

ALL THE COMFORT SIN CAN PROVIDE

Grant Faulkner



*To Heather,
who was there from the first story.*

“I am no longer sure of anything. If I satiate my desires, I sin but I deliver myself from them; if I refuse to satisfy them, they infect the whole soul.”

~ Jean-Paul Sartre

“I am good, but not an angel. I do sin, but I am not the devil. I am just a small girl in a big world trying to find someone to love.”

~ Marilyn Monroe

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Gerard and Celeste

Celeste traced the swirl of cigarette smoke with her finger as it laced through the light glowing from the lava lamps ringing her bed. As the smoke disappeared into the candy-colored light, she wondered where it went, particles dissipating beyond sight.

She imagined Gerard picnicking with his family, lolling about on a summer day, playing hide-and-seek with his children. He told her stories about his kids, but she never asked him about them. She didn't want to know about his other life. If he died, no one would call her. She'd go to their hotel room next Tuesday, room 42, curse him for not showing up, and then write him an angry e-mail.

"Hands clasping and unclasping," she liked to say. She cupped her hand over the smoke to try to save it, then blew it all away. She wouldn't even go to his funeral.

* * *

After he had children, Gerard saw each person as another's son or daughter. The pinch of worry in a mother's eyes just after midnight, the dreadful wait until the front door creaked open once again. Safety. Or was it?

He wanted to tell Celeste he touched her with such care, even as they lay in the strewn sheets of another cheap hotel room. He had asked his friend Eli to watch his children, Brooke and Alexander, so that he could be with her that afternoon. They were so small, just five and three years

old. They didn't know where their father was. Right now they might be crossing a street without anyone holding their hands, barely aware of the cars speeding past, the dramas within.

"Will you tie my hands behind my back?" she asked. He did so gently.

* * *

She told him not to toy with her, but then he found himself a yo-yo on her string. He asked questions. She told him nothing. "But we fucked," he said. "You called it making love," she replied. "But you said it was fucking." Up and down. She snapped her gum as she did yo-yo tricks: reach for the moon, hop the fence, punching bag. He was so dizzy, the whirl of the string buzzing in his ears. But then everything stopped, and he lay his head in her lap. To ask why was futile. "Why not?" she'd say with a casual flick.

* * *

When Celeste thought of Gerard late at night, she e-mailed him tracks of yearning sexy songs. "Sorry to rape your ears," she wrote. She enjoyed the thought of her songs popping up on his iPod years later as he sat in his living room with his wife. Nathalie. When he said her name, she hated the sound of it.

"I love this song," Nathalie would say. "Where did you get it?" She imagined Gerard's eyes blinking, then gazing off into a memory of the two of them, an ornery whiff of the past. True lovers are expert in constructing penitentiaries, she thought. She'd hammer a nail into his hands for eternity.

* * *

A resistance to spontaneity. A disdain for sultriness. Tattered underwear. Every marriage has its own legalities, and these were Gerard's complaints against Nathalie. Sometime, long ago, they'd believed in something that rhymed with *galactic*. Now, if gossip columns about ordinary people existed, they would have reported him howling at the moon.

One day, he asked her to get high and lay on the grass. She held a grocery list, stared at him with a survivalist's determination. No. Celeste would have joined him, he thought. She would have laid her head on his chest and looked up at the sky. He saw teddy bears and grasshoppers in the clouds. So many stories. The worms beneath him abandoned their selves, castings.

* * *

"Museum guards are the most enlightened people on the planet," Celeste said. "They look like statues of the Buddha."

"But they always look so bored," Gerard replied.

"Perhaps they're beyond the realm of passions."

He thought of the guards later that afternoon as they lay in bed in the dimming light of a hotel room just down the street from the art museum. The guards stared impassively into space, no matter the wild thrusts of the art around them. They waited, kept watch, much like he'd wait later that evening with Nathalie in the chaotic clatter of their house, distantly daydreaming of living life artfully.

* * *

Celeste slowly ripped the collage Gerard had made for her. She ripped through a woman's bodice, a faded lotto ticket, gold glitter becoming unmoored from the black paper and floating to the ground. She plucked off the dainty pink feather and twisted it in her fingers. If he was standing at the doorway watching, his lips would squirm like a little boy holding back tears. If she had a whip, she'd snap it on the paper to see if it would bleed. She climbed into her bed and reached into her panties. "Lambent tongues of fire," he'd written to her.

* * *

What they'd thought was safety: the smell of fresh espresso, a waiter's black shoe perfunctorily hitting the floor, the hotel's white towels. Gerard knew something she didn't: the way age exhausts the body. Celeste knew

something he didn't: she was only half there. Snapshots. Her mouth would find another lover's only hours later. A doctor would stick his finger up Gerard's ass to check his prostate. "I'm in the mood for self-destruction," he texted her. She didn't reply, wielding uncertainty like a matador's cape.

She was like a foreign language Gerard studied. He practiced trilling his r's, puckering his lips to accents, swallowing vowels, forming sounds that could only be described by her name. His voice halted over words he had aced in spelling bees. He tried to communicate with gestures, signs. Something. But she talked in gusts of wind.

Her question never went away: was that making love or fucking? It was a taunt, her hands tied behind her back, just as she'd asked him to do. Something had happened to her, maybe something traumatic, but he couldn't explain a lizard's eyes. He started pinching his balls when he came. Later, after it all ended, he handed his belt to a prostitute. Sitting under a scalding shower, the welts on his back flamed in the steam.

"It was making love." He could say it in a hundred ways, he could scream it, but she didn't care to listen.

* * *

Celeste wore a longing for death tightly across her forehead. She knew that each of their encounters ended in a kind of murder or its kissing cousin, suicide. "I trusted you like a wolf I raised from a pup," Gerard said. In his arms she felt as if she lived on the equator, every hour motionless, vast, hot. Funny how the clock can tick on timelessness. She always made sure to say she had to go before he did. She trusted him like a cardinal trusts a blue jay. "I'm a robin," he said.

She wanted to be free. "Happiness is yours from birth to have," the doctor told Celeste, as if describing the cure for a simple sinus condition.

In the darkness of the night, she heard a clamor of incessant words. Pills failed to give her sleep. She nicknamed herself *Quiēscō*, Latin for "I rest"; "I cause to cease"; "I am still, quiet."

Gerard sent her a jagged poem without punctuation, random letters capitalized in a reckless mess she couldn't understand. He wanted her to

see the torqued drama of his love. She didn't respond. She wanted him to see the blankness of her absence.

"Tell me how to be healthy," she told the doctor.

* * *

He'd conceived of karma as a simple equation: $1 + 1 = 2$. You commit a sin, you're wracked with guilt, there's a consequence. But when he stepped out of the hotel that last night, a warm glee stirred in him as the city's festivity rose around him in the darkness. He'd gotten away with it. Celeste ended it, locking the hotel door behind him. No arguments. No recriminations. No final dramatics. "Let's just end this," she said in the middle of a kiss.

He walked out of the hotel onto New York City's dark streets, all of the city's bright lights around him, couples dashing to dinner reservations and movies. He was separate from everything, like a ghost, but then, suddenly, he felt free. He didn't expect such a thing, but he felt airy and light. He'd gotten away with it all, and he couldn't have orchestrated it better if he'd wanted to. He'd somehow managed to indulge in his sin without punishment. He walked to the subway to be with his family, who existed in that other world, so separate, so safe. He would open a bottle of wine when he returned home. They'd order a pizza. Nathalie would never know.

If he looked up, he would have seen the moon laughing.

* * *

"I want to say good-bye," Gerard said, but Celeste knew his good-bye would turn into a noose. Memories are paintings that are endlessly repainted, she thought. Tender moments turn into swords, bombs.

"*Good-bye* is just a word," she replied. "Just say it and be done with it."

When she was a girl, she tied shards of glass in the trees after her grandmother died to be sure to hear her if she flew about at night. Ghosts appear when words fail. Celeste woke to his smell, his discerning gaze, as if he'd snuck into her room. She sensed him as she waited in the security line at

the airport, when she stepped onto the subway. She locked her door at night. She burned sage. Still, he rustled the bed covers. He appeared in the rearview mirror. He roiled inside her. A baby she couldn't get rid of.

One day, she took the sunglasses he'd given her and buried them in the desert. Vultures looped high overhead, content, yet desiring. "Good-bye," she said. It was a word that didn't work.

* * *

Celeste stuffed bags in overhead compartments, learned how to say "shower" and "bathroom" in other languages. Yet another apprenticeship with distance. Rio de Janeiro. Paris. Bangkok. She fucked an Australian on the beach in Phuket, made out with a man named Henri in the bathroom at Le Baron. Traveling through others' flesh was like smelling the air of exotic places. When she returned, she half expected to see Gerard waiting for her at baggage claim. He was watching her from somewhere, like a hawk circling in sky, just out of her field of vision. She'd traveled in search of amnesia. She'd held it in her hand.

* * *

The pale moon, like a faint cloud in the bright morning sky, naively clinging to its nocturnal powers. We all want to be seen, he thought. If Gerard knew where she lived now, he'd post a billboard with his picture on it near her house. But it wouldn't matter. Celeste would move to another city after seeing it.

He forgave her, then took away his forgiveness. He asked to be pardoned, then launched accusations. He was the talker. She was the taker. He had a doctoral degree in false hope. He held his hands out and tried to hold the night.

A man in a different age would have gotten on a boat, but he endured her absence like a prisoner. He might as well have been waiting for her in a train station in Poland. "You have gone," he wrote. "You are here."

When he watched pornography, he realized he hadn't fucked her in the way she wanted, yet he didn't want to love her like that. A word like

cunnilingus said nothing about true affection, true intimacy. After everything, after all of her kinky requests, he remembered holding her in the timeless time that only love affords.

She was probably riding a Ferris wheel somewhere now. He wouldn't even be able to make out her face.

* * *

Celeste stood at the back of the Gap and slowly lifted her skirt above her thigh as she caught a man's gaze. Then she handed him a note: "Follow me."

The refuge of a shopping mall bathroom. As the man undid his belt, his erection snuck over the top of his white underwear. Exorcism takes many forms. A zipper pulled. The slight, firm ending of a dick. Unveiling and release. She looked at his gold wedding ring and wondered if he was there with his family, a teenage daughter. He cupped her buttocks, devilish fingers searching for their daily bread. "Fuck me," she said. He pressed his chin down and appeared to be in pain as he came.

"I should leave first," he said. She adjusted her panties, knowing better than to look in the bathroom mirror.

* * *

One never leaves some places behind. The billowing white curtains of the hotel room in Anaheim, fireworks shooting over the enchanted castle. "Can you believe we fucked in Disney Land?" Celeste said. In Boston, she slipped a note under the door. "May this not be about regret, but joy and wisdom." Gerard could still remember the wedge of morning light striking the carpet so timorously. They dined on room service in Dallas, showered in Atlanta.

He lingered in hotel bars as if he'd find her there. One night, he sat next to an older woman, and he stared at the soft creases around her eyes as if they were exotic etchings. She drank rye, "like my parents did," she said. Summers on Cape Cod. She insisted on turning out the lights when he unbuttoned her blouse. She ran her fingers over his chest as if

touching a man for the first time. Even though he was almost fifty, he now was able to play the role of the younger man. Taut muscles. Years to live. He combed his fingers through her thin white hair. "Do you believe in ghosts?" he asked.

* * *

When Celeste's father photographed her, she always felt as if he were about to ask her to take her clothes off. He once asked her to wear a black dress, high heels. He put a rose in her hair. Another time he asked her to put on a moist coat of red lipstick, and he took a photo of her lips pressed against a windowpane. He'd spend hours in his darkroom. After his death, her mother burst into the kitchen. "What are these?" she yelled, holding a sheaf of photos. Celeste could have said a father's love. She could have said my life.

* * *

"It all began on just one lovely September day," Gerard wrote. "A silhouette, a shape, a mood. You should have asked me about the benefits of restrained desire. I glorified myself for having chosen you, perfect in your imperfections. My language fumbled; you chose not to speak. I said you were adorable, the way you sat in a chair. You said you wanted to fuck me. Your image out of thousands suited my desire. What an odd way to say such a thing. *Adorable* doesn't mean much, though, does it? And then fucking made it not so. A hammer on a butterfly."

* * *

Phone calls. The silence at the other end eerie, like in horror movies, yet Celeste liked the calls. She listened, as if an utterance might change everything. Would it? "Gerard," she said during one call. He hung up, a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. She'd called past lovers herself, to hear a voice, a breath, a thread of closeness. She called him from a pay phone one day, and he answered with a chipper hello. A father. A husband. A man of his community. His voice so far away.

One day an e-mail arrived from him with a blank subject line. Celeste shivered when she saw it, which surprised her. One day passed, then two, but she didn't open it. Gerard's name, once soft and reassuring, now menaced her, the e-mail a taunt. Finally she opened it. "Earn easy money from home," it read with a link to an unknown website. Spam. She now wished it said, "Dear Cunt" or "I still love you" or "You ruined my life." Something that was human, something that was him. She almost replied: "Get the manhood you've always desired." One spammer to another.

* * *

During Hurricane Sandy, Celeste picked up a man in a bar to get her through the storm. They clung to each other under the covers as tree branches slapped the windows. His name was Clive. His breath tasted like menthol molasses. His eyebrows wiggled when he dreamed. Life is clinging, she thought. The next morning, Clive stood in his boxers in her kitchen, his spindly body showing more bone than muscle. The storm would've washed him away.

"When are we getting married?" he asked.

When she blew at him, his hair didn't move. He returned that evening with only a toothbrush.

* * *

They would have called her a witch in another century. The small lockbox in the bottom drawer of her dresser contained the items she'd collected: the Day of the Dead mirror he'd given her, the notes he placed between the pages of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, a stray lotto ticket. She rarely opened the box now, but when she did, she felt as if she held him in her hands, and he couldn't move. Separated lovers always hold hope for the other's misery.

"What are you doing?" Clive asked from the bedroom door.

"Decluttering," she replied.

* * *

The black bra lay on the bedroom floor, wadded up like a piece of litter. Gerard hugged Nathalie last night in the affectionate yet unerotic way he'd hug his mother. Years ago, just after college, he'd found a bra in a laundromat dryer, a gaudy pink bra with black lace running along the edges, and he stole away with it, a sexual treasure, an accoutrement of masturbation. He'd touched few breasts at that point, and he'd touch only a few more before he married. The black bra, a wilted plant. Its lace supported the gravity of flesh, but that was all.

Gerard imagined a play in which a cornucopia doll dressed in lingerie sits in a chair on the center of the stage next to a box of Valentine's chocolates. The only character in the play would be a man dressed sumptuously in red velvet. He'd pace around a brightly lit stage making all sorts of proclamations of love during the first act. When the second act opened, the cornucopia doll would be gone. The man enters wearing black, lamenting the loss of his love. His last line, while dying, uttered with a gasp, "It is my desire I desire."

Gerard put all the items in a nondescript box: the letters, the journal Celeste had given him, the Post-it notes with secret missives. He wrapped her collage in wax paper like an art curator would. When she gave it to him, he couldn't stop looking at it: the red swath of fingernail polish, images of a blindfolded woman. He'd been beguiled by the woman, dainty yet waiting for a firing squad.

It was odd to archive torrents of emotions. Packing tape like a lock on an old mortuary. One never opens a crypt, yet the body is always primed and dressed for a ball.

* * *

When Celeste slept, she sometimes spoke Portuguese, her mother's language, although she couldn't speak a word of it when awake. Her mother lived next to the Desert Casino now. Celeste played blackjack for hours when she visited. "It's the uselessness of it all that is useful," her father told her just before he died. It was like him to depart with a riddle. He wore a cape as a young man and claimed to know a necromancer.

Guns fired at night in the distance. Pavilions of cacti harbored desiccated secrets. “Never stop, never now,” a crooner sang in the bar.

* * *

Gerard sat outside and watched his hands purple in the cold. He chastised Celeste for her selfishness. But it’s always difficult to know who abandoned whom.

“I can’t leave my family,” he said.

“I can’t forfeit myself,” she said.

Now she sat alone in the penumbra of a party’s flitting lights, damning him. He wrote letters he never sent. She sketched his torso in the middle of the night. He bought a cupcake on her birthday. She kissed a man who looked just like him. “I’m Romeo,” he told a dog. “I’m Juliet,” she told a snake.