

Linchpins

Beatriz's uniform swishes with each step. Her mind drifts to the cadence of her polyester draped gait. Shp, shp, shp. The rhythmic ohm falls silent as she comes to a stop, shifting the just-finished fries from their hot oil bath to the warmer's electric heat, shaking salt down on them like snow drift. Shp, shp, back to the counter. The wrinkle-free polyester sings softly with her movements, comfortable as pajamas. The visor however annoys her; it pocks her forehead with a stripe of sweaty skin and a light line of pimples, but at least it provides some shade from the glaring fluorescent lights, especially unrelenting so late at night, when low light or starlight should reign. Occasionally her voice breaks the relative silence to repeat an order through her headset to a late-night drive-thru customer, her words saturated with a stale cheerfulness.

When she notices the clock slip past 11 p.m. she can't help but mutter, "Gracias a Dios, just 2 more hours."

Beatriz moves with practiced invisibility, like a mild breeze--barely stirring the air. She makes fast food look slow, floating from fry oil to burger station to register. For her own sake she is trance-like in her work so as to meld minutes and hours into forgetfulness. It is artful subsisting, a paycheck, a down payment on better times to come.

Beatriz is nearing graduation. She aims to finish with a 3.0 GPA, securing easy admission to a one-notch-above-community-college state school branch campus, where 20 hours work a week will be just enough to supplement her savings for (she hopes) two years, when by her best guesstimate she will have to take a year off and work full-time to replenish savings before the final stretch. Destination: registered nurse. Specialization? Time will tell. Her dreams are modest, embedded in hopefulness that someday her life will be a haven--just her in a modest apartment earning a modest paycheck.

She can avoid most interlocutors in her life with a clear I-don't-care-to-know-you vibe, walking with her head slightly lowered and her eyes cast down and sideways. Her carriage projects a general distance. She never draws the attention of curious boys to herself with a soulful glance from coffee-black eyes, peering out

from behind a curtain of raven locks. She alone has seen such a look from herself in the mirror, but intends never to share it with anyone because look what that got her romantically minded mother--5 kids in a 3-bedroom apartment and a man who loves her at least half because he can put his feet up and keep them there five minutes in the door every night.

So for Beatriz, hiding seems preferable to being seen. With one sweet exception: Ballet Folklórico. Once a week, she dons a soft white blouse and a circle skirt of royal blue with rainbow embroidery along the hem and makes it dance in ribbon-like swirls. Ballerinas and dervishes are not her equal; she is an onyx-haired gem of bright complexion who makes cloth ripple like water, with a flower in her hair.

But most days Beatriz practices the dance of disappearing into her service sector role, where she has become a true artist of inconspicuousness under the fluorescent lights, where she stands now wiping the counter free of other people's splatters.

In walks a handful of fellow high-schoolers, intent on a productive study hall, AP US History tests being just a week away. Among the small knot of youth is Paige; for the first time in nearly a decade two childhood friends are in the same room but don't know it yet.

Paige casts her eyes to her phone to her friends to her phone to the menu then back to her friends. "Oh my god, nothing looks good I shouldn't eat this late, seriously, I'll gain three pounds by morning, but I'm feeling nostalgic for a happy meal remember those plastic toys, I used to love those I had a collection on my window sill I kid you not when I was little before my mom married Dr. Mike." She babbles unselfconsciously, not expecting listeners. Her highlighted curls bounce four shades of blonde on top of her natural brown, the curling-ironed coils sadly free of wild tangle. Paige wears a too-small flannel top layered over a lacy peek-a-boo camisole and cut off shorts with wear and tear purchased, not earned. She is a walking mannequin with--thank God--the smallest hint of cellulite at the top of her thigh in the rear, humanizing her.

Paige's eyes and words flick here and there so as not to settle on anything too long. Choices made lightly are choices less likely to disappoint. The hope is to be light on the eyes. She inspires a brief, unstudied acceptance; she checks all the boxes so that no one comes in for a closer look nor requires her to return the look. For if one gazes directly at a person one might encounter there rejection or, even more terrifying, devotion.

Paige prefers all manner of her life fall into the accessories category. There are no essentials, just a path to walk swiftly. It takes her to a gate labeled out-of-state college, where she will shed a few layers--of fashion and pretense--and spend each evening in a library cubby, a mousy deliverance out of eyeshot into books and quiet privacy. For this she thanks library gods.

Paige is accompanied by her friends. Briony: crowned homecoming queen, recognized by her minions as their true monarch, Eric: Briony's boyfriend and, yes, homecoming king, and Hailey: the hanger-on since jr. high.

Each face is lit from above by the dread fluorescents and lit from below by their temporarily referenced phones, each of them syncing briefly with something online. "Beau is on his way," informs Paige smilingly upon reading a recent text, her friends heedless of the small sigh in her words. Beau is Paige's boyfriend. They have a respectable 10 months behind them, having sparked a convenient summer fling that rolled into the school year, simplifying their social calendars. Beau is handsome as a demigod, adequate as a student and remedial as a conversationalist...so, popular. Upon the initiation of their romance, general consensus was, "Indubitably a good match; whyever did it take so long." Or in parlance, "Fuck yeah; you guys would make gorgeous babies!"

"Go ahead and order," Paige encourages her companions, as she attends to the abbreviated conversation with Beau: "McD's on 1st Ave. Want smthng? Split a Big Mac? ETA? We are OTD in 15."

Orders are placed. Sweetened coffees drizzled with chocolate syrup on hydrogenated whip cream are sufficiently aromatic to be breathed in with sighs. Hailey dips too close and ends up with a dollop on the tip of her nose, at which Briony rolls her eyes.

“What?” quips Hailey knowingly, her eyes glinting mischief, while Eric indulges her nonsense with a half-smile and gently backhands the offending mess and wipes it on his jeans.

“Gross. Can we find a booth and review now?” Briony fusses, proving how far she is from being a night owl. With drink orders placed and filled, the threesome slide further back in the recesses of the fast food diner and leave Paige to follow with food.

Thus, in a state of distraction, hounded by secret adolescent travails and internal musings, with miles behind them and miles to go before they sleep, two youth who once were friends reach opposite sides of a fiberglass counter in a nondescript, luridly lit McDonald’s and chance to simultaneously, with unguarded eyes, look up.

The deep brown in Beatriz’s eyes and the speckled hazel of Paige’s swirl into a scene of dimly lit, juniper scented magic. Pine needles under a baby blanket make the floor, and the roof is layers of coniferous branches arched above, letting in filtered sunlight. The outdoor room breathes Faerie, and the two 8-year-olds in matching pig tails alone know it in all the world. They’ve found one of the secret passages between their world and ours: the tree has a hollow in it. The girls spend hours a day weaving stories with their fancied friends, miniature and winged. Most of a doll house’s furnishings have been secreted out in pockets and little-girl purses to enact the enchantment. Whole faerie empires rise and fall in their tales, but always at least one faerie child finds safe haven with a family of field mice or in a robin’s nest to restart the kingdom.

The scene shifts again. They are knocking on each other’s apartment doors. They are up and down the stairs a thousand times a day. They are picking which apartment to watch Scooby-Doo based on the snacks in the pantries. They are swapping Little House books between weekend library trips with their

families, which they don't make together because little Hispanic girls and little white girls can be friends but their mothers tend to keep a studied, polite distance.

Except the night when a spirit of daring seized them (I blame the faeries) and they sneaked out to the park with the tree with the hollow knot and sheltering branches, to see if they could spy a circle of dryads and fauns like at Dancing Lawn in the book they shared that week--the one with Aslan. That night the mothers huddled together with worry close to midnight, metering out minutes and deciding how many had to pass before they called the police, which left Beatriz's mother with rampant fear in her eyes. The girls came back 45 minutes after their absence was discovered. They both received near-identical, wrist-wrenching drags to their rooms, tongue lashings, and (the first and only time for either girl) a spanking, followed by groundings that lasted 14 days--planned together by the two mothers during their half-hour of anxiety so that it would cover the final days of summer and the first couple days of school. Which might be why that was the last summer they spent together though they had been constant companions previously. Or it might be because this was the first year they landed in different home rooms. Who can tell? Whatever the cause, they drifted after that night.

In less than a moment, these images slip like a swift current through each young woman's mind. Both girls revisit childhood blessedness with the speed of a sideways glance, and when their eyes settle back upon each other at the counter, neither is sure if the other has remembered the once-cherished friend. Maybe there's a flicker of recognition or merely a question in Beatriz's eyes, but it's enough. Paige grins slightly, "Hi. Beatriz, right? I didn't know you still lived around here." Though in fact Beatriz still lives in the same apartment and it had been Paige and her mom who moved away when the happy match with Dr. Mike was made. Beatriz, still half-invisible by practice, nods curtly. Paige responds by getting down to business: "Um. I'll have a Big Mac and two diet cokes." Which startles Beatriz back into muscle-memory movement. She punches in the order, awake enough now to smile back and say, "Yeah. Nice to see you. Paige."

Awkward silence follows, while Beatriz retrieves the hamburger and loads the tray. With a pause and a “Well, thanks,” Paige offers as follow-up: “Maybe I’ll see you again next time I’m here.” Which both ladies know is a singular occurrence unlikely to be repeated but allows for an easier departure. Both girls move away from each other, steeping now in childhood memories and a sorrowful assumption that the other doesn’t remember well or care.

By the time Paige reaches the booth in the back, another table is pulled up at the end to claim tabletop space for books and notebooks piled up at the ready, waiting only for the consumption of foodstuffs and lattes. “We’re going to study here?” Paige groans, ready to flee the discomfort of remembered and lost childhood joys.

“Yeah, why not? I for one am going to need to refill on caffeine again,” Eric responds. “This way we don’t have to deal with parents. They think we’re going to fling our books aside for an orgy if they don’t check up every ten minutes. Unless, of course, someone’s ‘rents are gone and we are going to have an orgy?” Eric smirks with twice-raised eyebrows.

“Ugh. Don’t be vulgar,” Briony chides while settling further into the nook under his arm, sipping her McLatte. So Paige settles in for the long haul.

Last ditch effort: “I told Beau we’d only be here for 15 minutes; he’s expecting us to vacate.”

“He wasn’t going to stay for the study session, here *or* at someone’s house, was he? He can go if he wants,” replies Briony with uncharacteristic iciness. Paige and Briony are at the tail-end of a month of discord over Beau’s behavior at a Spring Break party, which involved tequila shots, a broken picture frame, and accidentally kissing another girl...”My eyes were closed--it was a game--I thought it was you, babe--I swear she must use the same lotion--smelled so good.” At which Paige takes her turn rolling her eyes dismissively though her stomach knots. Not her favorite Beau-moment either.

So for nearly 30 minutes the small group huddles around their textbooks and note cards, quizzing each other on key events and their significations, falling into a few minutes of silent review when details are fuzzy. Every ten minutes one person takes a turn interpreting an editorial cartoon from a different era, spinning it off into as many connections as can be partially justified, till the loony-ness triggers someone's bullshit radar--their way of keeping the cramming interesting. Eventually this little habit will help all of them pass the test with 5's and enable one (Eric, who eventually gets honest with himself and fucks then marries Hailey in grad school and produces a happy mixed-religion clan with a wicked sense of humor) to reach a faculty chair in a second-tier Ivy because history is about spinning tales as much as literature is, maybe more since making our own world internally consistent is a miracle of epic proportions. He and Hailey will enjoy a squire's life in a New England town where he'll write elegant biographies of seemingly minor historical characters who are revealed by his pen to be America's linchpins. But no one knows yet Eric is a sage, because that is the glory of time and its slow unraveling. He is just a minor character in this minor tale. And who can say if one of the other teens is a yet unrealized linchpin herself, a small Atlas holding a world on her shoulders, as each of us is to the people in our lives, orbiting around each other as we do and relying on a symphony of gravitational balance amongst ourselves to keep our personal solar systems spinning and stars and planets hanging in our skies?

During the 28th minute the door of McDonald's slams open and skidding tennis shoe rubber is heard. "Shit! I nearly fell on my ass! Where are you guys? Paaaa-aaaigge!" Beau has arrived.

The easy quiet of the study session shifts into a momentary lower gear of disappointment. The disruption won't be brief they all know, and Briony doesn't even try to hide her contempt. Paige nearly instantaneously recovers, hopping out of the booth like a bubble and making her way forward to the counter while offering a sing-song, "I'm coming, lover!"

Beau is inebriated. This is a regular thing. He is a little further than Paige likes to see on a school night, it being Tuesday and he in more of a Friday state. Plus, she observes, chagrined and embarrassed,

slipping toward anger, apparently he is alone and drove himself....No....Here comes Matt; he was parking, she internally sighs with relief because hashtag drunk driving and mangled traffic deaths.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Beau sidles in toward Paige for a sloppy kiss on her neck, where he nuzzles her as much like a neglected dog as a horny teenager, and she obliges by tucking her head down to make of her neck a small embrace into which he melts. When he brings his eyes back up he is all sparkle and charm: “I’m starving!”

“I ate the whole Big Mac,” Paige confesses with an apologetic pout. “You were supposed to be here half an hour ago. We weren’t gonna stay; you’re lucky we’re still here.”

But Beau has already sidled up to the counter and shouted toward Beatriz’s back where she is attending the fry oil, “Two cheeseburgers please, madam, and a coke.”

“I already have a diet coke for you,” Paige whispers.

“I bet it’s all watery from the ice,” he smile-grimaces. “Don’t worry about it, babe. I don’t mind getting a new one.”

At which Paige internally flinches, like she can do anything about the melting of ice when he is 30 minutes late and already pulling out his fucking flask because he doesn’t want a coke, he wants a Jack and coke. And she knows he is swiftly approaching the line where easy charm becomes a stupor. At which point, at the counter in McDonald’s with Beatriz slowly turning toward them to take the order and the fluorescents burning a hole in her brain and his flask half out, Paige realizes she is about to go postal on the whole fucking place, so she pulls herself up and drops her shoulders so that her breasts rise toward Beau suggestively and she oozes her best hip roll toward him and pulls on the back of his neck so that he can’t escape the kiss she lays on him like a kitten, all soft tongue and tenderness: “I’ll get your tray, honey. Go back and say hi to everybody. Can you pull up another table so Matt has a spot, pretty please?” since Matt is walking in now and greets her with a quick chin tilt to the sky and knowing shoulder shrug as she accusatorially meets his eyes outside of Beau’s gaze, glancing down at the flask that has already half-left Beau’s grip for her own.

By the time Beatriz reaches the counter for the order, Beau and Matt are walking toward the table in the back and Paige is staring at the flask unsure what to do with it since her backpack is back at the table and she desperately wants to get it sequestered deep inside without Beau laying his glassy eyes on it, and her darling little shorts have suggestions of pockets not actual pockets, so she slides it between her back and the waistband of her underwear, shivering from the cold metal like it's a gun.

"He's cute," Beatriz offers, politely ignoring the subtle drama she is wise enough to take in.

"Yeah, he's great," Paige instinctively shines back. "Beau--his name's Beau."

"That's funny. Beau is your beau."

"Yeah," she concedes, faintly recalling Beatriz's wit. Paige recenters herself by reasserting Beau's order: "He wants two cheeseburgers and a coke please."

So Beatriz assumes she is being dismissed back into her service role, drops her gaze, and attends the task at hand. Since it is late, Beatriz has to assembly-line the cheeseburgers, giving Paige the necessary time to splash a little whiskey in the fountain drink--because Beau will ask, she is a terrible liar, and at least this way she controls the amount--then tucks away the chilling flask at her back again, shaking off shivers.

Back at the table, after ten more minutes of study, courtesy of Beau's appetite for a little food in his stomach to bob around in the booze already there, the friends slip into a short sabbatical and bandy around prom plans. Hailey has good news: "My parents are paying for two rooms at the Marriott...they want to be sure my date and I aren't tempted to do any driving 'just in case' but two rooms because they want me to feel free to include you all. Girls room and boys room," Hailey smirks with appreciative hilarity at her parents' willingness to give her the benefit of a thousand doubts, forever trusting her to make "the right choice" and trusting their own ability to rescue her from the minor consequences of any youthful stumbles toward adult mistakes. Her father is a rabbi, which she still thinks means he is uptight but will learn with time means he has

seen every shade of tragedy the world can cast and remains a man of faith even unto trusting YHWH with his daughter, which is a steel-strong form of courage.

As prom seeps through Beau's alcohol haze, and with it after-prom, he gets handsy with Paige, quickly sliding from sweet affection--hand brushing across cheek, arms wrapped around shoulders--to suggestive--fingertips dipping below the hem of her camisole at the top of her breast. He is now whispering in her ear words only she can hear but everyone can guess: "I need to piss. Come with me. Sweetie come on, really fast, I just can't resist you, looking like an angel tonight. Listen. Come back in a couple minutes I'll meet you by the ladies room. Babe you're killin' me." While Paige bravely wears a gaze of nonchalance hoping to God everyone is cool with it just like she is so obviously cool with it as she giggles quietly to emphasize how very cool with it she is that her boyfriend is so enamored with her beauty and adores their romance-for-the-ages because that is what is going on here not cheap lust.

Beau has surfaced from his mile-long inebriation by a few yards thanks to Paige's light touch with the flask and the cheeseburgers now soaking up some of the poison in his gut. This allows him to reassert a newly available level of coherence in his game plan to lure his lovely girlfriend to the bathroom for a quickie. Feigning surrender, he leaves the request for a few minutes and let's the study session proceed through another editorial cartoon round, but before the next chapter is cracked (Jacksonian politics and the Fugitive Slave Act), he expresses his regret but he and Matt are going to have to head out and thanks for the midnight snack and fun. He pushes back his chair and quips he wants a little privacy to say goodbye to his lady, his love, and Paige knows this is an invitation she can't decline. She hopes to steer him past the counter to the exit for a goodbye kiss, usually a melodramatic reenactment of Romeo's bitter departure into exile, which she found sweet the first few months of their romance but now feels like work to sustain such ardor and grief for a mere 8-hour separation. As they slow-walk up from the back booth, Beau further inhibits their progress with his insistent ear-nibbling which at this late hour feels like a thousand pin-pricks on her skin from the stubble on his cheeks. She detects drift before they make it ten feet, toward the left not the right, toward the

bathrooms' hall not the exit. She uses her sandals against the linoleum to reverse the shift as best she can, even stopping to kiss him full on, tongue to tonsils, and attempt a reverse-roll out of his arms and back to the books awaiting her.

“Thank you soooo much for saving me from my academic toil. You are so generous; I was totally fried. Now I can press on to the Civil War and get home by 2 a.m. for sure. Text me? I miss you already. Do you wanna pick me up fifteen minutes early in the morning and we can drive through for coffee my treat? I wish you were taking AP so you'd have to stay but I know you have conditioning after school tomorrow so you should go get your beauty sleep. I love you babe.” And she works her syrupy whisper like lubrication for a smooth exit but can't seem to steer far enough to the right, to the green-glow of the exit sign, to a clean release with a final kiss.

“Babe I gotta pee real quick.” And with the flick of his mouth's corner up in a small Joker-grin, he wraps his strong fingers around her pliable waist. “Come keep me company.” And Paige can already feel the cold mirror at her back and the sink counter under her bare buttocks and the 4-minute grope and thrust she knows he's already counting on to replace one form of intoxication for another in his headlong pursuit of self-forgetfulness, while she'll be left to clean up with fast-food-bathroom paper towels, thin and rough on her skin, the smell of urine in the air and dried in droplets around the urinals and lingering in her nostrils for hours or forever who could tell? SHIT screams her internal voice and SHIT screams her conscience and SHIT screams her dignity and SHIT is what she already feels like, a different kind of depository for a different kind of dump for her gorgeous catch of a boyfriend who feels like a millstone around her neck and she wishes for the days of chastity belts and arranged marriages and nunneries.

“No, babe, I'm too tired and I gotta get back to the group. They're waiting for me,” which just one quick glance back tells them both is not the case--the midnight oil burns on without her, books being blissfully poured over as Matt chin-ups his exit to warm the car and pick the tunes and one last try: “Besides, I think my period is gonna start like anytime; I'm feeling crampy. It sucks. I'm sorry babe.”

To which Beau's eyes harden slightly and his fingers pinch an inch tighter on her middle: "Babe. That was two weeks ago. We're good--maybe you shouldn't have eaten that whole Big Mac without me," and his forehead wrinkles patronizingly and she feels the sting of shame lash her. "I just want your company; don't be so cold. Have a little compassion; I'm aching to feel you close, babe." His words have gotten a half-octave deeper and a half-decibel louder and she feels the crossroads under her feet where a step in any direction may lead to precipices--a shitshow of tangled complications like blowing up prom plans and having Beau drunk and angry and spreading rumors about her slutty ways and her abandonment of his whole-hearted fucking love for her that would force friends to choose sides. "Sweet Beau. Just. Not right now. Friday night my parents are going out; it'll be just you and me and we can spend hours naked together. We'll wander to every room in the house. Dr. Mike's pool table, babe? But just. Let's not. Not tonight. It's a gross bathroom. I want to enjoy every inch of you. So Friday, okay?" And she knows she's made some progress when his grip loosens as he imagines Friday night and her stretched across the pool table, but too soon his eyes refocus and he releases his hands from her waist only to pull her further into his arms and drag playfully on to the bathroom, and her mouth is buried in his t-shirt so her no is a muffled, meaningless note.

Then in a swift reversal and a startled stop, Beau is releasing his trapping embrace and saying to someone, "What the fuck is this?" Paige's eyes lift as she breathes a deep, free breath and sees Beatriz, eyes mostly lowered, slide a mop and pail-on-wheels in the path of Beau's progress. She plants the cleaning apparatus at the catty-corner bathroom doors, then removes a resting yellow sign and plants the triangle at the hallway entrance, not six inches from Beau's Nikes. "No Access Cleaning In Progress" and a big red circle and slash over a stick figure walking forward, and Beau and Paige's way is barred and tryst is foiled and Beau doesn't mention needing to pee but just stares dumbfounded at an insurmountable challenge to his testosterone-laced intentions. "Shit. Well, Matt's waiting. I'm outta here. I'll pick you up in the morning." And without a backward glance, Beau is off, past the soda fountain and happy meal toy display, and out the door.

“Sorry. I have to clean now,” Beatriz explains, lifting her eyes from behind her visor, a smile in them: “Didn’t mean to get in the way of you and your boyfriend.” At which Paige forgets awkwardness and years as strangers and hugs her old friend around the neck, and laughs one fat chortle that releases tension as big as a mountain from her belly, and all the air she’d been holding in her lungs pours out in one great WHOOF! Beatriz lets the mop handle thunk against the men’s room door jamb, and returns the hug one-handed and shy, while she let’s slip her smile a bit wider. Paige relents, releases her embrace, and looks Beatriz straight in the eyes: “Thank you.” And the girls, like their childhood’s imaginary friends, are winged and fragrant with memories and faerie magic.