

Floating on Top

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My favorite bathroom in the world: bright blue wall paper and a view I can almost see. I'm facing the mirror putting on makeup. The window is behind me but I know it's there by the way breezes rattle the empty toilet paper roll and blow up my skirt. From where I stand, if I look past my face, I can see a slip of blue sky, paler than the wallpaper, reflected in the glass. If I get down lower, slouch closer to the toothbrush cup, the top of your favorite maple appears in the corner. But I don't even try for the view. When I'm in a hurry, I say to myself things like "I already know what's out there" or "I won't be able to see downtown anyway with all the leaves so full in the trees." No need to add yet another set of thoughts to what is already bewildering enough—like, why am I shellacking my eyelashing until they resemble spiders' legs dipped in axle grease? Like, why on earth am I going through all this trouble to meet you? You never noticed what I looked like back then, why would you now? I glance at my watch, which is a mistake because I'm late—I'm late—and I know you expect me to be. So I rush, thinking it would thrill me to be on time for once and ruin your expectations.

Prematurely, I bat my lashes and watch as a tiny clump of mascara avalanches off and lands under my eye. Grabbing the towel embroidered "His" in flamingo pink, I touch the end to a faucet drip and dab my eye. The black smears until it looks as if I've been beaten. What doesn't come off hides nicely.

When you left I was in my militant feminist phase: thick underbrushes of armpit hair and faded eyes insisting on anger to get them noticed. All my clothes were variations on homespun cotton: gingham, pakistani cheesecloth, sun bleached knits. On the day it all ended, I hit you with a denim bag made from a pair of your old cutoffs. You said that was "unjust" and I had to laugh, because it was true. But I didn't laugh when you called me "macho." What a rotten and castrating thing to say. Had Owen and I done this to you—forced spite to the surface? Still, I played it out with a shrug, and I think you believed it. Yet here I stand three years later, doing a

Bloomington's mannequin imitation even down to the Bill Blass teddy with mother-of-pearl buttons at the crotch.

I learned so much from you about how visual acting can be. Standing in front of this mirror, you'd wave your razor in grand, sweeping motions, reciting Hamlet or Oedipus or some other script. You knew mirror soul-purging had become a literary cliché so you had to disguise it to yourself. But I wonder: are you rehearsing now? Is what's her face—Dodie?—bending over her baby whale shape to sponge up white piles of slop and stubble as they drop to the floor in your enthusiasm?

When you left it was fall. The leaves, lacey and red around the rims, looked bloodshot but were still so full in the trees neither of us could see the view. It was the day before. We had walked in the woods beneath the window and it drizzled just enough to dampen the leaves so that they stuck to the mud, and also to our feet. They were slick, wet leaf to wet leaf, and I had fallen and you helped me up only to fall down yourself. We both laughed.

As you grabbed my arm, I felt how strong and heavy you were, even as I laughed. You were covered with mud and I suggested we go back to the house and take a warm bath together. "I could make cocoa," I said. "We could snuggle under the afghan," I whispered, breathing against the hairs on your neck. We'd had an adventure, let's go be together, in our warm, dry house. Let's kiss. Let's hug. "I'm cold," I said, and shivered to prove it. You pretended not to notice, so I chattered my teeth. Loud. But you wanted what we'd set out to do. Never a compromise, never a change of plans. "The view," you said, pointing with one arm and encircling my waist with the other.

After our laugh, we didn't talk, not for twenty minutes or so.

"Are you angry?" I asked, finally. There was no reason. I hadn't done anything as far as you knew.

"Should I be?" you asked, throwing a rock up into the trees. It tangled, and plopped. You weren't looking at me, just around. There wasn't a clearing and wouldn't be until late in the month. By then you were gone.

The phone's ringing, but I'm not going to answer it. I'm almost out the door and it might be you changing your mind, or it might be her trying to change mine, and she could, and I'd rather not risk it. I can't figure out why I'm doing this or what I hope to get out of it or even if there is anything to get out of it. But I do know that lack of awareness is pretty fragile stuff. I stand chewing on my comb, looking at the phone as it rings, six times, high pitched and demanding, and then you give up. It has to be you.

On the walk to Steppenwolf's, I see three people who all remind me of you, playing frisbee. They flick it in a curlicue that the wind straightens into my shin. It bounces onto the sidewalk then rolls away. All three come running, apologizing in rounds. I step out of the way and let them pick it up themselves. The thinnest sends the frisbee whizzing, a bright red blurr, back at the other two.

Owen's old house is directly across the street. Every day I walk by but never look. I made a promise last year not to, and I've been good until now. Someone's painted it yellow and I fight the impulse to run across the street, squeeze between the cars parked bumper-to-bumper, and sneak into the foyer to see if it still smells of cigars. Sometimes, like the night you figured us out, it was so thick I could see the smoke swirl like paisley around the bare bulb dangling from the ceiling. I saw it just after Owen kissed me and we stood holding on to each other, afraid to think about what we'd just done but eager to do more.

Owen. Haven't seen him since you left. Even though you insisted otherwise, he really was one of your friends I'd adopted in the arrangement. Funny, but it seems I heard somewhere you're still in touch with him—that nothing ever came between the two of you. Pals as always. And I lost two lovers.

It would almost be a lie to say I wasn't in some way proud of what Owen and I'd done. Of course I couldn't think in those terms at first, but later, when I'd stand in the bathroom—a place that provided an excuse to be alone—there would be those big green leaves, tossing back and forth in the wind, hiding what I already knew was there, and I'd feel a sneaky pleasure over the whole thing. It felt good hurting you. If I looked closer at those branches almost entirely hidden beneath the leaves, I'd see things move and creak around in the joints: a squirrel, a bird; then I'd have to admit I probably let you know, deliberately, in some way. Testing you? Hoping to make you jealous? Seeing how well you knew my movements, whether they were honest or false? Nothing that complicated. It was only meanness. And also the desire to know how much smarter I was than you, that I could understand me and you and Owen and us together, and all you knew was the pain.

An old man comes out of the building and I look at my watch. It's twelve thirty and I should be entering Steppenwolf's air-conditioned lobby at this very moment. As I walk, faster, cool air brushing by me, faster, messing my hair, the pace pounding my heart, I try to control my future by envisioning the silverware and napkin, the round curve of the table, the calligraphy on the menu. Nonchalant-

ly, I order a glass of Zinfandel and some creamed herring to start. With more daring, I venture to imagine the two of you as a "them," dangerously basing this part on what I remember. It's dangerous because I've never seen you together before. Dodie was two years behind me at Barnard. We had friends in common but never got along ourselves. One said she was always jealous of me and I believed it, even before I needed to. So while I walk, I have to splice this picture of a girl smoking cigarettes to look like a woman onto my own very rich portrait of you, and somehow crop dimensions so both can exist in the same frame.

When I finally make it to your table, after refreshing up in the ladies' room first, it's clear I've failed. The clock says I'm twenty minutes late and you look smug. Your eyes seem to say, "some things just never change." Through my embarrassment, I hear the hostess ask me what I want to drink. Without looking at either of you, I forget the Zinfandel and hear myself order a Manhattan straight up. Everything feels so out of whack as I stand there staring down at Dodie's bobbed brown hair, the dull color of overbrewed tea, and how cheery she looks in spite of it. You're wider than I remember you, like my old Torino after a winter in the garage. Out of practice, I kept worrying about hitting something. But you still look good, and I can smell your Antaeus, amazed that you would use it at all, much less to this extent. I try to shake your hand but notice it is wrapped in gauze ("Tennis" you say). You lean upward over the crystal vase of gardenias in purple water. I lean down and kiss your cheek, noticing the diamond in your earlobe shining back gray from your tweed. That's when I tip over the centerpiece. Purple bleeds into the tablecloth taking on the shape of Lake Erie and I blot it before there's a small sea. As I blot away, I notice Dodie's fingernails. I can't make myself look at her face. They're perfectly painted and resemble little red Bic pen caps.

"Don't worry," Dodie says.

"It's almost cleaned up," I lie.

You call Heidi over and she changes the tablecloth. To get out of the way, I scoot around inside the window booth, right next to Dodie. Probably I should sit in the chair facing the two of you, but the waitress is billowing up the cloth from that side of the table I can't stand up another minute. It's going to look silly, the three of us facing the dining room, but what else can I do? Heidi pulls the table out to slide the cloth over the edge and there's Dodie's belly in the flesh, the little whale shape I'd hoped to see waddling across the dining room. But there it is, a silent mound pressing up towards

the inside of her skirt, pulling it taut. At first I want to cry. Then it looks fake to me, as trendy as a wok. I smile at this and you ask me if I'm listening.

"Dodie has been teaching playwrighting to blind children at the Manhattan Institute," you say, looking at her to verify even this simple fact.

"I thought plays centered on spectacle. How can you teach something so visual to blind people?" I ask.

Dodie seems surprised by my remark. I'm surprised she's surprised. Did you tell her I'm illiterate or something? You kick me under the table, then quickly assure me it was a mistake. Heidi asks us if we're ready to order. I notice she hasn't put another centerpiece on the table.

While listening to the tonal rise and fall of Dodie's explanation, I watch your profile, the dark, dark hair, the angled sideburns I could never get you to grow. Your diamond winks at me and I turn from it, slowly, and order the herring with sour cream and veal medallions "Gypsy style," your favorite dish. Because of this and also because Dodie has quit talking and started listening, you order the sauerbraten and latkes. Heidi, who waited on the two of us every Monday for six years, is surprised. So is Ursula, the hostess, who passes by to see how we're doing. You hate sauerbraten—everyone knows that—everyone except Dodie who starts talking about the LaMaze method and why she just ordered a vegetarian plate full of truffles, beets, stuffed zucchini, artichoke hearts gratiné, and pinenuts. I assure her I could never become a vegetarian. She assures me she will convert you. I laugh as I remember you devouring bloody terriyaki steaks, minty legs of lamb, Hawaiian pork chops, and barbecued ribs. You laugh back telling me how this will be the first red meat you've eaten all week and how much better you feel because of it. You order a bottle of Dom Perignon and Dodie tries to talk you out of it, claiming she won't drink any ("It's not good for the baby") as an excuse. I don't want to hear about the baby or how well it can serve certain issues. But then I find myself peeking every chance I get, sniffing with my eyes, as if hungry and looking for a loaf of homemade bread tucked under her blouse. The waitress saves me from getting caught when she brings the champagne.

It is now two in the afternoon and the weather is shifting. Turning to you, ignoring her, I ask about this role you've landed in the new Mamet play. You don't really like Mamet, or at least you didn't. One other thing we couldn't agree upon. "Do you have anything else lined up for when Dodie stops teaching?" I ask, pulling on a piece

of ryebread. Dodie brushes off the crumbs and fennel seeds and answers that she will continue to free-lance, that she has so many clients for ad copy she just doesn't know what to do. You say, calmly, steadily, as you take the bottle from Heidi and cover it with a towel, that you might work on *Days of Our Lives*, that you'd rather not, but the offer is eighty-nine thousand a year for only three days a week. It's not a big part, you say, but it leaves you room to find better, more challenging roles.

The champagne geysers out when the cork pops, but the two of us have our glasses ready. Dodie's accidentally clinks into mine, which causes her to pull back so quickly you almost spill the glittering stream onto the table. You take the glass with your injured hand, steady it, then continue to pour. When it's my turn, my arm stays erect, at a diagonal, unwavering in its direction but refusing to come any closer. Bubbles climb up the fluted sides and recede less quickly, so you don't wait to finish filling it. After you put the bottle back on ice, my glass settles and it's only half full. You glare at me, grab the bottle out of the ice, fill my glass and leave a trail of water from the bucket to my glass and back.

"We're going to drink a toast to Dodie and me," you say. Dodie has decided one little sip won't hurt her. I raise my glass an eighth of an inch higher.

You look at Dodie, put your arm on her shoulder, squeeze it, then hang your elbow over the top of the booth, behind her. From now on, every time you speak about "us," you pull her close. Out the bay window behind your arm it looks as if it's going to rain. The sky is the same dismal gray as downtown from my bathroom window in winter. It's strange how quickly it changed from such a sharp blue to this wan and muted color.

In almost a whisper, you tell me, "Dodie and I are getting married."

At first, I say nothing, then only "When?" holding my glass perfectly still.

"Tomorrow."

Your glasses surround mine, one on each side, banging into it without any feel for the music. Sipping first, I follow with a sigh, remarking first on the quality of the champagne then wishing the two of you a very happy life together. Before you can finish thanking me, I ask if Owen will be best man.

"Only family will be there. It'll be a small wedding," you say. The two of you are flying to Bethesda so both sets of parents can be there. Hers live in McLean. You sip your champagne and Dodie tells us she's

getting tired and adds she's sworn off caffeine. She's beginning to bore me and I think you look bored, too, and, despite the forced elation in your voice, a little scared. Your lip quivered when I mentioned Owen but it could've been from the cold champagne rushing past your teeth. Heidi clips by on her heels and you stop her.

"I'd like coffee. Do you want a cup?" you ask, looking at me. I nod. "Two coffees," you say.

There's a pause that doesn't disappear even when Dodie starts talking about the Betamax she bought for your birthday so you can tape the Royal Shakespeare productions when no one's home. "Which is all the time," she giggles. I look at her, then you. Your arm isn't around her shoulder; it's your own again. You're tearing your cocktail napkin and not listening.

Heidi brings us our coffee and I pour in the cream, watching it cloud on top. I don't stir it. I want to see how much it mixes on its own. It sits there, floating. Dodie says something about how you practice Hamlet in front of the mirror and then the movement in your lip is noticeable and I feel it, as strongly as if you'd blown on me instead of your coffee. Picking up my spoon, I stir my coffee too briskly and in one rush, ask "Have you even told Owen?"

You stare at me and I stare back and Dodie doesn't matter anymore. This isn't kind to her I know, mentioning Owen, shining the one moment that never ended on the table between us, so only you know what I'm talking about—so the moment is only lit for us. But I can't be worrying about that just now. This is for my sake. And she has her Betamax and your baby. So almost without effort, I reach inside and make you remember one last time, and sprawl out the remnants of our affair, shamelessly, in front of her. And you try not to look, you try to hide by pouring more champagne, but you're there, like you always were. □