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Resist

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Resist

The second time I wake up this morning Roberto is gone. The first time I heard the toilet flushing; he came out of the bathroom and slid back into bed, shivering. Now I am hugging a pillow that smells like him. I go to make coffee in the kitchen, where yesterday's clothes have been folded and placed on a chair. For weeks he's been saying that he wants to tie me up. Last night he tied me to the fridge with my bra, arms pulled behind my back, skin drawn taut across my chest. "To have my way with you," he whispered in my ear. The fridge, I imagine, is a preview of what's to come.

"There's more to you than this obsession!" Mr. Fairchild says to his daughter Sabrina in the eponymous MGM classic. Later, Sabrina sits in a tree overlooking a dinner party hosted by David Larrabee, the object of her long-standing fantasy.

"There's more to *you* than these obsessions!" says Dr. Hudson when I charmingly quote the movie line to her. It's a signifier that I recognize the problem, so no need to waste time getting to it.

Many moves to new cities equals many new therapists, and I am good at bringing them up to speed with a matter-of-fact, clinical detachment that almost makes me think we're treating me together. "You have so much going for you," each therapist says, resisting the impulse to touch me in a way that always feels intentional. But I'm used to being touched, I *need* to be touched, I promise I won't fall in love with a touch.

"There's so much in you to desire," says Dr. Hudson. "You're smart, you're funny, you're pretty—"

"Don't," I say. "I'm smart and funny. But, please, don't. Not that. "

With thick black hair that reaches the small of her back, almond eyes flanked by Palestine-reputed cheekbones, and a sensuous mouth, top lip weighing down upon a smaller lower lip so as to give her a terrifying non-smile, my mother is, by almost all standards, exquisite. As a child, I was lavished with attention for being her daughter. In fact, that was the extent of who I was. "*Inti bint Laila?*" You're Laila's daughter? "*Yee! Habibti!*" For years, I freeloaded off my mother's earned adoration. I didn't have to do a thing to be loved; I just had to be. But as I got older, the same people who'd kissed and pinched my cheeks would try and talk to me, assuming that I possessed her fluidity of wit and charm, her

lack of self-consciousness, only to discover that I didn't. My conversation was awkward, my gestures uncertain—a handshake or a kiss? And if the latter, two kisses or three? As an adolescent, my presence was off-putting. "Tell *mama* hi," they'd say before escaping its heaviness.

Roberto is in town from Argentina for the fall to work on his fourth novel. We meet the day he arrives. The conversation quickly moves from pleasantries to relationships to break-ups. He's separated from his wife and seems eager to mention this; my relationship with Samantha ended last spring. This is how we begin.

The next afternoon, I run into him outside the local bookstore. "What've you been up to?" he asks.

I tell him I wrote a short essay about sex, did some reading.

"Is it possible to write a short essay on that topic?"

The conversation feels scripted, as though we are two leads in a screwball romantic comedy. "Well," I say, "it's specifically about women having sex 'like men' and vice versa."

"I'm always the one who needs to be held afterward," he says, "and who needs to feel loved." My mind wanders back to Samantha, to a condom wrapper that materialized from underneath my bed one night. I managed to snatch the incriminating remnant off the floor before she could see it. I think back to nights spent with strangers, a strategy designed to preempt the pain of her leaving me.

"Right," I say. "And I'm out the door before the sheets have cooled."

The next day he asks me to dinner. We spend the evening on the restaurant balcony, smoking and drinking. He talks about his eight years in Paris, the birth of his son, the plot of his new novel, his open marriage to and subsequent separation from his wife. I tuck away the *Things To Be Wary Of*. When we finally decide to order, the kitchen has closed. "It's so comfortable with you," he says. "It feels like we're talking in bed."

The implicit presumption of his comment is both off-putting and impressive. Later, as we say good-bye, I give him my cheek, but he kisses my lips. I decline his invitation to his hotel, and by the time I'm home I have an e-mail from him. "Before tonight, I was attracted to you," he writes, "but in a speculative, abstract way. After we kissed, though, I walked home with my muscles in tension, imagining the unpublishable things I want to do to you."

I respond. "While in a way this excites me, it also makes me nervous."

He answers, "It's the same for me. We may never do anything but talk, and so what: some friendships are driven by attraction. The only

certainty is that there's too much complicity between us to hurt each other, no?"

I don't respond. It's a line I might've used myself.

Fall 2008. It's my first semester in graduate school, and I'm in love with Juliet. I've stayed after class to talk to her, to go over a paper I wrote on *Madame Bovary*, when she suggests I am too harsh on Emma for cheating on Charles.

"Emma's pathetic, sure," she opines, pressing a polished fingernail to the word "*méprisable*" on my paper, and from the dinosaur Band-Aid on that same finger I surmise a husband and kids. "But 'despicable' is melodramatic." She looks at me and smiles.

On the first day of class, she introduced herself to the seminar like this: "In the past, students have told me I don't smile enough. So..."—then she placed her palms on the edge of the desk and leaned forward, smiling, as if to say, "Here you go." I didn't notice the wrinkle that appears above her lip, like a second, smaller smile, that day. While we stand in the empty classroom, I begin to fall into its span.

After I pack my bag and walk toward the door, she calls after me. "Is it so bad, to have an affair?" That month, a photo of Eliot Spitzer and his scorned wife Silda adorns the front page of the *New York Post*.

"I don't know," I say, my stomach dancing. I smile and blush. "But it is in this country."

After the semester ends, Juliet and I go out to lunch and I can't eat. I am too conscious of my every move to land the fork in my mouth, now that I am no longer her student, now that her sapphire wedding ring is refracting off every surface. I stop trying.

"Sorry," I say, laughing dumbly, "I can't eat and talk at the same time." She'd suggested a place in the Upper East Side known for its burgers; I order a salad and have it packed up, though I know I'll never eat it.

The minute she turns the corner from the restaurant, tears start spilling down my cheeks: I am certain I've given myself away. Perhaps I should be more concerned with the moment when I looked at her and said, without a trace of irony or shame, "I set my sights on someone I can't have and use them as a muse." She nodded then, unknowingly, I think, though I admit I wanted her to suspect.

I'm walking through town a few days after our balcony date when it starts pouring. I run into the nearest building, which happens to be the bookstore, and Roberto is standing near the register, paging through Laclos.

“So the other evening,” he says, “was it something I did?”

“I’m not ready to get involved with anyone,” I say. No need to go into details. Say what needs to be said, reveal nothing beyond what’s necessary.

“Then let’s be friends,” he answers.

He comes over that night with a movie, *Notes on a Scandal*, and we talk throughout. “Obsession is so interesting,” he says.

“Do you think Cate Blanchett is hot?” I ask.

“Nah,” he answers, “but Judi Dench I’d totally fuck!” I let him smoke on the couch since it’s still raining.

“Can I have a drag?” I ask. He holds the cigarette to my lips.

When the movie ends, he faces me, inches forward slowly. I can stop him if I want. I don’t.

Afterward, after he’s pulled me onto his lap, carried me to bed, made love to me—sweat dripping off his nose and onto my cheek—a lightning bolt momentarily illuminates his face. “Is it all right if I stay?” he asks. It isn’t. The thought of spending the entire night together, then waking up and seeing each other’s bodies in slivers of light through venetian blinds, the smell of stale sex and sleep breath . . .

“No,” I say. “It’s not all right.”

He gets up. “Just promise you won’t disappear.”

Before Juliet, there is Kate, my college roommate. I’ve taken the semester off with a plan of traveling to South America, and I am waitressing at a bar to save up money. At work one evening I overhear my boss say to the bartender, “That girl who comes in here, the blonde?” He nods in Kate’s direction as she hovers over the pool table, about to sink the eight ball. “I want to fuck her until her back shatters.”

March 2001. It’s her birthday, and at dinner I give her a present: David Gray’s *White Ladder*. Once home, we put on the CD—it is whiny, brooding, melodramatic—and we lie side by side to listen. Nothing out of the ordinary until she begins caressing my face, tracing my eyebrows, my nose, my lips. Then she kisses me. Nervous, I stop her. “I don’t want to ruin our friendship,” I say. It is a line from movies, what the girl always says when a guy friend makes a move.

Of course I never end up leaving town that semester. The only places I travel exist along the landscape of Kate, beneath her clothes, inside her mouth, all on her white-sheeted bed that feels like a frothy ocean. I have lost control over my own volition, or maybe I’ve chosen to wrap it up in her. We set sail Friday night, docking only to pee, the ceramic ashtray on her windowsill full of butts by Sunday afternoon. An art and

fashion major, she paints, draws, collages, and dresses me. She drinks and tastes me. She does everything but feed me, though not for lack of trying. Once, as I sit naked in her bed, we both glance at my reflection in the window and notice my vertebrae through my skin. “You’re getting really thin,” she says. “I’m scared I might shatter you!”

Kate and I have been sleeping together for almost a month when I notice a bruise on her upper thigh. “What’s that?” I ask, and as the question leaves my mouth, I fear I won’t want to hear the answer.

“Oh. Blake,” she says. “He does that when I’m on top of him.” I pretend not to mind until three weeks later I watch her leave the bar with a man in the middle of my shift. After they walk out, I drink three Rail Royales—the house specialty, consisting of a shot of every liquor on the rail and a splash of Sprite. When I clock out, get in my Wrangler, and back into a dumpster, a cop appears immediately.

“She’s sleeping with someone else,” I cry, stumbling out of my car, “and I’m falling in love with her.” The cop collects me in his arms, and while I thrash against his chest, tipsy coeds stop to watch.

When I’m in high school, my mother discovers Café Milano, the place in town where politicians, lobbyists, and the occasional Hollywood actor schmooze.

“Where are you going?” I ask as headlights sear through my bedroom window. The driver honks from the driveway.

“Yalla, bye,” she says, spritzing perfume on her neck and rushing out to the car. I watch her open the passenger door and climb in, kissing the driver hello as they back away. She always stays out late, so late that I often think there’s been an accident, that she’s dead, she is dead, my mother is dead, she’s dead and I’m all alone. I pace the hallway upstairs, crying and screaming before I finally break down and call the restaurant. The hostess wanders off to find her at her table; moments later she’s on the line: “*Habibti*, everything’s fine. We’re just ordering dessert now. Go sleep.”

We keep up this routine for months until, one night when I call the restaurant, she refuses to come to the phone. When I hear the rumble of the garage door opening a few hours later, I jump out of bed. As I run to embrace her, she smacks me across the face.

I never call the restaurant again. I do not worry about accidents.

Kate and I sleep like this: I lie flat on my back, and she unzips my Outer Banks hoodie halfway down my chest, slides her hand onto my breast, and places her head on my clavicle. I burrow my nose into her hair.

When she wants sex, she gently caresses my nipple; it hardens and she drags her pierced tongue down my stomach, arriving underneath my ex-boyfriend's tattered boxers. I pull her on top of me and align her with myself, so that we practically snap into place. I always come with such force that my back shoots upward, propelling me forward and crashing into her.

"I want to marry you," she says one night as we lay wrapped in a sheet on the floor, having slid like salamanders off the bed. I flutter with fear and a fleeting disgust. A relationship with a woman has come to mean failure: I have failed to get a man, failed to find something normal, failed to not be pathetic. "This is why you don't have a boyfriend!" my mother yells. I spill cereal milk on the kitchen floor and no man will ever love me. I forget to get a pedicure on the first day of the season warm enough to wear sandals, and for this, I'll never get married.

The fifth time Roberto comes over, I let him stay. The next morning, I turn within his arms to face him. "Hi," he says. I smile as he stretches and smiles back.

"How come you never talk about your last relationship?" he asks as he carries two mugs of coffee back to bed. I've been avoiding the subject—Samantha—always turning the conversation back on him whenever he brings it up.

"Because," I say. "I was pretty terrible."

"Did you cheat?" he asks. I nod. "You know," he says, "sometimes I wish I was bisexual. Unfortunately I just like women."

I smile. It's exactly the right thing to say.

Between Kate and Juliet, there are many women I am strong enough to avoid. I can see my heart shattered on their bedroom floors. Nikki isn't one of them. On our first date, she takes me to a sports bar in Murray Hill to watch boxing, Manny Pacquiao versus Miguel Cotto. She is neither straight nor married—she is a film actress eighteen years my senior, though she looks no older than thirty. She wraps her towel around just her waist when getting out of the shower. "I want to come in your mouth," she whispers in my ear.

I dangle off Nikki's arm at parties and screenings, looking expensive and bored. In certain ways, I am her married, straight woman: decorated, femme, emotionally detached, detached because I am attached elsewhere. Plus she always smells like bubble gum, and she seems to really like me, which makes me think she's somewhat pathetic.

We quickly fall into a pattern of give (her) and take (me). For a while, she appears to enjoy it, and I think I can get away without having to do much besides lie there and enact dramatic orgasms. In the summer we fuck on a fire escape, the thrill of which, I hope, might distract her from the asymmetry of our affair. In bed one night, I roll over afterward and pull the blanket to my chin once she's surfaced, turning off the lamp on my nightstand. The frame squeaks as she gets up and picks her pants from the floor. "Where are you going?" I ask, as if I don't know.

"Home, to jerk off," she says, buckling her belt. "I'm sick of getting blue-balled."

It's hard to give when you're not in love, hard to buy into abstract niceties. But people do. Reciprocity comes from care, less than love, lateral to respect. Maybe it's just hard to give when you're not being screamed at or violated or outright bloodied, when you're not being taken from. Maybe it's hard to not become the very taker who took the parts of you that mattered.

Roberto gives me stories. He tells me about Guy de Maupassant's insatiable sexual appetite, about his mentor Flaubert's fear that his protégé's lust would deplete his creative energy. He reads me Neruda, Calvino, and the prostitute scenes from Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. He tells me about Joyce's urine fetish, Dali's seven-year bedridden-ness after Gala's death, the competitive friendship between Picasso and Matisse. He tells me tales of his own sexual conquests: the neighbor's wife in Paris, a forty-two-year-old German woman in Berlin when he was twenty-one, a Vanessa Paradis look-alike in Rio whose dress fell to floor with a gentle lift of its straps. I tell him my stories, too, and they excite him, just as his excite me, but he knows more than I know, has done more than I have, and that's what excites me most.

Spring 2010. I arrive in Los Angeles and call Samantha. I left her sleeping in my apartment back in New York before catching a red-eye flight to LAX. She doesn't answer when I call after landing, so I leave a message she doesn't return. I call again. No answer. I keep calling. The next day, I am at lunch when my phone buzzes with an e-mail. "Good thing I don't trust you," Samantha writes. "Because then I wouldn't have had the impetus to search for confirmation."

My laptop. I left it at home. And my password is saved.

The e-mail continues. She suspected that I would never escape myself, that I'd never change, but she chose to believe otherwise. She feels like she's been living in a fantasy for years. She's comforted to know that she

doesn't have to be sad at the end of it all, doesn't have to romanticize who she thought I was. "I am disturbed," she writes, "by what little conscience you have."

In the California heat, I feel cold and sick and scared. Samantha's e-mail is a mirror held to my face. I am horrified by what I see.

When I break down one night and tell Roberto about my mother, he holds me in his arms and promises to rescue me from all that. "You're my girlfriend, yes," he says, stroking my hair as I press myself into his body, "but I also think of you like a daughter."

Once, my mother told me the truth: she is beautiful, and I am average. I accepted her challenge that day. She might win in the looks category—why does it matter so much? Other Arab women have been mutilated by knives, shrapnel, acid, bombs, and I'm shaken by such a superficial charge? Is narcissism an inherited trait?—but my life will not be average. I will never be ordinary, I promised. And yet what's more ordinary than obsession? I still think of Kate, I still think of Juliet. I still think of Samantha.

Roberto fries up steaks and feeds me pieces. He ties me to the fridge and fucks me. He does all of this while cheating on me furiously, conducting a parallel relationship with his translator, forcing me to dump him for the sake of self-respect.

"I did something silly last night," he tells me, weeping, swearing that it's the greatest mistake of his thirty-six years. To my frustration, I understand his behavior—I could've easily been the one holding two women hostage in case I were to lose one.

"Of course you love me," I snap at him on the sidewalk, if only to keep my ego intact, "but you lost the privilege of *getting* to."

I push past him and walk home, alone as ever. Later, he begs for a second chance. When I refuse his invitation to Buenos Aires, he nods solemnly and says he'll come back to me, that he will spend five weeks in a Midwestern winter to show me the man he really is, and this I agree to. While I wait for his visit, he becomes a character in every novel I read. He becomes Swann, Heathcliff, Valmont. He becomes Rodolphe, he becomes Henry Miller, the one I know through Anaïs Nin's letters.

Sabrina moved to Paris, away from David Larrabee, and discovered how much more there was to her. But I don't live in Paris, and I'm not sure how much there is to discover here.

But then, as his arrival date approaches, he starts to disappear.

I won't notice her until midway through the semester, when I read her writing for the first time. I will come to believe that her inner world resembles mine, though maybe that's what everyone thinks when they think they're in love. Whenever she gets up to use the bathroom, she'll leave her jacket behind, smooshed into the chair, and I'll struggle not to lose sight of the other students around the seminar table. In those moments, when she's gone, I will teach through a terrible sadness. On the last day of class, I will panic at the thought of losing her. The sight of her name in my in-box will make me high. The sight of her holding hands with her boyfriend will turn my stomach metallic. Yet she'll still be my chance at redemption. She'll be the lifeboat I'll drown in.