

The Illusion

Nell stared at a metallic, wobbly version of herself; the elevator doors had closed too quickly for her to stop them with her foot. Her red hair and wool turtleneck drooped from the snow, but there was no point in worrying about that. She began the climb up the stairs, pushing at every step against the weight of her backpack, hoping no one could hear her heavy breathing and rubbing boots. Through the wide windows at each landing she saw the Saskatchewan River narrow and shrink until, from the fourth floor, it was a thin zipper frozen to the ground. She mentally plotted her goals for the next two hours before the library closed. One: chart a detailed outline for Dr. Daniels and PHIL 4300 with an original thesis statement about truth. Two: make sure the law student saw her with her hair down. Every time he passed by her work station for the bathroom she had her hair clipped in its frizzy nest, which wasn't what she always looked like, though he must think it was.

The elevator doors opened on the fourth floor just as Nell mounted the last step -- was it...? -- it was empty. Most likely there were only two other people on the 4th floor of the library on a Friday afternoon: the law student and the professor. Nell had never talked to either of them, and she'd never seen them talk to each other. But in some ways, she had more in common with those two men than with the roommates she'd lived with since sophomore year.

Through the heavy atrium door, Nell turned down the first aisle of books, passed the 901s on the right, philosophy and theory, and the 847s, French satire and humor, on the left. From the bottom shelf she freed a paperback from between a stocky Shakespeare portfolio and a collection of essays on Victorian modesty. The novel was the fifth of an eight-part series, subtitled *Barely Seen*, whose cover suggested the tragic hero Baylen

would at some point be climbing a thick vine wearing only a bandana. She didn't want the series on her library record, but she couldn't have anyone checking it out before she finished.

She unloaded her backpack at the computer station she used every night. A pile of epistemology books, a silver no-spill coffee mug, a Tupperware of sliced cucumber, and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She pulled up the twenty pages of quotations from Derrida, Foucault, Said, and Nietzsche. Dr. Daniels had advised against the topic, calling it a *dangerous* thesis, as if truth were a psychopath loose in society. That was the point, Nell believed. You had to see something no one else had seen before and not turn away from it.

Slow steps padded behind the shelves: the professor. She didn't know that he was a professor, exactly, but who else would be up there so often, as quiet as her roommate's boyfriend sneaking in through the garage after Nell asked if they could spend nights at his place, instead. The professor wore the same baggy suit every afternoon, had narrow, slanted eyes that never approached her, and thick, black hair that fell in varied directions. He traversed one aisle after another, choosing, she imagined, thoughtfully. Maybe he double checked sources for lectures, perhaps on Eastern philosophy? Nell tsked herself for assuming. Talk about Orientalism. Or, at least, that seemed like Orientalism, but was she just thinking it was because he was Asian, and if so did that make it Orientalism in a different way? However it worked, she liked how he refused to rush, how he wasn't pushed around by deadlines that are socially constructed and invented.

Everyone should read Nietzsche, she thought, scrolling through her document. She could use his *Truths are illusions that one has forgotten to be illusions* for the epigraph. She took a sip of coffee and opened the lid to her Tupperware, exposing decades of yellowed

paper to the scent of cucumber. She found her place in *Barely Seen*: if Baylen climbs the trees on the island, his hosts – who had turned out to be not as genuine as the fourth novel had suggested – might not think to look up.

A cough from behind startled her, and the book slipped to the ground.

“Here ya go.” The law student held the wrinkled paperback at the level of her nose. She could not see beyond his fingers imprisoning Baylen’s naked chest.

Her throat made a noise that was not a word and a small fire started under her sweater and rose to the freckles on her face and the roots of her hair, which was up.

He put the book on her desk and walked to the bathroom, only six steps away. He wore the green sweater Nell liked, and a toque with a red S on the front that he’d started using last week. When the door closed, Nell breathed out and undid the clip in her hair, yanking it out of the tangles. She sat up straight. When he came back out, she would be enthralled in grouping her quotations about truth into topics for the outline, but would peel herself away in time to say thank you. Then maybe he’d say something about how they’re always the only ones up there -- Besides the professor, she’d say -- and maybe that would expose the bond they had.

She scrolled through the pages of quotations, looking for “truth” or any of its synonyms. Truth was fixed by culture: *a uniformly valid and binding designation of things is invented*. That was the heart of what her paper would say. Just like Derrida’s deconstruction, and Foucault’s authority telling us what is true – how did people not see that those were just specific cases of Nietzsche’s same idea? Hierarchies, binaries, authority, dress codes, what is acceptable, what is shocking, all of it made up by people and followed without question. We’ve all forgotten that truth is an illusion!

Nell opened her email. No new messages. In the bathroom he must be – so strange, the way men did it, those same fingers that held her book now holding – what if it were the same, somehow for women? So many times every day.

Soft steps padded the back of her mind then receded. She stretched her arms and simulated a yawn, turning. It was the professor. The faded jacket, the loose pants, his head tilted towards a shelf, the German literature section. Maybe he compared Eastern and Western philosophy? It might be pure clean interest, the hunger for knowledge after teaching hours. His body swiveled slowly, as if his feet were stuck. His arms held something low, lower than his tan belt, something falling out of a fleshy triangle that turned Nell's hands numb as if she had been sitting on them for hours, and then the connection between her mind and her body broke so that she was trapped in the chair at the angle that made her see.

If truth was an illusion, what was that.

He turned away, moving down the aisle, and she fell back into her body.

Readjusting, she thought, shaking out her hands.

Truth as... slow plods on carpet, approaching. From the corner of her eye, he paused in the center aisle, his arms lowered to cradle a baby bird, no fur. He turned into the 750s, symbolism and painting.

Salt from the cucumbers sweated out of the Tupperware. The shelves near her looked unfamiliar, as if the books that built the background she'd lived with for so many hours that term had crumbled then realigned. Why would he do this after so many afternoons of their quiet agreement to let each other work? Did he want her to see? Had he

been doing this all along? Did he think that she had always seen? She quickly put her hair up, glad for the pull at her scalp.

She shut down the computer, and put the water bottle, Tupperware, and flaccid sandwich into her backpack. She grabbed the armful of books, and retraced her route through Philosophy then French satire and humor. The bathroom door opened behind her but she did not turn to see.

After maneuvering open the atrium door, she stepped into the landing and leaned against the heavy wood, preventing what was happening in there from leaking out. Did the law student see what the professor was doing? He was trapped in there, like Baylen in the tree, did she have the novel? She put her books on an end table to check; *Barely Seen* wasn't there. She must have left it by the computer. She imagined Baylen's gleaming body, brown, taut, up close to pallid pink and heavy tweed. Maybe the professor would think she had sent him a message. She had to go back.

She held the breath of her senses and opened the atrium door. She would not see or smell or hear anything until she had the book, but then he was in front of her, his tweed and the pale skin of his wrists close enough to touch, his fingers by his thighs where everything was bound, a closed zipper and belt . He passed by without apology, like stepping through a shadow.

She wilted back to the atrium. The door closed behind her with a draft that shivered the pages of texts all the way back to the work station, which was naked except for one of Nell's long, red hairs, snagged in the keyboard.