

Story originally posted at: http://www.swampwriting.com/?page_id=130



Issue #7

Central Casting

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She'd written a book. Not a book that brought her any fame, not a book that brought her riches or a book tour or controversy. Probably not even a very good book. Which frightens her; she thinks it's the best she has in her. But it got published, nonetheless. A small, reasonably well-reputed press. Hideous front cover, designed—evidently—by blind children without hands. Limited distribution. But a novel, with her name right there on the cover. The closest she'd have to a baby. And she peddled it in any media outlet that would have her. Those outlets were not plentiful.

On a freezing August morning she took a taxi to a community radio station. A warehouse of a building festooned with posters for Aboriginal rights and the end of poverty and something about plastic bags. For a second she wondered whether a better person, a more socially compassionate person, would have felt some civic pride staring at the crumbling facade. Felt inclined, perhaps to pump a fist and think grateful thoughts about media that care. Perhaps pledge to stop using petrochemicals on her hair. Stop pouring chemicals into her cistern. She rolled her eyes and knew she'd hate every single person behind those bricks. Hate them with their free trade coffee and Rajasthani rugs. Hate them with their junky, jangly jewellery and sandalwoody skin. And she arrived early. Ridiculously early. So early that she had to spend time more time walking the streets than she had in the cab.

On the tram back into town, she rode the entire way with her head against the window. Earphones wedged in, breaking off and sucking on tiny pieces of chocolate. Ensured before purchase that it was cheap chocolate, bad-for-you chocolate, preferably made by sticky fingered orphan slaves. Hopefully using copious supplies

of palm oil. The big haired, coral-lipsticked host had described her protagonist as likeable. Likeable. Not a new accusation, of course, but one that hurts in new ways each time it's hurled. Every friend who read it was verbally astonished that a character so likeable was born from her keyboard. You wrote this? Oh, but she's so unlike you! She's never mastered a decent fake smile. Truth be told, she's never mastered a decent real one. She had written a character who was her polar opposite. There were the silly differences—the character had boobs, ate meat, dabbled in drugs, had logical reasons to explain bad decisions—but her character's ludicrous niceness was the big difference. She had modelled her on a colleague. A colleague who, for reasons that still astound her, people seem to like. A lot. A colleague who speaks softly, so so softly, and who has that insipid do-gooder social worker/kindergarten teacher thing that stirs up vague thoughts about violence. And friends liked the character. And the idiot moron host liked the character. Of course. Because her protagonist wasn't her.

Waiting in her inbox was an email with the subject "you on the radio". Male sender. Unfamiliar name. Sent fifteen minutes after the interview. She smirked and knew she almost didn't need to open it. That email, after all, was the only reason she wrote. At least in a roundabout way. The first time she tried writing fiction—seventeen, family beachside holiday, torturous except that she found a thick notepad—the driving force was the vague idea of having a reader. She had a sketchy but thoroughly tantalising idea that she would be able to move people by her prose. That a side of herself that she presented on paper would deflect her real-life default iciness and indifference. That someone would be charmed by her through her prose. Someone who was interested in more than superficial niceties.

And he had read the novel. He, her new correspondent. Read it, felt moved by it. Apparently pulled his car to the side of the road to hear her talk about it. She had never driven, didn't know whether pulling over to listen to the radio was a big deal. But it felt like a big deal. Likens it to procuring a new album and wanting to listen to it in solitude. With her big noise-cancelling headphones. He stopped his car for her. It goes without saying that the arrival of the email—an email that she just stared at, unopened, in her inbox for the best part of fifteen minutes—didn't surprise her. She knew early on in life that she would always get what she wants. At least, what she thinks she wants. When she was seven, she read a fairytale called *The Three Wishes*. Something about a wish for sausages. Or maybe black pudding. The important bit—the moral, if you like—was about wishes need to be specific. And so very careful. She had always wanted a novel published. Had even wished for it. Got it, of course. At thirty. She just forgot to add in the details about getting a novel published with a fantastic front cover that people would love that sold well that would go into numerous reprints that would be made into a TV show that she would consult on. She's sure the *The Three Wishes* also had opinions about greed. A vice she doesn't ascribe to. She gets what she wanted because her wants are modest. And she gets gifted modestly in return. Wish for a man to love her? Ta taa. She'll get it, no problems. He might even love her a lot. Only he'll love his ex more. Or love some woman he once fucked whose name he doesn't remember more. Or love the idea of not being in love more. Or, he'll love her, but then he'll leave her. Or he'll love her, but decide on prescription medication and masturbation.

Even before opening the email, it occurred to her that she had an opportunity to tinker with her office before he visited. She didn't even need to open the email to know that she would invite him in. Of course she would. Foregone conclusion. She read a book once called *The Sensuous Man*. A bad 70s love manual. For men, presumably, although she was never quite sure. The one tip that always stayed with her was to leave golf clubs on the back seat of your car to convey the impression of refined hobbies. Surely there was an equivalent for her. Props and trappings and distractions to disguise the fact that she is thoroughly neurotic. And masochistic. And prone to depression. The redecoration of course, never happened. In fact, she didn't even bother discarding the chewed up Chuppa Chup sticks around her keyboard. Or the mascara smeared tissues. Or the receipts and gnawed pens. She pretends she's a 'take me as I am' woman; that visitors need to accept her for all her quirks. In fact, she just hates cleaning. When she first started working at the university—years ago as an administrator—about a month in and she had to meet with a student. She cleaned her desk in preparation. Made neat stacks out of the paperwork. Filed away correspondence. Threw out muesli bar wrappers and a dozen or so half empty water bottles. It took over an hour. The visitor was blind. Literally. Metaphor.

Her first thought when she opened her office door four days after the interview, was that he looked like a deer in the headlights. There was fidgeting, little eye contact. Lanky and shaggy. They always were. In their early 40s. Of course. Because evidently their parents took too much acid in the late 1960s. Her distractions always arrived packaged that way. Weedy artists. Suffering artists. No longer writing or reading or painting. Lovelorn. Who needed her to dress his wounds. If things go well, to lick his wounds. She cast a brief glance at the clock above her door. How many minutes before his first confession? Eleven, as it turned out. Divorced. She cheated on him. After he cheated on her. He's over it, he says. He lied.

Over a coffee a couple of days later, he would mention film. Did she see many? Her mouth twisted into her default smirk. "You didn't notice the eighty-eight movie posters in my office?" She laughed and he responded in that indelible way that the men who inevitably leave her life do, and said, "I didn't notice the walls." She blushed. He blushed. That night he would text her about being able to smell her perfume on his clothes. About liking it. She didn't dare wish to keep him. Knew the second she thought it, it'd be ripped away. Of course, thinking about something achieves similar ends.

Quickly, too quickly, she and he fell into a lovely blur of pokey cafes and interlocked finger-tips and Canadian indie bands that she'd stockpile for the teary purge. (Reached only 12 weeks later.) He was damaged. So damaged. Damaged of the calibre where sentences—sentences so heavy and wrenched and agonising—would end with damp eyes and an ellipsis. In one café—a café she now studiously avoids—she stared at him across the tiny table, so lean and so lined and so broken.

There was a train station goodbye. Not the goodbye. The goodbye was a Friday afternoon in a suburban side street where he'd parked his car. He knew that it was goodbye evidently, she just thought he had forgotten his meds. But the train station goodbye occurred a month or so prior. He was heading home, she was going back to campus to teach. They were in the underground. A brief—barely detectable—lip kiss. They detached, she pulled back, he looked at her, and he leaned back in. And kissed

her again. The lean back in. It didn't end up in the final draft of the novel—by that last draft she hated her publishers and was editing out scenes she considered too beautiful for the undeserving bastards—but for a good five or so drafts, the novel include a train station goodbye. It was, like most of the best things she's written, something stolen from her recent past. A goodbye in a train station. Not the goodbye from that relationship—that goodbye involved an airport, hysteria and a lot of fine cuts along the tops of her thighs—but one of the goodbyes was at a train station. An above ground station with high arches and zillions of people and a destination board offering quaint sounding destinations like Scarborough. The chaste initial kiss, the pull back, the eye lock, the lean back in. She stood on the escalator riding up to the concourse. Knew the second she thought about how beautiful an anecdote that goodbye was, she knew an anecdote was all he'd ever be. And of course, her correspondent, the lanky, suffering sculptor gave her a replay. Because one exquisite station lean back in isn't nearly enough for one lifetime.

There was a night on her balcony. She and the correspondent and ice in the air. Their upper arms just touching. Her pointing out the best of the North Western suburbs in the distance. He with his little musical hmms. It was too early to think she loved him, but it occurred to her that she might. A man who dripped with agony. Who, in a hundred different ways was saying I'm not ready, I'm not ready, I'm not ready. But she wasn't ready to hear him. Not with the lean back in and her perfume on his clothes. Two winters prior. Her balcony. A different bloke. The bloke. Thinning hair. Lines around his eyes. Lips. The tops of their arms just touching. Her pointing to the North West. No question about how deliriously she loved that man. Loved him. Almost to her death. Hers. She doesn't know how he's fared. Two balcony love epiphanies. Two balcony memories too many for her to go out there alone.

When she career counsels students, she tells them to think about where they want to be in five years and work backwards to work out what they need to do to get there. She has never and will never do this for herself. There are many rules she follows. Rules followed for reasons pertaining to ego, stubbornness and fear, but rules nonetheless. She won't even close her eyes and imagine where she wants to be because that one time she dared to and she still uses too many tissues and Band-aids. But the correspondent convinced her to try again. He'd shown her a campus short cut. So obvious a short cut, so so so obvious that she doesn't know how she'd missed it the thousand or so times she'd been on campus. But she had. And he showed her. And the first time he showed her how to cut three minutes off her daily journey, she dared close her eyes for half a second. Dared wonder. The Pixies. It wasn't down to the detail of imagining where they would sit or whether they'd take a cab to Festival Hall or whether he'd drive, but the vague idea of them going together sounded nice. Good. Do-able.

“Hey,” she said, gently touching his sleeve. “Will I hate you in five months?”

“What?” His face a map of wrinkles.

“Will I hate you in five months? I'm trying to decide whether I should get us Pixies tickets?”

They never used the shortcut together again and she pretends she's forgotten all about it.

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