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5,100 Words

The Peacefulness You Long For

By Michele Lombardo

“I can see your thong.” My mother’s voice was low and harsh. She stood before some unsuspecting Republican’s lawn, flanked by two weathered Trump Pence signs, gearing up to singlehandedly convert one conservative at a time. Like some middle-aged Joan of Arc, she’d uprooted us from Brooklyn right after the Presidential election and moved us to rural Pennsylvania, where her political aspirations could make a difference. And although I was nineteen, I couldn’t just wish her well and traipse off to college. A sizeable fuck-up left me repeating my senior year, so I was trapped, doomed to play the prop of wholesome daughter as we trudged door-to-door, kickstarting her campaign for City Council.

I’d bent into the car to place my coffee back into the drink holder because, moments before, she’d complained that it made me look *too Starbucks* when the look we wanted was *old-fashioned family values*. As I stretched with the coffee, a

ripping sound preceded the swish of my right boob dislodging from its packaging. The strap of my tank top with the built-in shelf bra snapped in half, and though it was covered by my flannel button down, I was a lover of symmetry. Leaning forward, I attempting to coax the errant breast back into my shirt, but it was out there, shirt flap dangling, the boob hopelessly abandoned. Sliding into the passenger's seat, I smiled thinly at her, a warning that she was testing my patience and that in this scenario, *she* needed *me*, so she'd better check her tone.

She swatted a stack of tri-fold brochures against her leather portfolio. "We're going for a certain image, Prue. You know that."

"If that image is deception, I commend you on your efforts."

In November, she'd been on the New York City Council and was poised for a future mayoral run, but post-election she swiftly took her trust fund elsewhere. The list of possibilities had included all the states that switched from blue to red and was narrowed based on quality of life and public schools that actually somewhat resembled institutions specializing in learning. Now I was a hostage in a place where campaigning door-to-door required a car, as well as vague sound bites like *strong neighborhoods* and *secure incomes*. Because according to my mother, in order to affect change in rural areas, you had to "focus on the things we can all agree on." I wondered at what point she'd get real and tell these people that she was fervently anti-gun, a regular crusader since my dad had been shot. But apparently making allies was more nuanced than barging into the living rooms of camouflage-clad hunters and telling them that they didn't need those AK-47's, or the handguns, or maybe any of them depending on their criminal rap sheet and mental health record.

I wasn't totally vacuous. I saw where she was going with the whole thing and, at times, telekinetically communicated my approval, but it still pissed me off that I didn't get a say. She'd just yanked me out of private school mid-year, implying that since I'd made a mess of my life, excluding myself from consideration for the Browns and Yales of the world, I was unworthy of our considerable family resources, and might as well just get a job at Arby's and be done with it.

Now, every morning I woke up in our "reasonably priced and furnished" home, struggling to quiet my vijñāna and meditate despite the fucking woodpecker going nuts on the tree outside my window, and giving up in a very discouraged state in which I reassured myself that while I'd likely be reborn as a demi-god, my mother was sure to reincarnate as an ant. But thoughts matter, and I didn't appreciate the additional hits to my Karma.

I got out of the car and tried to play my role to the best of my abilities when all I could think about was meeting Sky later and how I'd let him maul me in the backseat of his dirty, stinky car. While my mother prattled on about neighborhood revitalization and transparency to a hunched man with the eyes of a child molester, I dreamed of Sky's rural, milk-fed teeth biting the round of my shoulder in an uncharacteristic display of passion. The child molester asked her our last name and squinted suspiciously when he didn't recognize it. Then, of course, he called us out, as many had done before him. "You're not from around here, are you?" It was uncanny how, in this small corner of the world, it seemed you could count the last names in circulation on your ten fingers. You were a Snyder or a Stoltzfus or a Groff or Koch, or maybe, if not, you weren't from around here after all.

“We’re originally from New York.” (note the insertion of “originally” and the omission of “City.”)

“And you go to Penn Valley?” he asked me.

“Yes, sir,” I said, all cherry pie and straight A’s.

He grunted and turned, taking down a framed picture from the wall behind him. He shoved it at me, a grainy, black and white group photo, Class of 1962. “So you must know this guy, eh?”

“Oh, um....”

“Dickie Krieder. Teaches woodshop.”

“No, sir. I’ve heard of him, of course, but I haven’t taken that class yet.”

He nodded, pointing again. “How about this one. You must know her.” He watched me expectantly.

I gave my mother a death-glare and lied, because our credibility was at stake.

“Oh, sure. Yes.”

“I thought so. Everybody knows her.”

“We all love her.”

“That’s not what I heard, but don’t tell her *I* said so.”

If I kept this up, I’d spend my next life schlepping up the anthill behind my mother, balancing Cheerio crumbs on my back. Aware that she’d pushed me to the limits of what one human should reasonably be expected to endure in a single afternoon, we agreed that Sky could pick me up at the next house.

“For the record, I never asked you to lie,” she said.

At the next house, I informed her that it was the anniversary of dad's death.

"Do you really think it helps to hold onto it like that?"

"I never said it helped." I reached across her to shut off the car, her signal to exit. I could picture her face, the tragic, cracked expression, without looking. I hadn't said it for sympathy or some Hallmark moment. I just wanted her to know I remembered.

"I thought starting over would make things easier. I want more for you than the life you'd chosen in Brooklyn."

She was referring partly to the fact that after my dad's death I'd basically checked out of school and slept with any guy who'd have me, and mostly to the apex of my crack-up, shacking up for four months with Bob, some guy in a really shitty band, necessitating the repetition of my senior year.

I pulled down the visor and pretended to care about my hair. "You can go."

Eventually, she did.

Instead of waiting in the car, I stood by the chest-high wire fence around the farmhouse's property, prompting frequent nervous glances from the owner, a gray-haired homely woman pretending to listen to my mother while likely hypothesizing about why I was loitering around her property. *Time to build a taller fence.*

I got to business on my broken tank top, doing some serious tucking and rearranging and eventually fixing the problem by tying the remaining straps in a knot. Finally. I could breathe. The homely woman was flat out staring at this point, but I'd shifted into full-on mental health mode. Even minor physical discomforts could push me into a realm where my mood became impossible to turn around. If I

wasn't hyper vigilant, I risked pooling into a puddle of grief-tinged despair. Besides, if a car wasn't required to go EVERYWHERE in this God-forsaken place, I'd already be at Sky's house instead of stranded on the side of the road, digging at myself like a stray dog.

Before we moved, my mom had freaked over buying a car, salivating over navigation systems, forward collision sensors, even occupant classification systems, though we possessed no toddler to hypothetically put in the front seat, thus no need to hypothetically disable the airbag. She'd become obsessed by safety just as I'd come to the conclusion that there was no such thing. It was telling that of all the things we'd "downgraded" to "fit in" here — my education being foremost in my mind — we purchased a BMW, my mother being suddenly taken with German engineering. But alas, I wrestled by brain away from the ledge of this "negativity spiral," and thought instead of my old therapist promising me that Pennsylvania would be an "opportunity." I had no choice but to believe her. It helped to believe things.

When Sky pulled up, he suggested we get stoned and drive through the car wash. I made fun of him a little, but agreed. It wasn't like I had a better suggestion. It was an "opportunity" to further experience my new life. So we smoked all the way there as I told him about my fear of reincarnation as an ant.

"You're in high school. You can't be a Buddhist."

"So because we're young we can't *be* things?" I yawned, scanning the second-rate shopping centers lining the road.

“We aspire to be things. You’re an aspiring Buddhist. I’m an aspiring musician.”

“But surely I could be called a brilliant student, or a rebellious daughter.”

“They’re roles you’re already playing.”

I snorted. “But you’re probably already a Christian, right? I mean, as long as your religious affiliation is handed out at birth, or *common* in your society, you can embody that role before you’re even capable of speech. Right?”

Sky shrugged. “I just think you *want* to be a Buddhist.”

“I do. That’s why I am.”

“You’re, like, obsessed with trying to be different cause you’re pissed you live in a shit town now.”

“Aha! So it’s the difference that leads you to question the authenticity. You’re not actually concerned with the meditation hours I’ve clocked or my progression towards Nirvana.”

We pulled into the car wash, at the end of one of three lanes of cars belching smoke, inching toward a chick with shorty shorts and fake nails who’d take our order, scroll something in chalk-marker letters on the windshield and advance us to Tunnel One or Tunnel Two. When we reached her, she asked a bunch of questions and whispered into her headset all official-like, and I let the paranoia wash over me, visions of squad cars chasing us for being stoned and young and horny, of school officials speeding to retrieve us (even though it wasn’t a school day), of nuns smacking my hands with rulers for wearing a thong. I laughed at them all until we

steered into the first tunnel where a guy wielded a power washer like a machine gun. The loud spray pounded the car and, irrationally, I felt as though I'd been shot.

Dad died of a gunshot wound to the heart at approximately 5:45 p.m. on April 4th, two years ago. He'd been alone, a few blocks from Washington Square Park, with no reason we could think of to be there at that time, on that day. The gunman struck him on the head with the pistol, then lowered it to his chest. He'd died within moments. We didn't know if it was random or pre-meditated. We never found out who did it or my father's exact business that day. The only clues were the contents of his pockets — a pack of gum, some loose change. In his wallet, the stack of fortune cookie messages he collected, one of them starred in blue ballpoint that read: *Today it's up to you to create the peacefulness you long for.* Nothing to explain it, nothing to define him, nothing but questions lodged in my chest, where a beating heart had once been.

"Let this be another brick in, like, your path to enlightenment," Sky said, circling his thumb inside my palm. "Ready for the time of your life?"

And just like that, Sky brought me back from the precipice. Aside from his adorable face, I loved his compulsion to twist everything into a joke. As I would've done. Most people couldn't balance caring and not-caring. But I took my detached sarcasm seriously. It was more than some sad Millennial plight, it was therapeutic. Irony is the mother of detachment, and thus the ultimate Buddhist statement. Besides, sincerity is fucking terrifying.

Car set to neutral, we wormed along toward shooting streams of water and multicolored everything—spinning things, rolling things, soapy strips of squeegees swaying left and right, and blinking carnival lights—blue, red, even purple.

Sky held the one-hitter to my lips and lit it. “One more time.”

I exhaled, head back, eyes catching the moon roof just as psychedelic streams of colored soap shot all over the glass. The strips of color bled together and foamed, and the sweet violence of it all hit me square in the crotch. I could’ve straddled him right there, but I pressed my thighs together, savoring the agony.

We watched in silence as the swaying tentacles worked their way over the windshield and the spinning things pelted us with staccato drops of soap and the car lurched into a manufactured waterfall that blurred our vision and churned the suds into a surf-like mix blasted away moments later by a giant, drive-through hairdryer. And before the green “Drive your Car” light even illuminated, Sky peeled out of the mouth of the drying chamber, bypassed the boys in the red shirts that hand-dried cars with threadbare towels and sped away to a nearby forested place called The Grove where we liked to make out.

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Afterwards, sprawled naked across the back seat, I pretended I’d just been deflowered, pushing all knowledge of my brief but prosperous descent into sluttiness in Brooklyn to a remote corner of my mind. The birds hopped from branch to branch outside the steamed window, the blue sky a stippled smear, melting with the dripping condensation.

I pulled Sky outside, into the sunlight, liking the scent of honeysuckle on the breeze. Maybe this place wasn't so bad. Maybe car washes and wildflowers and rustling leaves and chirping birds and pretend virginity losses were on par with everything I'd left behind. Yes, I'd embrace The Pennsylvania Experience. Become an experience collector, and after I breathed this in, I'd move on — steal the car and drive across the country writing the great American novel (which would, unfortunately, be dystopian now) on a roll of toilet paper. Lose my virginity in every random town along the way. Tear down the Confederate flags in Mississippi and Alabama. Sleep in the desert. Befriend coyotes. Read tarot cards with the gypsies in Venice Beach. I'd drift, no possessions, just memories.

We dressed out in the open, and as I pulled the knotted strap of my tank top over my shoulder, the knot held, but one end broke from the shirt. "Shit." Staring at my bare shoulder, the frayed strap dangling over my abdomen, the fabric sagging low on my boob, practically exposing the nipple, annoyance replaced my newly manufactured hope.

"Torn in a fit of post-car wash orgasmic frenzy, eh?"

"Nice try." I shrugged on my flannel, buttoning myself up, plagued by the strap dangling there like a shriveled condom, my shoulder bare like that, boob loose like that. I climbed into the passenger's seat and shrank into the curve of the door, feeling like a cliché: broken girl with broken clothes commits broken acts with series of haphazardly chosen guys. I was an after-school special.

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Operation Return Sky's Mom's Car, which was to be followed by a stroll into town for cheese fries at the diner, a simple plan that went awry. The Simons residence was a stately country home on Main Street, within walking distance to school. Electric candles in each shutter-framed window. Brick, gingerbread woodwork, porches everywhere, some screened, some not. Upon entry, the charm disappeared, replaced with a quick smack of chaos and ruin. A large section of the ceiling by the front door was falling down. Bubbled and peeled drywall, disintegrated in places, exposing the wood lath beneath. A long, dark table below a carved gilt mirror the size of a piano, stacked with piles of shit. Similar piles of shit on a curved staircase leading to the second floor. Laundry, shoes, shit in bags, shit magazines, shit that might otherwise have a logical "place" in another home — batteries, Ibuprofen bottles, Band-Aids, empty Scotch-tape dispensers. It was clear that this was the shit of hoarders.

Next was the fucking dog, a huge black lab jumping and drooling all over me. Sky subdued it by sitting on it until it calmed. When it was safe, we hefted piles of shit from two chairs at a large table just outside the kitchen. Sky mumbled apologies for the mess, wandering around the room cradling his pile, hopelessly searching for a mound that wouldn't topple if made taller, settling for the floor. A small TV from another era blared Fox News. As soon as I sat, the dog was back at it, sniffing, drooling, licking. I held it off with an extended leg.

"Sky? Is that you?" called a mother-voice from upstairs. Without waiting for an answer, feet pounded down the stairs and she emerged in fleece jammies and a thick bathrobe.

“Oh, no!” she shrieked when she saw me fighting off the dog. She gripped it by its collar, dragged it across the room and plopped herself on top of it, just like her son. “Sorry. It’s not her fault. She gets so excited to see people!” Then, cutting her eyes toward Sky, she said, “I wish I’d known we were expecting company. I would’ve pick up the place!”

As if.

“Mom, this is Prue.”

She released the dog and grabbed the remote control, making moves to lower the volume, but stopped short of clicking, her attention snagged by something onscreen. “What a nice name.” Then, to Sky, “Your father’s been looking through old yearbooks in his underwear. I hope he puts on pants before he wanders down here.”

Sky whistled. “That’d be a show.”

She frowned at me. “Trust me. You *don’t* want to see that.”

I gave Sky a pleading look, making sure he saw me elbowing the dog’s head away from my crotch. He tossed the car keys onto the table, or rather onto a pile, and made excuses for why we had to get going. Mrs. Simons didn’t seem to hear.

Loud, off-key singing drifted downstairs, paired with heavy footsteps. I sighed and plopped my ass back down. We were stuck, fated to exchange pleasantries with the other half of the Simons parental equation. The dog had snuck under the table from some unseen entry point, sinking its snout into my crotch head-on. I yelped. Bare nipple grazing the cottony fuzz inside my shirt and beginning to chafe, I held out my palms to it like a traffic cop.

Sky yanked the dog from me, tugging it across the room. “Uhhh...just ignore everything my dad says. He’s a lawyer, not a regular human.” He tossed the dog into another room, slamming the door in its barking face.

“True,” his mom agreed.

The singing man appeared, in pants, beelining to a makeshift bar arranged in the corner, pouring himself a full 8-ounce glass of vodka and downing half of it without a wince. “Poor Val. No one pays attention to her.”

I hadn’t been in a household containing a full, nuclear family since we moved. Even with all that canvassing, it was always just one person who answered the door. It felt alien to have so many competing presences in one room.

“Cause she sucks,” Sky said.

The dog scratched against the door. Then came a thud, and another, and another. The 150-lb. dog hurled itself against a disintegrating wooden door in a disintegrating wooden home. No one acknowledged it, though Sky glared at his mom as if to say, *take care of this shit, would you?*

Mr. Simons shuffled to the head of the table with his glass and a small pile of shit which he placed on top of all that sat there before. He shook my hand with mock formality. “The girlfriend, I presume.”

Mrs. Simons fled to the kitchen, automatic, Pavlovian.

“Dad, this is Prue.”

“Prude? As in *a prude?*”

“Prudence,” I said, a lump forming in my throat.

Mr. Simons checked his chunky watch, a Rolex, which seemed at odds with his yellowed undershirt and frayed jeans. Everything about them was a contradiction. Like wealth dried up, or simply festering in the hands of the incompetent. "Going someplace?" His air was one of extreme agitation, although taking his living conditions into consideration, I couldn't fully blame him.

"To the diner," Sky said.

"Oh, bullshit. What am I, an idiot?"

Sky kicked the chair leg with the tip of his sneaker, staring at the floor rather than meeting his dad's eyes. Kick, kick, kick, rhythmic and constant. "We are, Dad. Just stop. Please?"

He polished off the vodka. "Humor an old man and tell me this much. You two are using protection, right?"

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Right?" he pressed, deadpan.

Seemed after spending two minutes with me, he was *sure* I was putting out. One minute calling me a prude and the next a slut, my only choices, if they could be called that.

I tried to think of something clever to say, to pummel him with indifference or at least amuse myself trying, but all I could think of was the night of my formal, back in Brooklyn when dad held me tight to his chest, so proud of his baby girl who wore the black dress with the plunging neckline so nicely. Just like a little lady. Look at those curves! Look at that lipstick! Look at that tousled hair! What a lady! What a man killer! His baby girl. Sure, post that shit on Facebook! Sure! Show the world

what a beautiful girl my baby is! But oh, how his tune changed when I came home late that night, missing curfew by a couple hours, lipstick smudged, hair askew, dress wrinkled. There'd been a line I hadn't seen. I was to pretend to be all grown up, not actually do it. Okay to flirt, okay to tease, to play the vixen, all grown up, making the boys drool, but not okay to want. Not okay to take or give. Everybody all lined up to reward the elaborate ruse. Not the fallout. Nope, nobody around to accept *that* but me. I'd fucked again out of spite, and again out of want, and again out of remorse, and now, in a strange house, with a strange family, in a strange town, alone again, deflowered again, the stickiness fermenting between my legs, my fucking breast bare, chafed and branded, being asked which was it, a prude or a slut, to choose, again, always to choose. As if they didn't make it for me every time anyway.

"Yeah, we use protection," I said.

Mr. Simons laughed. "Thank you! Was that so hard?"

He beamed at me. Now he knew what he was dealing with. That made it easier. Especially when the slut wasn't your daughter. And the boys, well, as long as they didn't knock anybody up, it was probably just a lot of *atta boy's!* and slaps on the back and condom-stuffed Christmas stockings.

Mrs. Simons drifted back into the doorframe.

I vaulted out of the chair and walked the length of the table, flipping through random books and magazines. "So it's cool as long as your progeny doesn't get strapped with a kid?"

"Prue? Maybe we should go." Sky placed his hand on my shoulder.

I was desperate to chill out, to stop making a scene, but I couldn't quite bring myself to walk toward the door. Where was my characteristic cool? The musty air stilled and grew heavy, the dog threw itself against the door.

"I've upset you," Mr. Simons said. His voice cracked and those eyes, which had been so hard before, were watery. Was he tearing up? He didn't know me, couldn't possibly give a shit to that degree, to warrant tears. It had to be the vodka. Or an eye condition. "Believe it or not, a kid usually isn't a good option for anyone your age."

"You just met her!" Mrs. Simons said to her husband.

"I hope to meet her again. Under non-crisis circumstances."

"How could you just assume?" she asked.

"Not a big leap. That's *all* I did at that age."

It was too much. Mr. and Mrs. Simons playing the role of concerned parents, Sky shuffling, a scorned child, the shaking door against which a 150-pound animal made herself known. Woof, thud.

Mr. Simons cleared his throat. "I'm sorry if my manner startled you. Please, sit down. Stay for dinner. Have a drink."

I shivered, the situation drifting beyond my grasp. Instead of playing it cool, I'd made things real, and now I didn't know what to do with these people, stepping all over each other's lives, their mess bleeding into my own. At once dismissive, forgiving, blaming, offensive, apologetic, taking turns trying on these roles, wearing them for a moment, then switching, and switching again, writhing all over one

another the way families do. It cracked something in my already weak and crumbling veneer.

“Thank you for having me here.” I kissed Sky on his trembling lips, wishing I could comfort him, or take him with me, but I couldn’t. And before I left, I surprised myself and opened the door that held Val and the dog burst into the room in an undeniable force of fur and stink and slobber.

Outside, I ran in the direction I thought might lead me home. Mostly lost, running toward a vague sense of something in a broken tank top, with a mostly exposed, flopping boob. I imagined people peering out their shuttered windows and watching me, this mess of a girl, and the urge to cry left. Three blocks later, I called my mom.

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Looking ragged, she retrieved me from the parking lot of a mom and pop hardware store that was closing for the night. She asked me what happened, but gross oversimplification seemed the only way to bridge our divide.

“His house was Fox News-central. I don’t know how you deal with these people all day.”

“I’m trying to imagine the ways we’re similar.”

“What if there’s no common ground? What if your little experiment doesn’t even work and no one wants to sit in a circle and sing kumbaya with you?”

My mother cleared her throat and tucked a stray clump of hair behind her ear. It was graying at the temples, unusual for her. She’d always been so meticulous about her appearance. I shuddered, imagining her settling into her new

surroundings a bit too much, foregoing pedicures and root touch-ups for a few too many homemade cookies and hand-knit sweaters.

“When you meditate, is it to let go of things?”

I tried to figure out her angle. Her questions were usually leading, lobbed to hit home the severity of a fuck-up or force the admission of a shortcoming.

“It’s to separate myself from the world around me. The suffering and loss and hypocrisy and bullshit.”

“But if you take yourself out of the world, what does that do to joy? Or me and you? Or you and Sky?”

“Unfortunately, it’s not permanent.”

Her face blotched over and I rolled me eyes, awaiting the tears. “Today, right before you called, I ran away from a man’s house when he tried to show me his gun. I lost it. I thought he was going to do something terrible, but now I think...he was just trying to show me his gun.”

Our road was deserted, but she still used her turn signal before steering into our driveway. Here was this woman, related to me, alone (except for me), not another moving car around her probably for miles, signaling into the night. To no one at all. Just in case.

She shut off the car and stared straight ahead, into the darkening night. “All this time I thought I was listening. I thought I was doing something.”

I touched her arm lightly. Was she having a breakdown? Or as fucked up as me? Or having second thoughts? Was her can-do, down-to-business, pulled together and zipped up attitude just a front?

When we entered the house, I went to the mantle and stared at the urn that held my father's ashes. I ripped off my shirts, finally feeling the symmetry I craved, and cradled the urn against my bare chest. He'd been shot two weeks after my formal. We hadn't been speaking. I settled into a leather recliner, topless, placing him between my legs, careful to squeeze him tightly between my thighs, to keep him upright and in one piece.

She cloaked my shoulders with her jacket and rubbed my arms to warm them.

The wind picked up and the loose shutters knocked against the house. "The temperature is dropping," she said. "It's supposed to snow. Let's build a fire."

We stacked wood into the fireplace, piecing together a mosaic of logs and kindling. I set my father back onto the mantle, and my mom lit some crumbled up campaign letterhead. The paper smoked and burned and we watched as the flames took hold and the smoke snaked up the chimney and fresh ash flaked down through the grates, dusting the cracked bricks. As the day burned away to reveal what was left.

-THE END-