

The Rotation of Planets

My windows are a kaleidoscope, blue, orange, yellow, red, and sun shines through in solid square streams from the panes that are clear glass. This morning, I wake up sticky and warm, curled on the futon by the windows with the blankets kicked off. There's a hot box effect of sun in the room from the old, single-pane, industrial windows.

My hair is curled with humidity and tangled from too many days without washing. I pull it back with my fingers and they get stuck half way through in nests at the nape of my neck. A notebook has fallen open beside the bed, next to my circled and highlighted collage of classifieds, my carton of Pall Malls, a half eaten sandwich from the bodega downstairs, the change that I'm saving in a mason jar, books, books, books. Most things remaining exactly as they fell last night or last week. It's been eight years since I graduated from college, but the tight space makes it hard to lose the embarrassing, dorm room aesthetic. Evidence of Julie is scarce but still present. I uncover small artifacts of hers under paperbacks and dirty laundry that startle me in my solitude. A few of her paintings lean against the wall by the door.

The heat from the windows tells my brain that I'm sunburning, even though I'm not. I button a big flannel over my naked breasts, throw a tapestry over the bare curtain rod drowning myself in blue light, and lay back down on the futon, which is the primary living area in the cramped apartment.

I hear the deadbolt to the studio click open. Julie is home from her early shift at the roastery down the block, returning, as usual, just as I'm waking up. I cringe a bit from wanting her and wanting

her gone in equal degrees. She comes over to the bed, slings her paisley bag to the floor. "Erin," she says, smiling almost like she's coming home to a pet. "You're awake." She lays down with her head in my lap, gypsy skirts fanning around her, her familiar smell of roasting coffee and jasmine, smells that, from now on, will be tied to her, whether I love or hate her, for the rest of my life. Her hair falls around her face in loose black ringlets. I run my fingers over her sharp, perfect collar bones, and she unbuttons my flannel slowly, kissing my neck, kissing each of my closed eyelids.

Julie is twenty-two, from Connecticut, living in Brooklyn on her parents' money. She's the kind of girl who thinks it's in to be poor. Who *wants* to be poor. Who is embarrassed by her privilege and doesn't yet know that she can't escape her upbringing. That she can't fake it. When I first took her home with me, she stopped at the door of the warehouse and looked up the six floor mosaic of colored glass and graffiti, her eyes wide. She smiled all the way up the four flights of stairs that smell like piss and weed, mildew and cheap cigarettes. She said she never wanted to leave, and she's still here. She had just graduated and told me she was broke and didn't know what she was going to do, so I took her in like a stray. Because of the nostalgia of being young and broke and moving to New York. Because of her luminous, curly hair and ridiculous inexperience. Because I was bored and had been alone for a long time.

Julie takes the tapestry off the window, and I'm naked again. Already, she has undone all of my progress for the morning. She traces one finger down the length of my body, says I look more beautiful in the sunlight. We fuck, sheets damp with sweat, our skin slipping and sticking in all the wrong places. A strange, rushed conciliation. She never opens her eyes.

I know that Julie does not love me. Nothing close. I'm just one part of this adventure, which, by now, must be getting old. I have an apartment with factory windows and high ceilings, drug

connections, musicians and artists to be introduced to, and a willing body she can have whenever she wants. Some months, I can't pay rent and she can feel vicariously bohemian, supplementing me with her trust fund dollars. But her naivete radiates. She is so stupidly young and beautiful that I keep letting her come back.

When we're finished, I put the tapestry back up on the window, pull on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, foregoing underwear and bra, tie my hair up without combing it. Julie's curled up at the side of the bed, back to me, facing the wall, and I wonder if she feels that same hollow in her stomach as I do, the one that says no matter how close we come, we will never connect. That we could orbit each other forever but we will never collide.

"I have a sitting this afternoon," I say, and she doesn't say anything, just lays there, maybe pretending to be asleep. "Maybe I'll stay in the city before my shift. Have a few drinks. You going anywhere?" She stays silent, and I grab my bag and slam the door shut when I leave.

It's hard for me to leave the sun of Brooklyn for the maze of shadows in the city, and I only do it because rent demands. The subway air is thick with the sick humidity of too many bodies, air so stale I think molecules of it linger from the year this tunnel was built. When I go down the stairs, I remember why people here are so insane, everyone scurrying underneath the city like ants. Somewhere down the platform, a man is chanting, mantra-like, in a deep voice that goes all the way down to my gut. "The train is coming. Stop your bullshitting and lolly-gagging around and get on the train," he says. "I have been here this entire time calling that train," and something about his conviction gives me an eerie feeling, makes me believe that he alone is responsible for every train that comes down these tracks, and that he has been standing there, immemorial, waving the very first commuters of this line on

into the darkness of the tunnel.

There's a sign across the way that says "Caution: Rodenticide" that I can't take my eyes off of, and right below it, a rat scampers underneath the electrified rails. Some kind of super rat that survived the poison who will breed and eventually overtake the city. I hear the rumble and squeal of the coming train and watch the tips of shoes creep over the yellow line. I let myself melt into the crowd, am herded into a car, and find a seat. "This is a Manhattan bound L train" a soothing female voice announces, and then in a man's voice: "Stand clear of the closing doors, please." Directions always in a woman's voice, instructions in a man's. I stare straight ahead at my discolored reflection in a Pepsi ad, and my eyes look like holes in my head, and everything shuts down until I make my stop.

The painting studio is quiet except for the rustle of charcoal on paper and the occasional scrape of a chair against the hardwood. I close my eyes and let my other senses take over. The room smells like dust and oils. Chemicals, mineral spirits, and potpourri. Yellowed pages of library books. Corners of an old, leaky ceiling, soaked and dried again. The warm air blowing from the vents is cool once it gets to me. It prickles against my bare skin, and I stay as still as I can. I try to remember all the lines and folds of my body but see Julie instead, curled up next to the wall.

I open my eyes and see twenty people staring at pieces of me. My breasts, my ankles. Painters trying to get gravity right in the way my hair falls over my shoulders. I imagine the other sides of the easels, all the different renditions of me that are not me.

If I were a romantic, if there were anything romantic about the situation, I would say that art and beauty brought Julie and I together. We met in this room during her last semester of art school. She was one of those anonymous pairs of eyes. For some reason, she picked me out of all the other naked women that sit in front of this class.

It only took her two tries before I gave in. The first time, she came into the back where I was still getting dressed. I was just buttoning my jeans and I held my t-shirt over my chest. "Don't your legs fall asleep, sitting up there like that?" she asked me.

"Every time," I said. "And my back is killing me."

"It doesn't show" she said. "Hey, would you like to go get some coffee this evening?" There was that school girl shrill and rush in her voice. The one that says, Christ, I've been working up the courage to say that for weeks. Her cheeks were flushed and she didn't break eye contact. She had a green headscarf on, brown canvas bag, long linen skirt that almost touched the floor. Quintessential hippie artist. She reminded me too much of me when I was young, before I was out of school, back when my edges were still soft. "You're not my type," I said, pulling my shirt on and grabbing my bag. I smiled at her as I left the room and maybe that wasn't callous enough because a few weeks later she asked me again. She came into the room and the first thing she said was, "You're not my type, either." That was the line that worked on me. You're not my type, either. It was such an intriguingly bad idea that I couldn't pass it up.

We rode into Brooklyn and went to this twenty-four hour diner, the kind where the cooks yell back and forth in Spanish and Arabic and somehow understand each other, and the grilled cheese costs more than the hamburgers for reasons I didn't want to think about. We had fresh donuts and bad, thick coffee, speculated about what the meat was made of and decided it was probably people. I admit, she

amused me, and I liked looking at her there across the table. She told me about art school, that she was renting a room from a friend in Manhattan in a two bedroom apartment with exposed brick and a courtyard. "That's probably the most beautiful apartment you'll ever see in the city," I said.

"I hate it," she said. "I feel like an asshole. I want the old, bombed out, eighties New York."

Yeah, I thought, getting mugged and stepping over junkies on the sidewalks. "You'd love my place then," I said. "It's full of roaches and mold."

She said she couldn't connect with anyone in the city. "I feel like I don't exist, or that they don't exist. Like we're ghosts walking past each other." She said that she talked to me that first day because I stood out to her. I seemed *real*. I know it was rhetorical, but she sounded like she thought the people in Manhattan really were figments, revealing themselves from another plane. "It's all the same thing," she said. "Friendships, relationships, sex. I don't know why we categorize these things. Why we make all these rules. It's just people wanting to connect. Any two people." For a moment, I saw heartache, then she giggled, reached across the table, and wiped something off of my cheek. "Powdered sugar," she said.

The third time she convinced me to take her back to my place. I opened a bottle of red wine while she wandered in circles around the studio and looked out the windows, the only things visible in the darkness were the silhouettes of water towers over the warehouses. "Nice view," she said, and I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic but was afraid she wasn't. We sat on the couch, and every time I looked at her it seemed like she had moved closer without actually moving. Maybe it was just the angle of her body, her eyes that never left mine, the way she seemed frighteningly open. "This is exactly the kind of place I've always dreamed of living," she said.

"You don't want to live here," I said. "You don't want to live in New York. It'll wear you

down.”

"You don't seem worn down," she said, and I just laughed, shaking my head, wanting to remind her of how little she knew me. She took my wine glass out of my hand, set it on the table, and I let her kiss me. "I've never slept with a woman before," she said, which was no surprise to me at all.

I take responsibility for the rest. Red wine goes straight to my head, and there was no reason why not. You would think that people have instincts for sex, but everything was painfully awkward that first time, and afterwards I felt half used, half predatory. She stared at my body for a long time while we lay there, part fascination, admiration, something, and part scrutiny, like she was looking into a mirror. Like it was her own.

When this sitting ends, I pull my clothes on again, tie my hair back up. I wonder if the more she gets to know me, the less "real" I become compared to the nude figure that Julie fell for. The teacher, a grey haired, puzzlingly conservative woman, hands me a fifty for my naked body. "Too bad I don't have the tits to be a stripper," I joke, and she scowls at me.

I go down to the street, crawling as always with foot traffic and taxis. I try to guess who's a tourist and who actually lives here, but everyone looks homogenous to me. I play a game sometimes where I try to pick out a local and ask them for directions. I'm usually wrong. The tourists always look flattered to pass as New Yorkers. Sometimes people ask me if I'm from Europe and I'm flattered by that, too, everyone relieved to be mistaken for someone else.

For a long time, I just walk, not wanting to go home, replaying the last few days that led to this morning's coldness. Our argument yesterday started when I got off the phone with Dominic, downstairs. He's a few years younger than me and just as broke. He's my only friend in the building

because he was too green to know that New Yorkers don't chat with their neighbors when he first moved in and we happened to hit it off. Julie and I were sitting together on the couch. "Why can't I ever meet any of your friends?" Julie had said.

"What are you talking about?" I said. "I just invited Dominic to come up for a drink."

"That's not the same," she said. "He lives downstairs and he always brings weed. Of course he comes over all the time. That's not the same at all."

"You wouldn't get along with my other friends." I put my hands on her shoulders and gave her a playful shake. "I know you and I know them, and there's no point." It's the truth. The friends I have who have lived here as long as I have are too hardened to put up with this bright-eyed, blundering child. My best friend and coworker, a crass, Puerto Rican goddess of the New York punk scene, calls Julie "the anklebiter". It's not her fault that she hasn't yet been bludgeoned into pessimism (or as we call it, "realism") by loss and failure and grief. And she hasn't known the city long enough to be disillusioned by its slow death and vanishing soul. What is refreshing about her is also saccharine, so, I keep her separate from most of my people.

"Sure," she said quietly. "I get it. Can't be seen with me. I'm not revolutionary enough."

"I'm not having this conversation again," I said, and thankfully Dominic knocked at the door. Julie was the one to get up and answer it.

"Hey Jules," Dominic said when he saw her. "How goes?" He was in his usual paint smeared, baggy, thrift store clothes, looking like he hadn't showered in a week, his face covered in black not-quite-beard, not-quite-stubble. He and Julie gave each other a sideways hug, then he flopped down next to me on the couch. He took a joint out of the pocket of his flannel, lit it, and passed it to me. I saluted him, smirking.

“I finished a new piece today,” Julie said to Dominic, and he got up to look, genuinely interested. Painting is something they share. Her work is good. Mixed media numbers with intricate, black ink detailing that I've always admired.

I lit a cigarette, cranked open one of the huge window panes, and watched them from across the room, blowing smoke out into the humid air. Dominic smiled a lot and looked at his feet, like a bashful puppy. Julie beamed at all of his compliments, and laughter tumbled easily from their mouths. Something in her posture changed. Her shoulders relaxed, her movements gained a natural flow. She looked different than she ever did with me. She looked comfortable. They talked for a good while on the couch together, then Dominic said “Okay, I'm out. I have to get to the studio early tomorrow.”

“Ciao,” I said, raising a hand, and he let himself out of my apartment. “Julie,” I said when she sat back down, removing the bitterness from my voice and leaving the honesty, “what are you doing with me?”

I open the door to the apartment and it's dark inside. "Julie," I whisper, thinking she might have gone to bed early. There is a dull, uninhabited silence. I switch the light on, and things look off, like someone's rearranged the furniture. Everything has been cleaned. Then it dawns on me, like something I had been expecting all along. I don't see any of Julie's things. Her paintings are gone from the corner of the room. I take a deep breath, let loss and relief flood in together. The relief of being released from someone's experiment and the fear of the bereavement to come, the void that will be left in my body. But her clothes are still there when I check the closet, her paintings stacked inside. Her toothbrush is on the sink. The room still smells of coffee and jasmine. I exhale.

Going on a hunch, I call Dominic. “It's Erin,” I say. “Is Julie over there?”

He chuckles, a trace of embarrassment in his voice. “She's here, sorry, don't worry.” He's almost whispering. “She fell asleep on the couch.”

I smile, imagining how tiny she must look curled up on his brown, lumpy couch. “Don't wake her up,” I tell him. “Let her stay.” And gently, I push us further out of orbit.