

Flotsam, Jetsam, and Derelict

When Pam was a kid she had a schoolyard boyfriend named Adam.

“You’ve been bitten by the lovebug,” her mother said.

The thought petrified her. Does love bite? she wondered to herself long after even her parents’ bedtimes. Adam *was* often cruel to her. Sometimes his friends would see them holding hands and they would laugh and he would let go of her hand like it was on fire. He had told his friends she gave him a handjob, which wasn’t true, but when they laughed at her for it he laughed with them.

She imagined Adam sneaking up on her, in her room where it was dark and she had thought she was alone. He would bite her. She would be frightened at first when she felt the pain but then once she knew it was him biting her she would feel safer in his arms bleeding, than she did when she thought she was alone, intact. This thought finally restored her to sleep.

I’ve never had a clearer thought in my life, she thinks.

They sit next to each other at a table for two, overlooking the Met atrium. Marble urns filled with flowers descend the staircase. Across the way there are 18th century French plates and vases behind glass. The second floor is dim, crowded with people, but it’s so spacious that it’s relatively quiet. A pianist plays Beethoven sonatas. Kyle abruptly picks up his chair and moves across from Pam, his back to antique kitchenware.

He inhales sharply, pauses, and smiles.

“Pam, I’m just not ready for something like this.”

She tries to take a sip of her martini but her hand feels too weak to hold the stem of the glass.

“Like what? What is this?”

“I dunno.”

“Clearly you have some idea about it.”

“It’s not nothing.”

“And you’d like... what. Nothing?”

He pauses and exhales with relief.

“Exactly!” He smiles cheekily.

“Cute.”

“Ah. I thought... nevermind.”

An angry minor chord cuts through the din of conversation. The piano player holds off for a few moments and then dives into the *Pathetique*.

Stay calm, she thinks. An overreaction is a tick in the loss column.

“Why did you bother *dating* me if you weren’t ready for this?” A neighboring table stops their conversation abruptly and Pam gets the distinct feeling they are drawing attention to themselves. “Why did you bother writing to me in the first place? Why did you bother with any of it?”

“I like you, isn’t that a good enough reason?”

“We don’t have to fuck everything we like.”

A tick in the loss column, she thinks.

The piano player rushes into a manic part in a minor key. The two of them sip their drinks, her pretending to be unaffected, him pretending to want to be there. Pam

listens to two matronly German women sitting next to them. The only words she understands in their conversation are “Costco” and “Monroe, New Jersey.”

“So you took me out to a romantic date to break up with me?”

“I don’t know, Pam. It just kind of happened. I didn’t want to do it over text or phone.”

“Very considerate.”

She wants to talk. To ask him questions, an exit interview. They walk through the museum and she feels how much he wants to leave. She asks him “why” in a few different ways and before long the physical pain of humiliation leaves Pam and the two of them are left with the husk of their relationship. They talk about work, about their favorite places to travel, about restaurants in Brooklyn. She looks at the backgrounds of the Renaissance and Mannerist paintings, the boggy aquamarine castles steaming behind Italian nobles, turbulent dusks behind effeminate Christs. She looks at Caravaggio’s *The Musicians* and remembers an art teacher telling her that the shadowy, shocked looking face in the middle of the scene was a self-portrait. She looks at all the figures in the painting, and then all the figures in all his paintings, and thinks how close they all look to that self-portrait: even his St. Peter is just an exaggerated and aged version of that same face. She thinks about spending a lifetime painting yourself, seeing yourself in other peoples’ faces wherever you go or however you conceive of them. A world of yous, and you can treat them how you want, because after all, they all get where you’re coming from.

“You must be a happy person, Kyle.”

“I do OK.” He offers a confused smile.

They say goodbyes. “Take care of yourself,” he says. She watches him leave through the main doors and feels her loneliness in the pit of her stomach, a faint diarrheic pang that stays with her as she wanders through Byzantine and Medieval art, looking at nothing, just feeling the museum, resonating with dates. Blind dates, first dates, second dates fueled with pretentious conversation and half-cocked intellectualism from men in their only decent sports coat. Gay dates, straight dates, married dates, divorcee dates, tourist dates: romantic vacations made stern and logistical by men with maps and fanny packs. Perfumed European women with their dutiful husbands.

And in the Arms and Armor, droves of school children with snot on their hands whoop and shriek past the solemn old knights, a testament to the fecundity of the place. The tragic and ineluctable denominator of all that love and suffering.

Sam Aldermann lived on Pam’s floor in her freshman year of college and was well known for the three-foot bong he kept under his bed. He made a pass at her during the first week of school. She acquiesced to a brief make out session over a DVD of a Grateful Dead concert and a considerable quantity of hydroponic marijuana.

From under her sheets, she stares at a profile photo of Sam Aldermann at a Lincoln Center Gala with the rapper Big Sean and Deputy Mayor Stephen Filmore.

“#living”

A series of posts on branding and marketing, a link to his inclusion on a recent Forbes “30 under 30” list, in their “Tycoons” section. “Humbled by this,” he wrote as his caption.

Her Facebook feed is a slew of success stories, people working in tech offices with video games and pool tables and free meals, friends with bylines at big newspapers, with books coming out on Simon and Schuster and Harper Collins, coming back from honeymoons in the Maldives, getting married at the Plaza, getting married at a converted warehouse in the hippest part of Bushwick, nobody posting about losing a communications job due to layoffs and nobody posting about working temp jobs and waitressing and publishing short fiction but only in journals with names no one knows with readership only as big as their editorial staff: *The Tuscaloosa Review*, *WebShorts.com*, a tumblr account for microfiction that Pam had gathered over a few emails back and forth was run by a teenager in Long Island. Nobody was posting about their breakups.

So Pam puts away her phone and thinks about home – Hollywood, Florida, a mixed income small city an hour north of Miami, filled with condominiums, small pink houses with bars on the window, some wealthy enclaves. There, she thinks, there are young men who became cops, others who went to state college and returned home to work for family businesses selling siding or installing Jacuzzis. They eat big lunches at restaurants with Thursday night wing deals, have small pools, and drive home from work on silent state highways under the lonesome tangerine glow of a Florida sunset. There are women, their wives, who work in real estate or retail and at night they watch television without feeling guilty that there's something better to do.

That is a life she could have had, perhaps. There was a boy. She waited for his calls and jumped when the phone rang, she met him for dates at the Baskin Robbins, she dressed her prettiest and eventually they made love. Then, coming back home for college

breaks, he was still there, never her boyfriend in those years, but always her lover, always her friend.

“Move home, Pam.” Aaron had said to her during the last of those breaks, while they drank cans of Bud Light on lawn furniture in his yard. “Come live with me. I’ll tell Pete to move out and we can have this place to ourselves, do this every night. Just imagine it.”

She had thought of the two of them living in his three room pink house with the vinyl siding and the bars on the window, the side lawn with the plastic furniture strewn out, working in one of the thousands of strip malls that stretched out over the county baking silently in the cruel sun, of unending sitting around, waiting for something to change in a place where it never did.

“I don’t want it, that’s all”

“But I love you.”

She had given his hand a firm squeeze and smiled at him. She moved to New York the following week, and her parents moved north to be near their kids shortly after.

She hugs a pillow into her chest and listens to the sounds of her downstairs neighbor yelling at her kid. She doesn’t miss him, she thinks, but she considers the pink house, the side lawn dewy with the smell of sweet wet grass under a canopy of palm trees, of nights when the sun doesn’t go down until 10, of laying out on the reclining patio chair, of her career mattering less, of the simple smiles that lovers share.

The itzikaya restaurant is one they went to in college before they were of legal drinking age. The walls are adorned with ironic pictures of Hirohito and Japanese kitsch.

Pam and Bella always meet here because they have more fun when they are pretending they are still in college and they like not bumping into anyone they know. Bella is there first, she has ordered sakes and edamame. At 30, she's donned middle age prematurely, with its baggier clothing and moderate signs of physical exhaustion, a kind of world-weariness that always positions her as a counselor or therapist whenever the two get together, and she wears it all well; confidently.

"You look fabulous," Bella says.

Pam realizes too late that, in lieu of actually planning an outfit, she wore as much jewelry as would fit on her. Big, wooden earrings, necklaces with fat beads, a wrist full of bracelets. She thinks that she looks like a middle school art teacher.

"Bella, I'm gonna move out of the city."

"Where to?"

"Well... don't laugh. But Florida. Back home."

Bella laughs, sips her sake.

"Stop it. This prick isn't worth that. He's just a prick."

"It's not about Kyle."

"OK. Then what's it about. Work? You'll get a real job if you apply enough.

You're brilliant."

Pam thinks of driving places, not worrying what she's wearing, air-conditioned cars, a plethora of parking spaces, apartments with living rooms and guest rooms.

"I just want to live somewhere...palatable."

"OK. People talk about leaving. That's part of living here. That's what makes *here* palatable. You don't actually go. So stop. You'd be so bored."

Bella asks Pam to go with her to a magazine launch party. Pam remembers the last of these affairs, the smokers outside mingling, everyone probing everyone else about where they worked, who they came with, who they know, and eventually sorting themselves into small groups by order of importance.

Instead, she goes home and buys round trip tickets to Fort Lauderdale, and looks at apartments online and wonders how serious she is. She finds two bedroom apartments for under 600 dollars.

The humidity in Broward County soaks the trash and the dirt and the sickly-sweet palm trees and the sun bakes it and the whole place smells like shit. That's something Pam never picked up on when she was growing up, but now that she's back, it's inescapably true. In fact, it's suffocating.

And Pam's rental car is haunted with a faint geriatric air. A whiff of crusty Chanel no. 5, a powdered Kleenex in the cup holder. She drives down 95, the windows closed, blasting the air-conditioning, her only olfactory escape.

She gets off at her old exit, the one before the closest one to home, to avoid some traffic. She remembers every road, the stop signs she can coast through, the flamingo pink and canary yellow houses, the bright green lawns, mowed to perfect squares. She drives past her old house, remembers barbecues in the lawn, the smell of sausage cooking, of chlorine from the neighbor's pool. She drives past her high school, serious and modern with long, flat slanted roofs and big glass windows, and remembers smoking cigarettes with a boy she liked outside the rear exit.

She has a few hours to kill before meeting Aaron, so she goes to a local wing restaurant and orders a glass of red wine. The bartender is confused and looks lost for a while as he excavates the bottle from a distant shelf. It's served in a dusty champagne glass and is nearly undrinkable. She wonders what Aaron will look like, what kind of life he'll have, if he will be kind and if he'll touch her or kiss her or bring a bottle of something nice for them to enjoy while they lay on a blanket, watching the sun set. She orders another glass of wine.

She told him she'd meet him on the beach, at a bench at which they used to sit, and she is there first. She looks at the ocean licking the sand. She sees Aaron. He has a beard now, he's maybe ten pounds heavier. When they make eye contact he trots over and she shifts her weight on the bench.

It is strange to see him, to hug him, the sense of knowing the body under his clothes better than the man himself, with his deeper voice, his baggy eyes that seem less ready to make or maintain eye contact.

“So good to see you Pam”

The mole on his hip, the x-marks-the-spot for his hip bone, her handle, still there she was sure, just under some new weight.

“It's good to see you too, Aaron.”

The way his penis curved, like a half-smile, a wink.

He worked, he said. Something about restaurant supplies. He lived in the same house, now without a roommate. Pam made it sound like her temp job was permanent, and impressive.

“So you've got to be married or on your way by now, Pam. Right?”

She noticed a sourness to his breath. Was that beer? She tasted the acidity of cheap wine at the back of her throat.

“No, Aaron. No guy. No hubby, no fiancé, no boyfriend.”

The sun is dipping into the horizon. The ocean is filled with a languid purple light. Pam thinks it looks like blood.

“What about you?” she says.

“Well, I was thinking of making someone up. Just to make you jealous. But no. Nobody.”

Pam considers how she wouldn't be jealous at all. She laughs for him, though. Aaron pulls the bottom of his shirt down, which seems to be just a touch too short.

“And New York?”

She has nothing left to say without lying. Suddenly, the thought of describing her loneliness or frustration seems like a horrible errand, loaded with necessary backstory, futile love affairs and a half-dozen desk jobs that bore her to even recall.

“It's fine. Not as fun as it was when I was 22, but fine.”

She feels to ask him about Hollywood is rude, since she imagines she knows that things aren't going so well for him. But she doesn't have a clue, she thinks. She finds that maybe she doesn't care.

And soon there is nothing to say. They look at each other, and there is no romance. Just the cold anxiety of adolescent sexuality, still present there. She feels like she should kiss him, but when he leans toward her, she looks forward. He kicks the sand.

A sequin vest floats to the shore. Perhaps the remains of a cruise ship emcee, eaten by sharks. Or a charter boat bartender who quit on the job, failing to think of the

awkward ride back to the shore. The whole place seems like it's filled with sad mysteries in the form of litter: a single shoe tied to a tree branch, an industrial-sized jar of mayo, emptied, a collection of empty whiskey bottles in the naked shrubs that line the back of the beach.

“I forgot how much litter there was in Florida.”

“Me too,” Aaron says. “Until you just said so.”

They look at the litter behind the bench, in the water, in the shrubbery, the whole of Florida like a museum of human trash.

“Until right now,” he repeated.

By the time they leave, the beach is silent under the shade of a moonless night. The sea looks black and oily. Pam's rental car still smells sweet and decrepit, and she wonders if she can fly standby, catch an earlier flight. She hears Aaron start his car and the wheels pull out. She wonders where he's off to. Somewhere better, she thinks.