

Will and Fauna

“Beautiful stone.”

“Oh, thank you! This was my grandmothers; it's a Peruvian opal. It was her favorite.”

“I can see why.”

What she notices first about him is his wrinkled shirt. Well, it's not completely wrinkled, but there's a noticeable accordion-thing going on about his sleeves, and one large crease bisecting his collared shirt into top and bottom. She smiles and recalls what her grandmother told her, that all men need work, some more than others.

“So, what do you have on tap for the weekend?”

“It's actually my birthday. I'm kind of excited because it's a prime number; I've always had a thing for prime numbers.”

“29?”

“You guessed it! I mean, I hope you wouldn't have guessed one of its neighbors, although sometimes I do feel like I've already hit 30. Hopefully I don't look it.”

“Oh, no. Not at all. I was going to say 23!” He pushes his spectacles neatly up on his nose and sniffs.

“Don't make me laugh.”

“What's your obsession with prime numbers?”

“Hey, wait just a minute. Nobody said *obsession*. Let's just call it an *interest*. Well, I don't need to tell you how interesting they are. Like, you know how they are the fundamental building blocks of nature and everything?”

“Yeah, no doubt, but I guess I haven't been completely introduced to all their nuances.”

“Oh, I could go on. Will, I had a really nice time the other day, in the park. It was so enjoyable to catch up. I just felt like it was such a freeing conversation. And to be honest with you Will, I really needed it.”

“It was nice. It was very nice. Sometimes I feel like we’re like ancient and star-crossed. You know? I mean ancient in a good way. I don’t want to freak you out, but I feel like I’ve known you much longer than I actually have. I guess I’m trying to say that it’s really great we can feel so comfortable around each other.”

She smiles a warm, lingering smile, one that unfolds like a carpet for as long as he can manage the gaze. It hit its target, he knows, which gives him a sort of momentary superiority, despite his honesty.

“Hey, I don’t know what you’re doing tomorrow evening, but maybe we could go out,” she says.

“What were you thinking?”

“A friend of mine is having an art exhibition; her opening show. It’s blowfish in Madrid. Would you like to come?”

His head drops, his shoulders grow small and his hands clasp. “I’m afraid I can’t. I have something already going on.”

“Oh, OK. That’s fine. Maybe another time.”

“Yeah, absolutely...”

A couple is leaving the restaurant. The man holds onto a Styrofoam container and smiles broadly at the owner from across the field of variously slanted heads on neck stems, like some overgrown urban plot, points to his takeaway container and mouths what looks like “fin-tastic!” The owner chuckles and waves. The man and his lady laugh, as she faux elbows his rib, then takes his arm and sashays toward the door. Fauna notices that his shirt is not wrinkled.

“Good evening,” the waiter says. In this moment they size him up. The couple notice the waiter's effeminacy, his lingering smile, the small droll eye rolls, the lilting voice, almost falsetto.

Will breaks the silence. “I'm really surprised you're still using polystyrene for your takeaway containers. Did you know that this is made from petrol?”

“No sir, I didn't know that. What would you like to drink this evening?” The waiter bravely pushes past Will's objection. Fauna gives Will a look—gentle, curious, but annoyed-curious. They order drinks. Fauna, a glass of Merlot; Will, a Kirin beer.

Will plows on: “Did you know that it's a carcinogen? Do you know how and with what chemicals Styrofoam is made? It leeches out into the food.”

“Yes sir. I'll be right back with your drinks.”

Fauna now gives Will a look of caution, a yellow light, signaling *Enough already*.

The waiter scurries away, hoping to quickly forget this unnecessary moment of unpleasantness. Surely, he thinks, the bloody customer is wrong, has something mixed up, is upset about something else, is mentally ill perhaps...

“I'm sorry Fauna, but this really has been on my mind recently. You know, it's atrocious. We're slowly poisoning ourselves. This stuff is made from petroleum. Do you know, it takes a million years for this stuff to decompose. And I'm not joking!”

She sighs audibly, causing him to momentarily pause, and then breaks off the silence with “You know...wasn't that funny yesterday when Brandon got his foot caught in the elevator?” She titters on her seat, and covers her mouth with a dainty, yet protective hand. “Yeah, that was pretty funny. He

was so embarrassed.” He chuckles and smiles briefly, but his eyes quickly glaze over like a house cat catching sight of a squirrel.

“But just think about this Fauna, you have a death cycle here. You have fish eating bits of this Polystyrene stuff—you know its floating all over the world now—ingesting all of these cancer causing materials, and then we in turn poison ourselves by eating these poisoned fish, and then just to top it off, and to make sure we are really good and poisoned, we punctuate this rank chain of events by taking our sushi leftovers home in poisonous containers, then throw the Styrofoam container back into either a landfill (polluting the earth and contaminating animals) or we burn it in a massive incinerator, where it breaks down into styrene gas, which is of course again *poison*. No wonder communities living next to incinerators have enormous health disparities. You know, they're dying and getting sick at quite an alarming rate. And here you and I are about to enjoy our sushi, not thinking, or caring, about any of this. Does that make us evil?”

“I don't think so. I think that just makes us human.”

“So, I suppose in that equation, human equals evil. Must we accept that?”

Her brow furrows: “You really don't have much of a pause button, do you? Please don't get upset Will. I really enjoy spending time with you, but at this moment I do think you are being very naive.”

There's a pause, while he half-digests this new foreign feedback, like a tough bit of steak. Our first real argument.

“Naive. You say Naive, but how is being educated naive? I mean the whole world is backwards; is it not? Maybe you think the world has always been like this, that the world is so complicated and thought-through, and somehow so *permanent*. But the world is always changing; and we are the ones who change it.”

“No, I’m not that naive, but I also know that the world doesn’t change in a day, and I also understand the collective momentum needed to make any kind of meaningful change. I just don’t think it’s worth spending our time arguing about things that realistically won’t change.”

“Seems like we might be having a little trouble facing reality...”

“Will, listen. I’m just not in the mood for this; I don’t want to do this tonight.”

There’s silence.

The waiter returns. “Here are your towels.” There is a pronounced lack of thank yous.

They press the hot towels to their hands and then over their faces, a momentary and frustrated game of hide-and-seek. They feel a little of their stress lifting and rising from their bodies along with the steam from their towels.

“Are you ready to order?” Yes. They order, as if the waiter is an indispensable middleman, barely looking at one another. The waiter leaves as they take turns inspecting each other over a wall of silence.

She lobs a communique over: “You know sometimes we, people in general, think we are so angelic. But if I’ve learned anything in my Anthropology studies it’s that we often create our own dramas, often collectively. I just don’t know if that mindset is good for anyone.”

“How, may I ask you, is world extinction—all of human and animal life erased from this planet in the most heart-breaking and violent ways—how is any of that me just creating my own problems? I’m not quite sure what *you* are missing here.”

The waiter returns. “Your food is almost out.”

Will’s normally pale face is flush. “Could I ask you, seriously now. Why are you are still using Styrofoam for your containers?” Interrogating the waiter, as if proving his point will send him home a winner.

“Well, sir, I don't know if I have an answer for that, but I can ask the boss. Would you like that?” he says smiling, certainly a forced smile, one that contradicts a tense gravitation of his cheek muscles to push his lips and jaws together trapezoidally. They all now have been transposed into a comic strip. The waiter's ears dribble steam up alongside his, what looks like, plum face in this uneven chōchin lighting, bestowing him with wispy horns before the steam evaporates completely above his dark and molded head. A thought bubble containing “Wanker” hovers just over his hair.

“Well, yeah, OK. Please do.”

Fauna waits for the waiter to leave them. “Jesus H. Christ. I see you are really doing your best to ruin our evening. I told you I wasn't in the mood, and it breaks my heart to do this, because I thought we were getting along so well, but Will I have to go.” She stands, slips into her leather jacket, fans her blond hair onto her shoulders, a formidable expression of you-can-go-fuck-yourself, and storms off in a beeline to the door.

“Wait, please. I'm sorry.”

He sits, weighted into his seat, and surveys her empty seat and discarded parthenic napkin and her bruised and spurned glass of wine...

“Sir, the owner will come out and speak with you momentarily. Meanwhile, here is your food.” He says this as if nothing has changed—his fine, glued-on smile, the lilt in his voice, teasing, naturally deeply infuriating our protagonist, who sits with the whole of his head's weight in his clasped hands, now peeking out one eye up at the waiter, just to acknowledge a sort of understanding. It's a rapier-eye though, one which matches the rapier in Will's heart, one that would pierce the waiter's doughy and easily-yielding anterior skin just above the heart, somehow meting out a kind of karmic justice—heart sting for heart sting.

Will surveys this pine sushi boat for two, each roll of sushi a yearning sailor ready to set sail—but whereto tonight?—each positioned so neatly in place. So many sesame seeds; more than he's used to. It's too much for one person. He begins his sushi ritual, but he isn't sure if he'll be able to enjoy it. He's in shock, the full load of her exit and the gash in their friendship still fresh and scraped raw. His heart breaks open like an egg. He knows he was being abrasive. But he had to be, dammit. He didn't have a choice. Was there any other way? He wants so badly to run out after her—perhaps she even expects this—but he knows he can't. He just can't, and it's excruciating that he can't tell her why. He also knows the self-triage that he's just begun after this self-inflicted A-bomb. The worst of it, the more complicated thought-emotions, has yet to break down his door.

She's back down. It didn't take her long to return. It hasn't even been an entire season. I mean this is still technically summer after all.

She's almost grown accustomed to it. A clean place; too tidy perhaps, and colorless—well, gray is a color, isn't it? She thinks she may even love this place, although she's never quite sure if love is supposed to feel this heavy. She finds it difficult to apportion and measure desire and love, being so married as they often are. In these moments, lying on her back, staring at the blank of her ceiling, she prides herself as queen of her very own underworld, sitting poised in a blackened, twisting cathedra, peering down across all her minor works of destruction, scattered before her, a bobbing sea of neglected playthings once-removed and disfigured from her uneventful childhood.

She had recently returned to the world of light, but she never was able to rid herself of the feeling. The feeling that she would have to go back down. And she was OK with this. But it of course makes relationships difficult. She had tried pretty hard with Will. I mean, all of those times they smiled and laughed like children, all the cool, tossed-off jokes. So natural. And the sex; with or without the drugs, it was good. She hadn't been able to say that for quite a while. God, so much had been piled on this past year. She tells herself repeatedly, God only gives what a person can handle. God *only* gives what a person can *handle*. She's repeated the mantra so many times at this point, she could recite it in her sleep, and sometimes she does. She supposes she has handled it, but barely. The medicine helps.

The Pomegranate Pimm's. The party on the balcony. Was it six or four pomegranates bobbing on that viscous surface, like little delicious rubies? She never experienced such a pulling feeling of return before. Was this the pomegranate's function? It just tasted so good, and she couldn't really stop drinking, exploding those little beads between her teeth, anticipating with each burst those miniature sour-sweet squirts of liquid, followed by the tingling in the scalp. Later in one of those quiet times on her back, like now, tracing the secret vitiligo in her eggshell ceiling, she suspected—as crazy as it might seem to literally anyone else—as in the Greek myth, that her partaking of this drink somehow forever bound her to Hades' sepia-world Queendom. Now in July's overexposure, she's at least getting on a little better with her mother. In these quiet moments, after her not-as-frequent cycle of smoking, freaking out, eating, sleeping and resurfacing, she can empathize with this mostly better version of herself; after all, she's been down for so many months now. Her brief sobering, the longest in a while, wasn't a true resurrection, transformation; after all she still longed to dive back down, in heart.

Even as she tells herself she's unique—there's no one else like her in the entire Universe, her mother used to tell her this—she knows somehow that her story isn't at all unique. So typical in fact, that she chooses to keep it to herself. She is the Kore, the maiden, the archetypal one. She knows very well that her loss of innocence is an every day occurrence. Nothing newsworthy at all. Something both men and women have scoffed at, taken for granted for centuries. Really, you are suffering? Ah, poor maiden, let me stop and wipe away your precious tears; *ah, grow up!* The voices seem to cry. Just pick anyone on the street, even those who profess to care for her—can she still include Will in that lot?—would yawn simply and coldly and matter-of-factly. Just as for countless maidens, she claims loss of control. Being overrun by that drove of carnal black-painted stallions—a regular and almost trite occurrence. She guesses at how many Underworld Queens exist hiding from light, all erstwhile maidens of pure heart. But the magnitude of each of them haunting uneven streets in their own death shrouds, glazed eyes peeking out, fading lamps, sole mobile identity cards of humanity—if they could show nothing at all, they would—seems uncountable. Just over half of the roughly three hundred and thirty million in the US are women, and she figures at least half of those could easily recite their own rape-of-Persephone tales. But everything's so magnificently dusky underground. What if she doesn't *want* to return home. After all, how could the bourgeois surfaceworld her parents inhabit and uphold ever compare to the opalescent, brooding, comforting, razor-edge existing that she's been fated to meet?

Her parents had come for her, but she held them at bay. Finally cutting off communication completely. They had no right to interfere and they had no passport to descend, not now. Besides, she couldn't stomach being treated anymore as if they knew better. And how embarrassing, how her mother had reacted, dishing out her daughter's dirty little secrets to her friends, as if her friends were holy, were

somehow better than human, were somehow good. As if they weren't ravenous vampire scavengers, lubricating their undead chops with flailing whips of tongue for a new line of blood; anything to put a little of that old rouge back into their erased faces. She still tells people she's not related to that crazy woman.

How could Will or anyone else hold her here in this July daybreak, when she's tasted the fruit below, when she knows the kinds of immaculate shadows that exist just underneath the table of her professed life? For years they stalked, seduced and gripped her imagination. She's not sure if she'll ever become truly free from such velveteen cuffs, but does she want to? Will, with his talk of the end of the world, she just can't make herself care. If it all went to pot (LOL) tomorrow she'd be destroyed, her parents, along with Will and her professors, along with her work—all gone; she knows this. But, so what? What difference does that make to anything at all? Listen to the scientists. She's a speck, merely a fallen cosmic crumb, tittering atop a reflective windswept table too vast to even conceive. What difference to the world, to the universe, does it make if she's here below or up there, or if the world even exists at all? The universe will go on expanding...a big fuck you to everyone and everything in it, and all of these mortal soap operas will be forgotten so fucking easily...

He doesn't know me. He doesn't know me down here.

Will meanders south on Grays Inn Rd toward the bridge in the distance. On his walk he's assailed again by the differences between this foreign country and his home. Motorcycle food couriers motor pass. They look so cute, like out of a storybook. Painted onto the window of a green grocer in

temporary marker is an image of two military tanks humping; written above it, “Make love not war.”

Yeah, I’m down. What strikes him most is the unlikely superposition of historical and modern.

St Paul's Cathedral rises like a sea monster above formidable buildings, apartments, a big-city Mecca. On Peter's Hill the double-decker buses pass (packed tourists, who are in turn packed with stuff—human matryoshkas—pink and green plastic earbuds which, in spite of the municipal recycling effort, will nearly all be trashed, fated either for a kind of thing-holocaust at one of the energy recovery facilities or to be dumped and layered in a landfill, the pink and green strings swallowed into unnameable grey mash). Art exhibits in the middle of the sidewalk, and closer to the river: chamber musicians playing—bassoon and trumpet trading licks, skilled and studious. Children playing tag, nearly exploding with giggles. Now it's over the steel Millennium suspension Bridge, facing the Tate. Will descends the steps, turns right on Bankside, strolls a mile or so down the Queen's Walk, under a bridge, through a hypnagogic tunnel—a somber accordionist boomerangs his notes off the tiles in echoes like swarms of drunken bees. Along the Thames, Will takes in the eye-candy until he's stopped in his tracks by a ring of spectators, and a show—

“Malawi is a country where we have time to make a show like this for *you*.”

“We have worked on this, just for you!” The just-for-you part is spoken by the group at once, like a barbershop chorus.

Scattered applause. The audience is largely hooked. Even if they’re just saying this to make money, Will finds the words endearing. What can I do for *her*?

They dance around their makeshift stage, arms repeatedly raised, provoking further claps. Their act is really more anti-climax than any sort of theater you’d spend money for. But it’s enough. Enough for a once-off. Enough for the children, who are amazed, and at times frightened, to see sundry deformities

attempted, and often succeeded at. One of the young men sits in a large saucer resembling a stretched church collection plate, waves twice at small children in the audience, winks once, then places one leg behind his head, one more wave, and then hoists the other leg behind his neck. He somehow makes it look comfortable. To the adults this is all abstract, better understood as an ephemeral curiosity. Will watches in anticipation at how their act unfolds. Two of them hoist their crablike compatriot-in-a-dish high up to the sky, in what looks like an offering to Nut, the Egyptian sky goddess, her body the living canopy above, one of her bared breasts a rain-swollen cloud. The troupe are dressed in African colors, not necessarily Malawian, but authentic enough for this pregnant ring of bloodless onlookers. Their spandex t-shirts are hatched with blood red, sand brown and gold stars, all shapes contoured in black. They wear tawny umbrella pants, flags in this wind, and black high-tops.

They run interference patterns, circles and ovals, alternately raising and lowering their man-in-plate as offering; music blasts from a tired boombox. They do tricks, cartwheels, somersaults to the blaring beats. They pick out two children. As the crowd parts to make room, Will sees her on the other side. His heart seizes, his skin grows cold; a dizziness assails him.

The performers get the children to wiggle cutely for the throng. They lift the children onto their unflinching shoulders, they parade around one last time, finally asking the audience for money. If they were to see this in Malawi, they would be paying at least twenty pounds. “Whatever you can give, but just know we rely *only* on your support.” Minor guilt works its way into Will’s joints and makes him forget her only for a second. He makes his way to her, rushing just enough so that he won’t miss her, but not too much to appear desperate.

“Did you get a load of that?”

She turns. “Will. I saw you there. I was going to come and say hi.”

“It’s great to see you—”

“Hey good people! If you enjoyed it, you must give *something*. Thank you!” A handful of spectators return dropping coins—mostly 1-pound coins—into their now lightweight giant tin plate, which one performer shakes vigorously.

“It’s nice to see you too. Did you come down here just to see this show?”

“No, I just kind of bumped into it,” answers Will. “Hey, would you like to take a walk?”

“I actually am down here meeting someone.”

“Oh, I see.”

He stares for a second at the passing walkers, as if worthy of his attention. “Well, maybe we’ll bump into each other again.”

“Yeah, maybe,” she smiles.

“Hey look, I’m really sorry that I made you walk out like that. I didn’t mean to make you upset. I really didn’t.”

“Will, it’s OK. Really.”

“OK. Well I should get going. I guess I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Bye.”

“Bye Will. Take care.”

Will is the kind of guy who gives chase at the last moment. Like a dog chasing cars except, well, at the very last moment. It’s not all worthless though. He often catches up when it counts. But given a

neutral playing field, he'll never chase. There must be some imbalance in his fortune for him to thrive. It's always been like this. His mother teased him about it. She chided him and browbeat him on a number of memorable occasions.

Her mouth is oval, a necessary oval for her long teeth, unabashedly on display each time she talks, especially when she smiles and laughs, which she does quite a bit (many times very inappropriately, which he generally finds endearing, when he doesn't find it childish). When she laughs her eyes twinkle. All of this belies a deeply analytical brain—how many times did he joke about her donating it to him? (she is an organ donor). Older than he, she's working on her *thesis*. He's heard her say it so many times, it almost makes him sick. But not today. Now he can't imagine the word spoken in a voice that isn't hers, a voice that puts on an endearing air of being exhausted with her current situation, but which he knows she's extremely proud of. She worked hard for it; she told him this all the time. You only need to hear her recite her thesis' title: Character as Continuous Variable in Western Group Dynamics. Much of this of course is identity. She's respected more for this identity than for her personality, which he's worked to separate out in front of her, which initially she balked at, but told him in the park that night that he might be the only person to truly see her for who she is. He's a little frightened of her acuity and her analytical skill. Sometimes she misses things, which he then sometimes points out. She's often quick to judge, without first having all of the facts. (like when she stormed out of Toromon's Sushi, for example)

She apparently was in a pretty bad state before meeting him. And she told him of her struggles with marijuana addiction. He always laughed at it, chiding her that it wasn't addictive, and that she just wanted attention. But he was certain now after her harrowing stories that it may be just as addictive as any other drug. He thought she was over it, but recently he's not sure. She used to find such comfort

in it. No, comfort isn't the right word. A terrible addiction, one that often crippled her ability to participate in normal activities. She explained to him why, but she can't use it for the rest of her life as a crutch, can she?

And where is she tonight?

Will, at an impasse, has thrown himself into composing a letter of sorts in two hundred and eighty characters or less. If he can only express himself within such authoritarian social-media constraints, there is at least the chance that she'll understand everything. Over the past week, he's feverishly composed a poem, using end and slant rhymes, to be sent over Twitter. After subjecting each word to prolonged forms of torture, long ago made illegal by The Geneva Conventions, he's boiled it down to nine lines of condensed meaning.

Tonight, face illumined by the computer screen's icy glow, he hunches forward almost in prayer. Every fragment of spiked conversation, every deciduous bump in the hallway or out in the street amplifies his loneliness. He sends her, just a minute apart, the following two tweets, praying that she'll understand in the end:

Why an addict here at all?

Wo(man) evolves from great to small,

In every moment's passing flair,

Sings opportunity's snare,

Sit before your ancient drum,

Let it hit your chest – dum, dum, d-dum.

A true heart tweets...

Where do souls like ours meet

On the plain of battle must be

Wish you were my soul to see

Were I could distill heart's love

But something horrific warps my aim

Tragic lovers appear in form

Ours unique as snowflake's face

Keep my memory sweet, thine countenance gay.

With a hole where his heart had been, he peruses his message feed, and reads again the list to make sure he's followed the instructions exactly, or nearly:

Will, you shall complete the following items, in order, and exactly:

1. Invite Fauna to Toromon's Sushi restaurant.
2. At the restaurant, you and her will want it to be romantic, but you must freeze this in its tracks. This is how: You will notice that the restaurant is still using polystyrene containers for takeout, you shall mention your surprise and annoyance at this repeatedly to the waiter. You shall make this the focus of your evening, instead of Fauna. She will become an afterthought, and in the process you will hurt her.
3. You shall let two weeks pass where neither of you are in communication. If she contacts you, you shall not respond.

4. After two weeks you shall send the following tweet. It must not be a DM. You must tweet the poem to her using her handle, *@fauna1_grpAnth*:

Why an addict here at all?
Wo(man) evolves from great to small,
In every moment's passing flair,
Sings opportunity's snare,
Sit before your ancient drum,
Let it hit your chest – dum, dum, d-dum.

5. You shall never tell her the truth.

Will, if and only if, you carry out the instructions above exactly, you will be safe. We will desist in pursuing you and no more threats will be leveled against you. After completing the instructions above, you must never ever make contact with her again or our previous activities will resume and you will no longer be able to consider yourself safe. Respond to this message with, "I understand," if our message to you is clear.

I understand.