



STATIC FLUX

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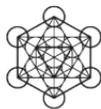
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NATASHA YOUNG



“A woman is always accompanied, except when quite alone—
and perhaps even then—by her own image of herself.”

– John Berger



It was the first cold day of autumn, coming off a humid summer in the psychic confines of northern Brooklyn. I was at a cocktail bar at dinnertime on a Wednesday. The room was candlelit and otherwise empty, darker still than the gloaming that descended outside as the streetlights flickered on. I had come to drink undisturbed.

“On the house, doll,” the bartender said without irony, as she placed a French 75 on the bar for me. I was so cash poor it was the least and most I could do to raise the coupe in my hand, my wrist rigid with fear of spilling a drop.

“To childhood’s end,” I toasted her. “The day you realize you’ll never become the person you dreamed you’d be.”

On any given night I had a friend tending bar at one of the neighborhood haunts. We shared the sense of having been deprived, by circumstance or late capitalism, our destined Artist's Life: unstructured free time, solitude, space, all much too expensive in this city. For keeping them company during their shift, I drank for free and padded their pockets in what tips I could manage at the end of the night.

Tonight, Misha was behind the bar. She was slight, mild-mannered, extensively tattooed, with hair dyed jet-black and cut with laser precision in a flapper's bob, shaved clean at the nape. She stood only a head higher than the bar in her platforms. She carried herself with grace, maintained ballerina posture even after hours on her feet in her Docs. In soft contradiction to her tough-as-nails aesthetic, her body language betrayed the prideful, egoic upkeep of her unrealized dream of being a dancer; her hardness, a reckoning with the interminable student loan repayments she owed for an abortive stint at NYU.

A portly Hasidic man entered and sauntered up to the bar. I sensed right away his sense of entitlement to my company, his passive-aggressive friendliness. I willed myself to be smaller, to take up no more space than the diameter of the stool. The man sat down on the stool beside me, despite the rest of the bar being empty.

Misha greeted him like they were familiar: “Hey, Sol.” She placed a glass of water in front of him. He turned to me and grasped my hand, awkwardly by the knuckles of my fingers, said “Hello, hello, so nice to meet you.”

I grimaced as close as I could to a smile and withdrew my hands. He excused himself to the restroom and I whispered to Misha across the bar, “Is he the landlord or something?” “No, he just comes in once in awhile,” she said, with a posed look.

When he returned and took his seat beside me, he declined Misha’s offer of wine but sipped the water. I was perched still on the stool, anxious and alert, my gaze focused on the rim of my drink as I avoided eye contact while he made an insistent effort to get me to talk.

Sol was a happy aberration. He explained to me, sounding guileless, that he liked to gather forbidden intel on the world outside his Orthodox community. He was curious like a child about a woman like me, he said. Women like me didn’t exist in his world. I was amused, but suspicious. I took my hands off the bar and thought about getting up to leave, but Misha had already made me another drink and set it down before me. Sol leaned in closer, then, to confide in me, his voice lowered—unnecessarily, though, as no one else was around.

“Sometimes I try on my wife’s clothes.”

“I think that’s great,” I said. “To be honest, I wish more men would try it.”

He chortled.

“I like you, young lady!”

“Does *she* know about it?”

“My wife?!” He imitated her to demonstrate her horrified reaction, a rather cruel caricature. He spoke in a high-pitched squeal and contorted his face to look mean. I thought I’d be twisted, too, if I was a woman living under his orthodoxy.

“She even refuses to wear pants. I’ve begged her to try on a pair—it’s usually forbidden for our women, but I say, ‘Dear, just try on my trousers, just once, to see how it feels! Women wear pants all the time!’ But even in private, she refuses. I believe in equality for women, by the way—which, believe me, very few of us do.”

I shot back the rest of my drink and motioned to Misha for a refill.

“Nobody knows I come out like this. At least, I hope not. No, they can’t. Because if they did, they’d have cast me out by now.”

“They do that?”

“Oh, yes. They’re very easily scandalized. I’d be exiled.”

“That’s rough.”

A pause in the talking brought me a moment of relief.

“What do you do in life, my dear?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re mysterious! That’s alright. I’m not bothered leaving some things unknown.”

“What?”

“More fun that way.” He winked.

He took a napkin and Misha’s pen from the bar and wrote on it, in childlike script, his email address. I was surprised he had one. It was a secret from his family. He checked it only in the public library, he said, and

then announced that he had to go home. I nodded and waved goodbye as he waddled out the door, turning south. Misha minded her work behind the bar.

“Everybody’s just looking for a way out,” I said.

“Did you hear about the school shooting?” she said.

“Another one?!”

“This morning.”

“No. I’ve been avoiding the news. Jesus fucking Christ.”

“I know.”

“I feel numb. Not, like, indifferent. I mean, like, depressed to the point of numbness.”

“Everybody feels that today. Everybody but Sol, apparently.”

“Oblivion must be a pleasant place to live.”

She lifted her eyes from her busy hands with a look I felt was made to humor me, and shrugged. Our conversations often trailed off this way. Her pitch-black bob hung like a satin curtain along her jawbone.

I hung around until she closed up, then we stepped outside, lit our cigarettes, and bounced on our heels to keep warm. In my sighs of resignation were 7,000 chemicals, including hundreds of toxins and about 70 known carcinogens.

Walking north along the East River towards home, I shivered as much from anxiety as from the chill in the air. I was imagining how I might defend myself if attacked along the row of industrial warehouses. No signs of life around, as far as I could tell, but the city was comprised of hiding places.

I started—something rustled in a pile of garbage bags on the sidewalk in front of me. A rat crossed my path. I walked on, unsteady, but with a sense of urgency. I cut around a building on the river, winding through construction barriers for the new condos rising up out of the craggy shoreline across the water from Midtown. I'd passed the ferry dock and started up the stairs, through the newly renovated park, when I saw a shadow in motion, in the faint cast of a street light stretched across the clean concrete. I proceeded with slower, softer steps, toward the dim spotlight. Looked like a small, gangly wolf—I remembered reading somewhere that the coywolf, a crossbreed born of desperation and resource scarcity, had proliferated in the city. The coywolf stopped his strolling in his tracks as we met eyes. Still

for a moment. I took a slow step forward. He looked at me, surprised, and bounded off, disappeared through a hole in the orange plastic netting round the concrete barriers, into the dark construction site.

Still drunk, I climbed six flights of stairs to the apartment I shared with my boyfriend, Marcel. He was away on holiday with his family—a “real” African safari, for which he’d left a week ago. His mother had planned the trip as a surprise. I made a fight out of it because the trip would overlap with my birthday, and of course I had not been invited. In the days leading up to his departure, I made my resentment for his going without me obvious: withdrawn from conversation, barbed reactions to his affection.

I opened a window and climbed out onto the fire escape to smoke a cigarette. He didn’t know I smoked, or so I thought. As much as I could help it, I showed him my best self. I would only smoke when I was drinking with friends without him, or when I was upset with him, but that was remarkably rare. In the mire of naïveté that was my early twenties, I wasn’t yet self-aware enough to comprehend my dishonesty as a form of disloyalty. I wondered what time it was wherever he was. Every muscle in my body tensed up in the damp wind as I struggled to light one.

I wanted to sleep, but dreaded going to bed alone. I reflected how pathetic it was that, if one of the little jalopy planes he'd be on in Africa were to crash, or if he'd be blown up by terrorists, or his family hijacked for ransom money, the last words exchanged between us would have been an argument.

“Can't you be happy for me? I'd be happy for you if you were going away to do something you really wanted, even though I would miss you.”

“It's never me who leaves, though. I never get to do anything fun.”

I honestly believed I did not deserve him. It was the only thing we fought over. With surgical precision he excised and analyzed my self-sabotaging behavioral patterns. He said there were much bigger things in store for me; that I was destined for greatness, if only I could get out of my own way. If only I could internalize his belief in me. But all I could think of was all that I lacked, the experiences I hadn't had, people I hadn't met, places I hadn't been. Having grown up poor, among rural New England folk of no pedigree, what I wanted seemed impossible. And what I wanted most of all was to be a writer, and not poor.

I climbed back inside from the fire escape, filled a glass with ice and poured myself some of his good whisky (I hated whisky), and sat down at my laptop to get some work done. Work typically meant writing content for brands to supplement my “real” life’s work—cultural criticism and journalism—for which the pay was meager and never on time. I couldn’t afford the career I’d had my heart set on pursuing. Even entry-level editorial assistant jobs seemed to exist solely for designer-educated progeny whose lifestyles were supplemented by a legacy of wealth extending at least as far back as the baby boom. They didn’t pay more than twenty-five to thirty thousand a year, at a time when average rent for a closet-sized, windowless room in Bushwick already exceeded one thousand dollars a month.

Sharing an apartment with Marcel offset the cost of living just enough for me to make it. We split the rent, but sometimes he paid more than his share to help me out. He swore he didn’t mind so long as I was doing my best and not taking advantage of him. I maintained hope in an old-fashioned work ethic, took on excruciatingly boring freelance copywriting gigs and temp jobs. I had no insurance; I hoped nothing would happen that would require my hospitalization, in which event I hoped for a quick death. I was sitting at the kitchen table we’d found on the street a few months ago and carried

home together for about ten blocks. I was staring into the bleak light of a blank document. I sipped the whisky and screwed up my face in disgust. I had been living with Marcel in that modest apartment for six months. I'd moved in only a month into dating him.