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Crazy

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MICHELLE LATIOLAIS

Crazy

for Max Winter

The students were thanking her and then hugging her, filing out the front door and leaving down the walk. They liked the food, the wheat berry salad and the fennel tart. They liked the beer, too, and would she come with him to school sometime to hear a reading of one of their plays, or a rehearsal, perhaps have lunch with them? Polite. The students were always so polite to her, and funny; they made jokes about him that amused her. Of course they were drama students, and so they were lively and performative, joyfully outrageous, on fire. Did she know that he talked about her in rehearsals, said, "I defer to my wife on this. . . ." One young woman—she stood so tall—said, "You're his example for almost anything having to do with women." The young woman smiled and it was genuine, her ink-blue eyes glistening; she was the talent in the group, Benson said, "it's too bad she's so tall."

"Now we know why," said another young woman, and it took her a moment to realize this was a compliment to her, that they understood why she was a measure of womanhood, or homemaking or cooking. It referred to so much, this compliment, and she knew they were taking their notes here, now, in her home, their home, Benson and hers. It made her nervous most times having them here, so many sets of avid eyes. Some of it was sweet attention, the fact that they were at school and away from real homes, stable living situations with full batteries of pots and pans. They hadn't seen a four-square meal in days, nor cloth napkins and glasses that matched. They wandered the house looking at the paintings, or playing with the wicket in the front door, this bit of theatrical business, and today Benson had even directed them into their bedroom—really into their walk-in closet—to look at the original playbills from Odets's *Clash by Night* and Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*. So many of them had stood in their bedroom, but one of the young men had plunked down on the bed, drinking his beer, one of his knees hiked up with his boot heel on the bed rail. It was just a length of wood, she said to herself,

and his boot heel would do no damage. It was an old, old bed, one which she had brought to the marriage, a spool bed inherited from her southern aunt. They were reproducing them now, though this was an original from Louisiana, from the 1870s and made of West Indian mahogany. She hadn't wanted it to be their bed, their marriage bed; it had seemed too grandmotherly, and Benson stretched its entire length and then some, but they were as poor as these graduate students were now, and had been happy to even have a bed. A small white panel truck delivered it to their New York apartment all the way from Shreveport, the men calling ahead to make sure someone was there in the three-story walk-up to receive it. On the busy, filthy sidewalk when the moving blankets dropped from the turned rungs of the bed's footboard, a check, secured on one end with Scotch tape, stood up like a playing card clothespinned to a bicycle spoke. On the back of the check was scrawled, "Buy yourself a good mattress and box spring, one which will take a lot of action! Love, Tante Çeçè." She hadn't loved the suggestion of her aunt's note—it embarrassed her—and even worse was the absurd amount, enough for five mattress sets. She worried that these moving men had read her aunt's ornate scrawl, had laughed their way up the eastern seaboard, and when Benson came striding down the street, waving, his face alight, he and the men had laughed and she heard the words "we brought the launch pad to the rocket" and the deep male laughter and she watched from the window the vigorous handshakes and Benson putting money in their hands. "My aunt already paid them," she said when Benson came up the stairs and in the front door. "She tipped them, too. You didn't need to give them money."

"Oh, why not," Benson had said. "They're in New York City. They need to play a bit." She had felt mean, a check for five thousand dollars in her hand and she stood there begrudging these men a little mad money.

Of course, she and Benson bought a very fine mattress and box spring, and because of this had used the bed for so long it became their bed and then, even longer into the years, after they had replaced that initial mattress set, it would have meant something too ominous to have changed out the bed frame...and then what would that preferred bed have been anyway? "I can't hear you for this goddamn bed," Benson complained, its squeaking and moaning quickening over the years as the different climates dried out the

old wood. Or Benson would ask, amused, "Is that you or the bed?" or he would ask, his lips against her ear, "Was it as good for you as it was for the bed?" but Benson loved Tante Çeçè and would not have hurt her for the world even if she might never have found out about them purchasing something new and less rickety. It was just something Benson wouldn't do in the world, and of course she had always agreed, had loved this observance in him.

But this summer, in the dense, unnerving heat, Benson moved her against the wall and ran his hands up under her wet arms and then up around her sticky neck. "Stop," she pleaded, "stop. I'm a sweaty mess," but he wouldn't and he turned and pressed her into the bed and said, "I don't care—you think I care about sweat. I want my mouth on you." That was his expression, he wanted his mouth on her, but she could not understand this desire, could not imagine allowing anything so disgusting. "No," she said, pushing his head from between her legs. "No. Why must you want this so much."

He jerked his face away from her hand. "Why indeed," he said and then he shifted his weight and rolled away and she raised her head to see him licking the mahogany rungs of the footboard, "chewing the scenery," a phrase she knew from him. And then she said as much, "You're chewing the scenery."

Now she shook the young man's hand who had sat on the bed, the bed that had strangely not made a peep. His hand felt grainy and thick and cold, but her hands were always too warm, clammy. "I've read your books," he said quietly. "They were helpful to my family."

Oh, she thought, his hand falling from hers. She was always surprised when someone knew that she had done something other than stand by Benson's side as he told his students goodbye. It was not Benson who spilled the beans, and her "oh" was in large measure her surprise that someone yet again had spoken about her, had identified her. What diligent soul in Benson's department took it upon himself?

"You have a little sister," she asked the young man, "or a sister, yes?"

"Yes," he said.

"She eats now?"

"Yes," he said again, "sort of," and then he was gone down the steps and she heard his boot heels against the brick, resonant and

pronounced, the jostle of the buckles. She liked the way his black leather jacket hiked up his back. She could see his faded blue shirt-tail just coming untucked. She liked these students; she liked them all, their tremendous vulnerable power. Then Benson had her by the shoulders from behind and pulled her into himself and kissed her on the top of the head. "I'll be right back in," he said, and because he was an actor and he knew how to breathe, how to enunciate and project, his words blew hot across her scalp, as though even before she saw what she was about to see, the fire had begun.

"Come along, Mercutio," Benson said, "that knucklehead Romeo awaits your death." Benson's talent, the tall Meagan, turned and smiled at her; she clutched her purse to her side, intoned what so many of them had intoned, thank yous, appreciation, and then she passed out the door at Benson's insistence, his arms aloft, directing. The tall Meagan bowed awkwardly, a performance, stumbling into a funny drunken walk, and then she hung a moment on the iron gate delivering lines:

"No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man. I am pepper'd—"

Benson laughed and pulled the front door shut.

Inside, it was so suddenly quiet, even the music between tracks, and then slowly the deep sounds of Mingus fingering his bass. She stood looking at the door's panels and the iron wicket that rattled. She could open the little grille and look through, but she thought, no, don't. She walked into the front room and gathered glasses and napkins onto a tray. Two cashews remained in the nut bowl. They looked to her like huge commas, and she leaned down and plucked them from the bowl and ate them. Mercutio's lines, didn't they signal the turning point in the play, the comedy ending and the tragedy beginning? She moved to the front window and looked out. She thought "the talent" and Benson well matched. They stood talking, first Meagan's head down with her hair falling forward, obscuring her face, and then his face down, and then her hands held behind her back and her lovely face tilted up to his. Benson knew an audience at his back when he had one, and he never touched her, never even leaned down to kiss her on the cheek—blameless—but this was how she, his wife in the window, knew. All theater people hugged and kissed all the time. They were crazy for it.