

On the Floor

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Snow fell in heavy clumps, but it did not occur to Nigel as an obstacle. “I’m at school,” he typed into his phone, clicking each button three times.

Jean replied immediately. “Do you want to come over? Here’s my address.”

He pulled up a map on the screen in front of him. The terminal was just one mini-desktop cabled to a monitor, three rows deep in a bank alongside ten others. The overhead light had dimmed after the timer counted fifteen minutes of no movement.

Nigel sketched a few lines into his notebook, a rough map with just enough detail to guide him. The visit would bring him somewhere new. He could not have known the significance this night would play, but still performed a minimal survey of the terrain before him. For the young, everything is new and we cannot parse the significance of one event against another. A figure steps forward, an outline now etched in laser-like clarity beneath your focus. It recedes back into undifferentiated life. The role that personage plays does not become clear until time allows us to isolate it in the context of a life. Nigel has since become trapped in the opposite perspective he once had: an antiquarian, a scholar of life, professionally reserved. He perceives nothing but historicity, as though he might find, in a volume pulled down from the library stacks, a chapterized moment.

“I’m on my way,” Nigel typed. Fond recollection of his bygone follies would become a pleasant indulgence for Nigel, an exercise to animate a heart blanketed in the soft dust that settles on undis-

turbed chambers. But I return so often to that night, and I have become convinced that there is depth to be revealed in the sequence of events that unfolded.

The snow blurred the night into driven anarchy. Sudden lights and the blare of a yellow plow roared at him. Her address was a four-storey block of apartments. He pressed the blue button for her unit and the door opened with an electronic rattle. As he put his foot on the variegated linoleum, the sound of an opened latch echoed down the stairs.

“Let me take your coat,” Jean said. He handed it to her and she flattered him when she rifled through his pockets. “Nietzsche, eh? You’re not beating the philosopher–king allegations.”

He bent with straight knees to untie his boots. “I know he’s not in style, but I just can’t help loving him.”

“And what have you been writing?” She pulled out his notebook, and he attacked the next knot with vigour. She would not likely try to decipher his handwriting there in the hall, but—“what’s this?”

He straightened his back to stand six feet tall, but she was still taller than him. She held up the page that showed the map he had drawn, her address written in ink.

“Well, I’ve never been here before.”

Her pointed brows worried him. “Why did you draw a map?” When he showed her his phone, she understood, and dismissed the topic with a roll of her eyes.

Now it was her turn to be flattered by the attention he paid to her. She followed along as he slid socked feet along hardwood floors from one room to the next. Kitchen and attached living room, bedroom down the hall. The place was well-furnished, as though she had been there for years—it must have come furnished, although such arrangements are not common. The first time the two of them

had gone home together, she had brought him somewhere far more modest (albeit in a more conventional neighbourhood). Now she had a matching tweed couch and armchair.

A lampshade cast a warm glow over the kitchen table. He took a seat in the chair that was already askance, and she pulled out another chair to sit at his left. Their knees touched under the table, a brief and invisible sensation, before she crossed her legs. Pens, books, and a notebook were arranged in an arc around a Macbook balanced on a stack of books. Jean took the silver thing away, put it in a drawer while Nigel proceeded to peruse the literature.

Little of what he saw held familiarity to him. “So this is what you’re reading over in the English department?” Some of the books were in odd formats, with more attention paid to design than the scholarly editions he was used to. The topmost volume was a square of paper, a 4:3 photo of a van printed across the cover. Instead of the blocks of text that he was familiar with, the pages were printed with spare, sculpted lines.

Jean watched him. “It’s poetry,” she said. “Do you know what that is?”

“I’ve read poetry. I’m reading a book of Emily Dickinson right now. I got it at Indigo, if you can believe that. I love it.”

“That must be so different from the strong, masculine curriculum of the philosopher-king,” she said.

“Alright,” he said, and took up the next book.

“That one’s a really big deal. It’s about Trayvon Martin. It was published a couple years ago, but with the new president people are talking about it again. Have you heard of it?”

“I think he mentioned it in the class we took together.” Nigel continued to unpile the stack of books. When he reached the bottom, if he had not been so taken with the surreptitious game played between them, he might have noticed how her brows pointed forward again as he uncovered the final

volume.

“What’s this?” It was not in heavy rotation, but neither had it been retired to the shelf. A thin blue paperback torn neatly in half. *Bluets*, read the title in small block letters. On the same line the author’s name: *Maggie Nelson*.

“Have you seen my Marilyn Monroe?” Jean stood up, moved into the living room and pointed to a framed print of Marilyn over the sewer grate. “Isn’t it kitsch, isn’t it funny?”

He followed her. “Very funny.” She made little effort to disguise the obviousness with which she deflected his inquiry. It would not be enough to prevent them from circling back around to where it lay on the kitchen table.

“And what about this one?” He moved further into the living room, to a print of some pastel oblongs that hung next to the couch.

“Careful,” she warned. “My friend made that.” She stood close beside him, as though to try it out. He laid his hand on her shoulder-blade, himself in the mood to experiment. They hung like that for a moment, close together, before he let his hand drop and she swished her skirt back to the kitchen.

Jean tore the wrapper from a teabag and put the paper in one of two clear plastic bags that blocked the door to the balcony. “I love to collect recycling,” she said. One bag was full and tied off, the other nearly there. He could see empty milk cartons, the plastic boxes salad greens came packaged in. “Don’t you?”

“What is this?” Nigel picked up the torn copy of *Bluets*. The two pieces fit neatly together, but he could not unsee the line of their tear.

“Have you read it?”

“No, just *The Argonauts*.”

“That’s right, we read it in that class together. This is her first book. It’s closer to poetry, but it still

has theory. You'd like it."

"And you hated it so much, you tore it in half?"

Jean held the two pieces between lengthened fingers. "Not me."

Nigel interpreted everything she said as an aesthetic manifesto. She was a true poet, unafraid to probe deep into the hidden heart of the matter. She said the whole truth of what she felt and challenged him to respond without flinching. He suspected that her simple comment about the pleasure of collecting recycling related to some deep Lacanian truth. To this day, while Nigel bitterly watches dust collect in the ventricles of his heart, Jean is not content to settle for a half-life.

"It was a man I used to know. Gary. A brilliant man, truly." She glanced at him, brushed her hair aside, and Nigel noticed that her brown eyes held the deepest clarity.

Jean took a year off from her undergraduate degree to move across the country. She wrote, had a few flings, and revelled with amazement at how little she needed to work to remain comfortable. When the Fall semester came around, she transferred her credits and took another year, part-time, to graduate. The delay bumped her up an age bracket, but she knew what she wanted. The Masters program here was more academic, and hence more modernist and avant-garde. She could keep up with her research and still have time for studio work.

The city offered endless dynamism, too. Dense and concrete, hot in the summer and cold in the winter. Every night there was something to discover. On summer weekends, when it seemed like everyone in the world had stopped down to let loose, possibility radiated out in every direction. She was accepted into the program, and even offered a Research Assistantship.

The guys in her program either covered themselves in tattoos, or wore skirts. Both were the same:

obsessed with being the smartest person in the room. She knew they studied deconstructionism and decolonialism, just like she had. And yet they held on to their conquering reason and reduced everything to a binary. She still studied with them, went to conferences with them, socialized with them and otherwise spent most of her time with them.

But there were other guys in the department. She wasn't in any of Gary's classes, but he was always there when she went to her supervisor's office. She heard him and Nathan laugh together, loose and unreserved, just like any other couple of guys.

By the time Nigel and Jean met, rumours had begun to circulate fast and thick. That was the year so many departments came to reckon with the skeletons hidden in their closets. Clouds of kicked-up dust forced ghouls out of the crypt, there to choke in the torchlight. One rumour said that Nathan had fled Berkeley. Before it could gain strength, scandal broke closer to home.

Jean wound up crammed in the seat next to Gary when Fred Moten came to speak. The auditorium was packed: students sat in the aisles, professors sat along the edge of the stage.

Gary leaned over and whispered into her ear. "He's wrong to approach institutional critique in the same way as in America." She could feel his breath on her ear. "It's different here."

She agreed. "It's even more fake here."

It was still warm out when Nathan threw his Fall semester party. He kept the door open and they spilled out into the backyard. All the graduate students were invited, but Gary was one of only a few faculty members in attendance. But they were all artists: there was no hierarchy here. Jean didn't think he looked so different from the guys she had known, as he leaned against the tree. She went up to him to see if it were true.

Jean liked to feel pain, so he hurt her. But she didn't take it easy and would resist. It was part of their game, she thought. They fought viciously, and when they took it to the bed they continued to spit and claw at each other.

He was unkind about her classmates, the school, the country.

"This country is a ghetto," he told her. "You have real talent. I mean it. I want to see you succeed, but If you want to have an impact, you have to get out of here."

"You can't say ghetto." His arrogance stung. It was the arrogance of kings, ordained by the unearned right of birth. "Didn't you learn anything from Fred? That's just white supremacy."

"I'm from New York, the most diverse city in the world. You're from an island."

"I may not be a New York City bigshot, I may be just a village bumpkin to you, but I see you for what you are. Everyone in the world does."

Since she was uncommitted to her apartment, and since the fighting only kept them stuck to each other, she moved in with him. That's when they really started to get acquainted: he was always condescending to her for the values she maintained. Her "pieties," he called them. "You're so politically correct. And you're so impressionable. Your taste is too easily molded by fashion and by people with less talent than you."

He came home one night after drinking with Nathan. She could perfectly visualize the hours they had spent inflating each others' egos. "This is what you're reading?" he interrupted, plucking the book from the table. "I said before, auto-theory is just a fad. You can't waste your time writing like this."

"You're saying that because you hate women. Don't take your frustrated ambitions out on us. Don't take it out on me."

"I'm telling you for your own good!" He took the book between his hands and she saw his surprise when it came apart. "I'm with you because I believe in you. The more you squander your talent on this,

the more poorly it reflects on me!” He threw the pieces at her and they struck two painful blows to her face.

“You piece of shit!” Her cheeks were red. Hot blood pumped: her entire head was on fire. Now her body was on fire. She couldn’t help but throw herself to the rug in front of the couch, pull up her skirt, push down her underwear and start to rub herself vigorously. She was already on the edge, and it didn’t take long to push herself over. She didn’t care that Gary just scowled and left the room. She knew that he could still hear her.

“I have a masochistic tendency. I enabled him. I thought I could handle it, but we both pushed each other to the end and eventually it just got out of control. It wasn’t a clean ending. I will never know if he has been accountable. But closure is a fantasy, and this idea of justice that some girls have is completely sick. They want to live intensely, and still get out perfectly unscathed. How entitled can you be? I won’t make the same mistakes again. I don’t want anyone else to get hurt, but neither am I a cop.”

The energy of her story had drained the room of the friendly antagonism inherent in their game. Nigel was moved to respond with empathetic companionship. As he lay beside her in bed and listened to her gentle breathing, he could not tell if his disquiet came from thwarted desire, or from the story she had told him. He did not see then how a simple anecdote of the heart so closely paralleled an epic dynamic of national identity. He had by this time become acquainted with the height of his passionate capacities, but still took them for granted. Not so the antiquarian with whom I have lately become acquainted. That man has grown obsessed with tracing the line of causality and symbolic connection between innocent folly and the events of his ultimate undoing.