

## Chilly Hands Held in a Wintry Milwaukee Moonlight Next to the Lake

So we were in bed—Rachel and I— laughing because we were both in grad school and had no future.

And what was so funny was not because it was—just because of the wine or the playing around we had done, but because it was true. We had no future.

And later—afterwards—she kicked me out and I was hungover and had to get ready for classes—teaching and taking. It wasn't funny anymore. All the mirth had died like the faded taste of a lukewarm beer left on the counter after a week.

I had to tiptoe back into the apartment to get my keys. I had left them somewhere under the table with the bong on it. I had been doing some trick with my toes and used them to demonstrate. I didn't remember if it was successful.

I found my keys after several tries—and several more silent curses—the damn table was too low. Once I had them in my hand, I took and unwrapped a Cadbury Cream Egg. Easter was coming and we at least had that much going for us—the chocolate eggs, not Easter.

She was there sleeping next to the sofa, on her stomach as usual. Her head was turned towards my side and she looked peaceful, like a little school girl napping in the afternoon sunshine after school is let out.

My reverie is interrupted. My legs, twisted at impossible angles trying to not step on the covers and wine bottles, give under the weight of drink and lack of sleep—plus I was never coordinated. I do a complicated summersault, and land as if with magical grace, my legs perfectly wrapped around her midriff, and the palm of my clammy right hand rests on the crown of her head as if I were some bizarre priest giving benediction backwards and upside down.

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The reaction was swift and severe. She reaches for my groin—but not in the attempt at more play but punishment this time. And her mouth spews out angry songs of distress and red hot fury. For a moment, I am left nonplussed because I honestly don't know how to get my body upright, but then she helps me choose my path. I am flipped backwards, and at this point I deduce later, I lose my keys again. To hell with it, I figure once I found out, I can always ask for them later, or in the worst case, there is always the window.

Once outside again, I remember why she is so upset. I vaguely recall saying that Asian girls have better figures, and this permeates onto her. It is true, and she is not Asian. And through wine-induced reflexes, I clumsily counter to my defense that I do not want an Asian girlfriend, I just want a girlfriend with an Asian figure. Of course I leave the part out that connects her to this, but then the logic was never sound to begin with.

Looking at my watch, I see that class starts in fourteen minutes and thirty three seconds. If I run, I will make it and probably be about two minutes late. I do not consider the fact that my hair is messy and I smell like pot. Such things are never discussed, only whispered about later. The class is one on Bantu phonology. I am a linguistics major. The professor is very passionate about this field and I am very passionate about the beautiful budding trees sitting under a thriving sun just outside the window. My eyes tickle their branches, and they sometimes titter in the wind, and I, somewhat romantically perhaps, fancy that they do so on account of my gaze.

Bantu languages are a complex family that I will surely never speak any of, and linguistics is a field I will surely never fully understand. The more classes I take on it, the more I realize I am like a digger on top of a huge sand pile, digging on top of a hill instead of steady ground, tossing the loose bits of sand over the edge of the hill onto the ground below.

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I chose the class because I once heard a record sung by Swahili musicians. It was beautiful in both a subtle but defined way. I was simply enchanted by the gentle harmony of the tones. That is part of my quest for things that stimulate me. I guess it's something that everyone seeks. New stimulation, whether real or not is the product, more or less, of all my pursuits. But this class has long since passed the stimulation phase.

The professor goes on much the same way as the classes before, writing rules on the board. I write them down and think little on them. The burly oak, full and alive, speaks to me outside. The lake beyond it is challenging me to avoid its complacent splendor. I cannot. The other students seem far into it and I wonder if there is something in them that I have missed. Maybe it's something I lack.

Class is finished and I go outside to sit on the cold grass. It is still March. Next week, spring break starts and there is excitement in the air once again. Crowds of students form around cell phones and laptops. Each of them has a story to tell about their plans that will end up bringing more stories to tell. They sat on rolling hills under brusque trees with sturdy branches hanging over like superfluous spectators. Overhead the few whispery clouds cross paths with each other and form new wistful shapes. The din or excitement is only interrupted by the blusterous buses whose trudging noises pound up and down the hilly roads like some gargantuan metallic beasts of burden.

I turn towards the building I had just come out of. Blake, an acquaintance of mine approaches me. I haven't seen him since the New Year's party. He has all the right clothes on: fashionable and fancy, every piece has a name brand on it. I stand in something bought at a drab store with big aisles and no sales help for miles. I immediately feel the inadequacy of my attire, but he waves all my worries off with a smile of good nature. We shake hands. I'm not sure who initiated the contact, but I'm almost positive it isn't me.

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He has news of the protests. They want to cut the university budget and dissolve unions. I listen with faint interest, my mind going back to the tree outside the classroom. I turn to find it but it is at another side of the building. I remember that I am still engaged in the conversation, but Blake did not notice my mental truancy.

“... and the governor has made a firm stand. We’re definitely going to have a hike in tuition this time. And my professor is as pissed a blue monkey, he says if they cut his pay any more he’s going to...” He goes on about the protests and counter protests. The actions of the government and all the injustices it has performed. I sense that he has given a similar dialog many times now, and he is searching for agreement. He wants something from me, maybe more than just acceptance and recognition. I nod at the right places and give the proper sounds of indignation. I cannot feel worked up, however, and for a moment I fear something is wrong with me in my comfortable detachment from it all.

Some day, I think, we will all be connected with wires somehow, so everyone can see what the other is thinking and that will surely cause the downfall of civilization. What will the outcome be if troubled minds can no longer continue the self-deception and project it onto others? Blake is unaware of all these deliberations in my head. He’s a good person, I decide. Good and steady and brave in his own way. He would be more likely to storm the Capitol and be arrested than I would, even if I were emotionally invested.

Off towards the lake, the whistle blows. It announces that there is a boat setting sail, but I recall that the lake is still frozen. This mystery attracts my attention more and my concentration again becomes hazy. Blake disappears leaving me alone. I cannot recall if I made proper farewell greetings. I glance once again at the passersby. No one notices me as I walk towards the library.

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I pick a stall in the dark, way back in the corner where no one can see. I take out a pen and go over my homework, but stop after thirty minutes. And look around me. It has the look of a prison and the feel of a submarine. It is two levels below ground, in a halogen lighted hallway, with no sounds and smells of musty old books. I stand up to walk towards the books. I look at one of them. It is *The Stranger*. I take it off the shelf and bring it back to my desk. I read the whole thing in less than three hours. My homework remains undone, and the deadline sticks into the back of my mind: Friday. It is Monday now.

I put the book down to go get a late lunch. It is 3:45. Outside the storm clouds gather and people are walking with their hands closer to their heads, as if to ward off something they can't see yet. The splotchy bark of the Douglas firs, the robust Pines, and vibrant alders shook in the wind. Squirrels danced and sung, happy to be free of the burdens of snow.

The university store stood at the corner, and I walked past it. It sold essentials such as iPods and toothbrushes. Condoms were placed next to pencils, and junk food was on every aisle. I went in for some water, but they didn't have any. Instead, I picked up a diet soda, not realizing that it was a new kind: raspberry spring. I bought it anyway, not wanting to go back. The cashier didn't look at me and kept her eyes focused on a book that was held open by two elaborate pencil weights.

I saw a dark chocolate bar that Rachel liked, and asked the cashier to ring it up as well. Annoyed, her attention was at last diverted from the book as she had to do some more complex operations. I stood waiting patiently for my change, murmuring apologies like a complacent monk at mass.

Outside people were honking their horns to the tunes of popular protest melodies. I saw an old guy with a gray beard and a fireman's hat on in a two-door Chevy waving his fist to cheering onlookers. I clapped my hand, and whistled. Why the hell not. He didn't hear me though, and kept his attention

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focused on two hot honey-bunnies next to the drug store, who kept walking even though he stopped his vehicle and continued to wave and laugh. No one was behind him and he had all day. Eventually he drove off, and I continued on.

I headed to the newly renovated coffee shop. It had been an old building, and looked like one of those Italian joints you see in Boston—a really classy place that didn't have the air of a mass-produced structure made in some factory in China.

Inside, there were maybe twelve tables—most of them for two people, and about a third for four. I took out my six-year-old laptop and started to check my email. I checked my email at least a hundred times a day, sometimes two hundred. That's not an exaggeration.

Someone I recognize walks in. It's Ned Sandstrom. He is one of the most extreme men I know! Every single sentence he gives is a practice in extreme sentiments!

"Hey, there you are. I've been searching everywhere for you!"

"You have? What's up?"

"I refuse all of it! I refuse to believe in the whole system!"

"What system?"

"The dating system, the academic system! I refuse to accept it all, and I refuse to participate any longer!"

"Your thesis got rejected once again?"

"Yes!"

"But what did your advisor say this time?"

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“My advisor! Screw the whole lot of them! They’re all trash! He came in with that snide look on his face, and then he told me that he wouldn’t accept my proposal. It wasn’t like he was kidding! He said that people do not even act under the assumptions I formulated. Despite all the literature I provided! I told him that he couldn’t refuse the data any more!”

“And what did he say to that?”

“He said it was absolutely unacceptable!”

“Well, that fits the pattern. And what about the dating? You mentioned that too.” The truth was, I didn’t care one bit for his dating situations, but I was a friend and had to do my best to find out.

Ned is a sociology student, which makes him closer academically to Rachel who is in psychology than I am. He’s always been into it—at times too much so. He fits right in here. We met in a volunteer organization. It was to campaign for lake cleanliness, and both of our wills petered out at about the same time. We used to go soliciting for monies together. He would always talk, while I watched and smoked occasionally. Actually, I never did anything. He was always so passionate, and once in a while he would score the jackpot: someone would give money, and he would take the donation, cool as a cucumber.

He hardly ever took showers, hardly ever dressed in fashionable clean clothes, yet despite this, he always managed to find rambunctiously attractive women to chase him. And despite this, he was still never satisfied. he would have ten beautiful women after him, and he would desire the eleventh who was beyond his reach. Never satisfied with what was one step in front of him, he wanted the one that was two steps. His misery was assured like a carrot in front of the racehorse. His albatross was stuck to his back, out of reach, yet plainly in view.

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“I’ve finally discovered why I’m here!”

“What do you mean? Here as in school or here as in the world, life itself.”

“Both!”

“And why is that? Maybe you’ll get a knock over effect and figure out my own troubles too,” I said, rolling a cigarette. As a rule, we couldn’t smoke inside, so I got around this by rolling cigarettes I would later probably not smoke. It was the closest I could come to defiance, and yet still managed to put my own stamp on things.

Around us were students, young and old—mostly young—sipping coffees, lattes, cappuccinos and mochas. All of them were focused on their computers, protecting their plugs into the wall as if they were the very lifeblood of their souls. Occasionally someone would go by and trip on them, and their eyes would roll as boiling vengeance was held in check by the needs of society. No one really saw each other at such moments. They were as walking corpses floating around in some netherworld, where the only thing that was real was the thing they were focusing on.

“So what’s the answer then?” I asked in a voice that probably disappointed him because he looked at me and his excitement faded like some cloud vapor caught in the dry desert sun.

At that moment, a girl who looked to be perhaps eighteen or nineteen stumbled and dropped her coffee cup squarely on the ground. A good portion landed on Ned’s shoes and he did not show any reaction other than moving his feet out of the way, but I could tell they were splashed.

Without helping her or anything, and before I could move to help the girl, he told me, “Life’s a big fuckup. And it’s all about getting back on your feet.” I couldn’t decide if that was meant to match the moment, or reveal some truth that he had been hashing out for awhile. Anyway, I moved to help

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the girl before thinking his words over too much. She was very apologetic, and Ned just shrugged it away. He didn't even let her wipe his shoes off, and I doubted he would bother washing them. They were filthy as it is.

I moved to comfort the girl, who was more embarrassed than hurt by the fall, and she was very grateful. She never looked at my eyes and stared oddly just to the left of them as if I were a Cyclops with an invisible double head.

When I got back to my seat Ned was gone. It wasn't unlike him, and I shrugged it off. No doubt he was off onto his next mission. I remember his coming to my birthday party and staying only until the first drinks were served. Later I found out that he had some "new developments" in his field research that he had to look on. If he didn't tend to them immediately, his idea would be gone and he'd be left with no innovative way forward. Whatever.

I pulled through my bag looking for something that was non-technical. I found Anna Karenina in my bag, and pulled it out. The words felt good to my soul. I felt a comfort not unlike someone readjusting the tiny bones in my body into the right order with an invisible hand.

Moving through different pages in the novel, I quickly scanned the pages for something—what I couldn't say. There was a range of sentences, dialog about different things—mostly failed love and stalled beginnings. The two lovers never seemed to be able to fully come into the light. They kept moving away from each other as soon as the fateful decisions had to be made. I closed the book in disgust and went to the restroom. On the wall in front of me, someone wrote:

IS THERE ANYTHING DANGEROUS TO DO AROUND HERE?

And underneath that:

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### TRY TELLING THE TRUTH

At last, I had my fill of the coffee shop, and the strangers who never looked up. The long walk home passed by another lake, this one to the south. It was impressive in its deep blankness. The night swept it empty and filled it with someone else completely: a new metallic void.