looked around for the girl she'd seen walking around with Ronnie lately, and sat down on the opposite side of the circle. When about forty people had shown up for this rehearsal, or meeting, whatever it was, Ronnie started talking.

"We can't bring Melissa back," he said, still pacing the perimeter of the circle. "All we can do is something in her honor, in honor of the spark of crazy life in her." What he had planned, it turned out, was to put on the *Bacchae*, in a new kind of staging, using a new version fashioned by Ronnie himself. She should have guessed: they'd discussed that one play for two whole classes. The women who'd shown up would play the Maenads, the more the better. Ronnie would play both King Pentheus and Dionysus, giving the role of the wind god to one of the guys when they had to appear together. But he would definitely be Pentheus when the king dressed as one of the Maenads, thinking he'd pass as one of them. In Ronnie's version, in contrast to Euripides' original, the Dionysian frenzy would be acted out: crazed Maenads would actually be seen ripping Pentheus apart and eating his flesh, somehow—he hadn't figured it all out yet.

"We need to have a way to really put ourselves on the line here," he continued. "It's life and death, people. Here and out there." He looked around the circle, and smoothed his hair back. "So we're gonna perform the whole thing in our underwear." All the women immediately shot looks at each other, trying to read reactions in their studiously blank faces.

"Now here's the thing," we went on quickly. "The point of this is to be real. So whatever you're wearing today, that's what you wear at the performance. I don't want anybody going out and buying some fancy new panties so they'll look nice. Just to make sure, let's all take off our pants right now and take a look around."

More glances ricocheted across the circle, and some nervous laughter, but no one moved.

"I'll go first." He threw off his sneakers, slid out of his corduroys and sweater, revealing the pale chest and white jockey shorts for everyone to see. Finally one girl stood up, the very skinny Russian major who had recently started going by her middle name, Tucker.

"You're a pig!" she shot at Ronnie. "Chauvinist bastard! I don't believe this." The girl stomped across the floor and slammed the door behind her. Dorie would not follow her, though she wished she could. Ronnie stood there, his face a tight smirk over his pale body. Finally one girl, then another and another, stood up and hopped out of the pants. Dorie, riding a wave of pity for him, standing there so

naked and alone, joined them. A few women still sat, looking intensely uncomfortable.

"Okay, if you aren't wearing underwear, pick some out for the performance," he said, guessing at the problem. "Just promise you'll take the first underpants that present themselves in the drawer, the laundry pile, wherever. No second-guessing." They nodded solemnly.

He must have known most of the girls wouldn't be wearing bras. Breasts of all sizes blossomed out from under layers of clothing, awesome in their collective softness and roundness. Now the boys had all stripped down too, showing their skinny, hairy chests. One of them cupped his hands over his underpants. Dorie didn't know how she felt, standing there in her plain white panties that just covered her bellybutton. Her own breasts a little on the small side. It wasn't like being in the locker room. This was some new kind of nakedness that she'd never felt before.

So easy to do nothing. The clock by her bed read a little after 11. Her history class was over by now, and Poli Sci, Issues in Electoral Politics, was almost halfway through. Ronnie's class met in midafternoon. She hadn't been to her morning classes since when, early last week? If only she'd known how easy it was to stop going, she thought rolling her knees slowly under the pool, or a lake. The shock of cold, followed by the watery, floating comfort of immersion. Cells slowing down as the body temperature dropped. What had been Melissa's half of the room was now bare; Dorie couldn't make herself even cover the thin, gray mattress. She had tried to organize things before Melissa's parents came. Her mother's face carnation pink, and quivering; she must have cried the whole ten hours in the car. While Mr. Breese stiffly placed folded clothes, rolled-up posters, books and notebooks into the boxes they'd brought, Melissa's mother speared Dorie with her eyes, keeping her face averted from her daughter's things as if they were the scene of the accident. Dorie heard her own voice, hollow and high as a scared six-year-old's, giving weak little responses to Mrs. Breese's questions. Yes, she thought Missy had been doing well (that's what they called her). No, she hadn't been dating anyone special (she looked away as though pondering this). Her favorite class? Roots of Western Theater, Dr. Freundlich's class, definitely. Once he'd carried the boxes down to the car, Melissa's father stood by the door, a hardened sentinel with a steely frown, till the women were done talking. After the two of them left the room, she rifled through her desk drawer for a sheaf of snapshots, silly dorm-life pictures of Melissa, and ran after them. Mrs. Breese hugged her next to the car, and made Dorie promise to stay in touch; then she started to shake, and Dorie had to help her into the front seat. She held herself tight, coatless in the cold as the station wagon pulled away.

Dorie lowered her feet to the cold floor, stumbled toward the bathroom. A week after their visit, she got a letter from Melissa's mother, thanking her for all her help, and telling her they had spoken to Professor Ronald Freundlich about

Melissa, and he had kindly offered to mount a performance as a memorial to her. She marveled now at their innocence. Did they have any idea what he was doing? Would they be coming to the performance? She looked in the mirror at her pasty reflection, the dark hair furring out around her face at odd sleep-angles. She imagined herself dancing in her underwear in front of Mr. And Mrs. Breese. At a memorial for their daughter. This is avant-garde theater, she told herself, shutting her eyes against the picture in her head. She almost hadn't gone to the second rehearsal, the one where Ronnie announced all the Maenads would be blowing on whistles. Melissa would have pushed Dorie into going back, but she wasn't there. So Dorie had done it herself, saying in her head as she walked along the dark path. It's for Melissa. I'm doing this for Melissa. Now she looked herself in the eyes and tried it out again. It's for Melissa. It's in honor of Melissa. It's in Melissa's memory.

Another big, pretty envelope waiting in her mailbox: this one from the dean's office. She felt a needle of remorse, but it passed as she tossed the unopened letter into the trash. She thought of Dean Loughlin, her faded face surrounded by frizzy gray hair, her eyes beaming sympathy of an unnerving intensity from behind her desk. Loughlin had come through for her then, when the thought of sharing her room made her feel like throwing up. Now, she probably just wanted to see how Dorie was doing. Or one of Dorie's professors had talked to her. Was it possible she had missed a test? If it was that asshole Fallon, he could take a flying fuck. Poli Sci had seemed to make the most sense when it was time to pick her major, but Fallon's droning voice made her jaws ache with the despair of being in the wrong place and time.

She walked down the path from Thornton, checking the angle of the sun. Already it nested pallidly in the tree branches. There was a swooping behind her, and a hand looped inside one of her arms.

"Dorie," said the voice low in her ear—Ronnie's. Her breath leaped in her throat, and she felt angry at herself for this betrayal by her body. He'd only called her that once before, a little joke while they lay in his bed, their bodies slick against each other. Her anger sharpened as the next thought came to her—that he must have finished with his latest coed. She tried to yank herself away, but he just followed, his arm still linked in hers, like she was leading him in a dance step. As they walked along, she felt his hand insinuate into her coat pocket. It came out again, holding a stray cough drop, which he gave a brief but intense examination. He unwrapped it, popped it into his mouth and chewed on it, making a sound like glass crunching under a shoe.

"The whistles came in," he said. "Want to come into town with me and pick them up?"

"No, I don't want to get your goddamn whistle!" Her voice surprised her with its harshness. He untangled his arm from hers and walked sideways, examining her.

"What's your problem, man?" he asked. She stopped.

"This whole thing is your fucking trip, Ronnie! It's got nothing to do with Melissa, zero!" Her face felt raw, and her throat, and her head rang. He came in close to her, close enough for their breath to mingle in the air between them. But he didn't take hold of her.

"Look, I'm hurting here too," he said, his eyes looking into hers. "What am I supposed to do with that? I do what I do." The muscles in his face strangely still, his face glowing in the weak late-afternoon light. "I just thought you'd want to help out a little. For Melissa."

"Go to hell," she got out, having a little trouble breathing, because she actually, unbelievable, was starting to feel sorry for him. He cocked his head, considering what she'd said. Then as if obeying her command, he turned lightly on one sneaker and walked away. She stood, watching the invisible lines made by students crisscrossing the lawn. The sky above them a mouse-fur gray, far from what she knew would be the gauzy, caressing blue of the Barbados sky.

Walking in fading light. Too many twigs under her feet was this the woods? No, it was the path, still the path. The wind sneaking into her back, swirling through her coat, under all the layers, into the skin. Inside, shooting through the hollow places and on out through her belly. Pull up the collar. Don't run. Things were no longer making sense. The wind cold, but it was also the tropical breeze of Barbados, heavy and insistent, nearly knocking her over with the knowledge of how it would feel to lie down by the side of the road and not get up again, to let the fullness of not moving grow and around her like bougainvillea. Lying there, she could let go of it all—dealing with Ronnie, tying herself in knots trying to figure out how to live with a war on. How to live. She caught herself waiting to see Melissa—there she was, by the side of the path. Her face big, puffy and distorted now. The hair massing around it like golden seaweed. The pink lips saying something to her, but the voice wavering like a tape on a faulty head. An underwater voice, calling her. What? What are you saying? I'm here and you're not—is that all right? I need to know, talk so I can understand!

Standing behind the bleachers, she heard the rising Greek word that signaled the women to enter. She pulled off her shirt and threw it in the pile. Her whistle clutched in one fist, she squeezed with the other half-naked Maenads through the opening between two bleacher sections. Four sections had been pushed into a rough square in the center of the gym. Inside the square, the harsh yellow light shone equally on performers and audience—she could see all the fully-dressed people seated around them, their foreheads bright in the overhead glare. There, in the bottom row, Mr. And Mrs. Breese sat stiff, as if braced against a blow. She turned her eyes from them, as if that would keep them from seeing her. She didn't want to look for Jeffrey, but her eye found him anyway, sitting up near the top with Tracy, hunched forward in his coat. That's what it's like, she realized—the dream she had, where she was walking down a hall, or a crowded sidewalk,

and realized she didn't have her shirt on. Or her pants. But in the dream, she'd clutch something to cover herself. This moment, with other women around her as naked as she was, lay somewhere way past that dream. It was some other dream. Ronnie stood in one corner, Pentheus now, his body milky-white under the lights, wearing only his jockeys and a cheap black Halloween mask covered with leaves. Under the god's spell, thinking himself one of the Maenads. He gave the cue—a slow turn of the head from one side to the other—and the women started advancing on him. The plan was for them to take hold of him, five on each side, lift him above them, and circle once. Then, with the others making a wall in front, they would tumble him backward, making him disappear. Raw meat waited on the other side, in a big kitchen bowl just under the bleachers. Dorie put the whistle in her mouth and started to blow, along with the others.

A deafening sound!

The shrieking of the whistles makes her feel like part of a crowd of ululating Arab women, screaming for their dead husbands. She blows short, sharp bursts that help her keep up the step—two steps forward on one foot, two steps on the other. Light-headed from blowing she lets the whistle rest lightly between her lips while the sharp sound buzzes in on her from all sides. If they all let go of Ronnie at once while he's getting lowered to the floor, eh would fall on his head. His neck would break. If only a few let go, he might still fall on his head and suffer serious injury. She is supposed to take hold of one of his ankles. The hooting whistles have heightened her capacity to see—not to think things out, but to see. Does Ronnie know how vulnerable he is? There's so much energy surrounding her—it seems to be pulsating from the skin of the women, coming out of their moving bodies. Bare feet stamping, they're moving all around now, breaking the lines they started in. So beautiful—their backs long or thick, bellies wide or taut over the underwear, the on-their-honor everyday underpants—pink, yellow and white, a few with lace, some with little flowers. With a silent snap, she realizes that she, too, is beautiful. It's not necessary to understand the rest, she couldn't figure it out anyway. Right now, it's enough to be swaying in this sleek and dangerous body. Ronnie is irrelevant. So is school. She'll go someplace where it's always warm, it doesn't have to be an island but it will have palm trees and a soft breeze, and bright red flowers. From there, it will be easy to understand what Melissa's trying to tell her. She will turn her face to the sun, and remember this and laugh. Gliding with a panther's grace, she reaches down to grab the pretender by his pale ankle, lift him high and let him tumble backward to the floor.