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Negotiating with Truth

by Shane Kraus

We'd get started in a field usually. The Polo Grounds at Golden Gate Park were ideal, but when we were too excited to make it that far we'd stay in the Mission, climbing the hill that swelled up from the corner of Caesar Chavez and Folsom streets to the Bernal Heights radio towers and gulls diving into thermals. She'd have a hold of my hand and be dragging me up the hill, hopping up and down, telling me come on, come on while some desperate urgency frothed out from inside of her and carbonated the air around us. We'd hit the top and she'd stretch her arms out, rotate softly, and everywhere the houses painted the hillsides for miles in Victorian pastel. All right, she'd say, close your eyes. She'd take my hand again, scream, jump two, three more times, ask me if my eyes were closed and I'd tell her YES. She'd ask me if I was ready, I'd nod, and still hopping, she'd say Okay, GO! and we'd start running. She held my hand here as if it were the only thing keeping her from floating off the earth. We were sprinting downhill now with our eyes closed—one of us laughing and the other screaming. And we never made it more than about fifty or sixty feet before someone would start falling, which meant the other would follow. An ankle would buckle or a knee would give, we'd try to right ourselves but fail, brace, hit the ground and end up rolling hysterically in the dirt. She'd be above me with her dyed red hair like spilled paint and that silver make-up smoldering at the edges of her eyes while she pinned my palms back with hers and laughed. She'd ask if I was okay and I'd say yes and wrap my hands around her waist until she screamed/laughed/begged me to stop. Her fingertips and cheeks were freezing but her mouth was warm, and beyond her, dusk feathered out in dirty napalm over Oakland and Berkeley as if the East Bay were on fire.

Three months earlier I'd barely spoken a word to her. I watched her at the restaurant where we worked, stalked her by some standards, and kept my distance because I was generally overwhelmed and horrified by her. She was the founder and leader of AWD (a performance art company blending modern dance, pyrotechnics and gymnastics that was on an eight-week run at the Eureka Theater), ran a warehouse space called The Vortex (hosting raves, foot-fetish balls, a miscellany of ritualized gatherings all infinitely more elicit in my imagination than in reality), and wore excessive amounts of black makeup, apparently intent on communicating a basic lack of interest in conversation, interaction, or humanity. All of this combined with the collective mythology developed by the restaurant staff surrounding her habits, nocturnal activities and bi-polar tendencies made her almost impossibly intimidating. I had to work to surmount this intimidation but managed by giving her a novel I was work

ing on. This said I was an artist too; this said: Fuck you, I can hang and that we had something in common. Forty-eight hours later we were on the floor of her building staring up at an aluminum art installation that bathed the ceiling in a complication of pixilated light, and she was running her fingertips over my face like we were born for this. Where have you been? one of us asked. The other didn't know. Five weeks into it we were naming eyelashes and I was trying to hold on—

We had trouble eating because we got into food fights. This happened almost everywhere but was really problematic in places where we could get Thai ice teas or Vietnamese coffee. A few of these and all she wanted to do was throw tofu. By week three we'd been thrown out of four places and warned by two others. The problem was the caffeine; we both got high on it, wired

out of our minds. We implemented a policy not to have it until the end of the meal:

Is it time yet?

No.

Close?

I shook my head.

Gimme it, she said.

No. Just wait.

I don't have to wait.

You do, actually.

I'm gonna just take it.

Fine.

I will.

Come over here and take it then, pussy.

She leapt over the table at me and they threw us out.

We were carving a warpath all over the city. We'd sneak into theaters for shows like Stomp by claiming to be reporters for The SF Bay Guardian, into gyms to make-out on weight benches and fondle each other in pools, and outside the city to hot springs by vaulting fences. We tested sea-saws and climbed swing sets in parks. We were on a park tour. While at the parks she would taunt me with her gymnastic prowess (e.g., climb onto a fence and do a back-flip off of it and then look up at me whimsically as if to ask: Can you do that big guy?), forcing me to tackle her into the dirt and drive my finger into her underarm or inner thigh until she laughed and pleaded. We'd get up in the afternoons, leave only for bags of gelatin candy, and sit curled in blankets under the window watching the separation of white skies by leaves, the black stems like bark tentacles in the paling blue. I watched every move she made, carved fingernail designs in the geometry of her skin, and she painted m

y face silver and wrote unintelligible nonsense on my stomach in a neon orange highlighter. We spent ridiculous amounts of time staring at each other, locked in elaborate telepathic exchanges, and she controlled all of them. One of them went this way:

Stop looking down there, Shane.

I can't help it.

You want to look me in the eye, buddy.

But it's so pretty.

Okay, but for the moment you're way more interested in fixing me pancakes.

There's no way that's true. I've never made pancakes.

It is true.

It's not.

You feel like giving it a shot.

No, I don't—

You're thinking about Bisquick and blueberries.

That's not at all what I'm thinking about.

Do it.

No.

Yes.

Okay.

Okay then.

God damn it.

But there was the other side too. Maybe this was the one I was always excavating for, because it looked more like truth to me.

She couldn't sleep. (I couldn't either, but she didn't know.) It would take her two, sometimes three minutes to exit the bed in total silence and without displacing any weight on the mattress, but she'd manage, and then she was up and floating. I'd lie there and watch her: she sipping at wine in the window; she on the floor with her feet together and bent all the way forward to touch her knees with her head; she with her arms around herself in what looked like soft consolation. I wanted to talk to this side of her and ask it questions about the other side that seemed mythical. This one was in a tee-shirt and frog pajamas-pants at 3:26 in the morning (they were blue, wide-eyed, happy frogs on pink polyester). Her hair was tied up in multicolored braids with the tips dyed violet. On the floor she'd take hold of the sides of the pajama pants with her thumbs, lift her butt, slide them off and sit back down. Now it was just the t-shirt. I tried not to look, but had to. She'd put her hand on her leg and close her eyes, not looking at the burn, placing her fingertips gently at the base of her heel, start at the ankle and then ascend, running the length of the calf to the quad and spreading her hand over the grafts as though some anodyne faculty were present in her fingertips. With her eyes still closed she'd move her hand with calculated grace over the burn's topography—whispering shhh to it, to herself, to something—and let her hand go all the way to the small of her back, where she finally came to rest, and then sat with her head in her palms, rocking slowly forward and back in gentle deliberation with something I wasn't meant to know. The frog pajamas were next to her. She had no underwear on. I always thought she was crying then but could never tell in that light. I would swallow all your sins inside of me, whatever they are—I said to her, but she couldn't hear me.

I'd wake to her eyes over me. She'd be dangling a piece of sour candy over my lips and grinning. I'd go for it; she'd pull it away, shove it in her mouth and blow up laughing.

God damn it, I told her.

I know, she said, I'm terrible.

Draped over beds and couches, feeding me and staring into me for hours on end, I was her project. There was an understanding between us that my brain was to be dismantled/stripped naked, and she had explicit permission to fumble about and play in my cranial nudity in the manner of a child in a sandbox. I was complicit. I would have allowed anything. I'd have resigned every ounce of my free will to allow her to pat me about like a cat toy, as long as she would promise to periodically include my genitals in her play. I did everything I could just to stay at her pace when we were together, to keep up, because she was tireless and maddeningly unpredictable, and I wanted her to think I was, too. Example:

We have to go now, she said, hopping up and down on the bed.

Where are we going?

Bus-stops, she told me, smiling, still hopping.

For what?

To give people rides.

Why would we do that?

How can we not do it?

(I didn't have an answer for that.)

If you were sitting, she said, maybe waiting with your laundry . . . how would you feel if someone came up and said, hey come on in here buddy, you don't have to ride the bus today?

And it was you?

Yeah?

I'd be scared.

She tackled me off the bed.

We'd get up and out. Walks lasted for days. Impulsive trips to Marin and Santa Cruz for no real reason were regular. Time wasn't around or didn't hold jurisdiction over the two of us. I don't know how many months went like this. We'd end up back at her building where she'd be rehearsing with this group or that, have a show with one dance-company, and be producing another. There would be a party at her space—everything lit up like Christmas in gothic Atlantis—she'd grab my hand when I came in, pull me through all of it to her room, where we'd listen to the vibration of bass through walls and the reverberations of the intoxicated, and then wrestle till we nearly passed out. When the party was over we'd go down to sift through the wreckage in boots with gloves on.

It was about here that I started doubting her. I don't know where it came from, but I doubted the truth of the two of us. She seemed impossible to me. It had to be fiction. She could always sense when this was happening, and she'd tell me to come back, and set out on a long explanation of what we were; claiming it was something unprecedented and couldn't be understood by the old models or definitions of relationships; and that we had to redefine everything—and it was evident to both of us that she needed to be reassured of these things as much as I did. She'd talk and talk until the content was less relevant to me than the hypnotic quality of the delivery, and I'd recline down into it as though she'd created some auditory sanctuary for me. With my head in her lap that voice was a featherbed mezzo of silk and opium. Take Billy Holliday; step down an octave, wrap all of it in suede, and you're there. I use to draw while she'd talk to me; or she would. And whoever was drawing would unknowingly match the design with the soft oratory, following the advance and recess of pitch and emphasis until there were pages of blue ink on paper, and some conclusion had been reached, some arc drawn at the end of a monologue, or the edge of a notebook.

But I didn't believe it. I've got to own up to this. I wasn't the burn on her leg and the truth wasn't tractable.

Another night would come. Another 3 or 4 AM and she'd be awake and cross-legged on the floor with her hands and fingertips at work with the burn or something far beneath. I stared at her so long and hard then she became surreal to me—a spectral creation respiring in the loft half-light at the center of a haunted impressionism. She'd go through her healing rituals and then sit and stare at me across the room on the mattress, not knowing if I was awake or asleep. And this would go on and on, both of us trying to comprehend the other. I told myself she was working then, trying to make sense of us, trying to write us into an algorithm that made this phenomenon we'd created sustainable— but she didn't believe it either.

We were hallucinating on the top floor of the Marriott. In every direction the city beneath us fanned out in packs of constellated light and the bridges reached northbound and eastbound like electrified monoliths that connected the world we resided over, to another we misunderstood. One of her hands was in mine, the other was pressed against the 39th story glass and our eyes were giant puddles of dilated black.

Holy SHIT, one of us said.

Holy, MOTHERFUCKING, SHIT, the other said.

We'd taken pure MDMA an hour before and it had just come on with such concussive force it nearly knocked me off a barstool at POW. Everything I looked at was bathing in serotonin and everything outside of the two of us seemed like elaborate parody.

MOTHER OF GOD, one of us said.

I know . . . Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!

Nothing is real, but you.

I know. I KNOW.

Don't let go of me.

I won't.

Fuck.

Motherfuck

I'm—

I know, me too.

I'm scared—

Don't be scared—

I've got you.

I've got you too.

What if we don't make it?

Its ok if we don't make it, she said.

Okay.

Just be here, right now.

Okay, I'm here.

Don't look away.

Okay.

My god . . .

I know, I know.

(Note/reflection on that last bit of reflection: What must the people at the bar at the top of the Marriott have thought of us? Most of them, I've got to assume, were business travelers. They were well-dressed, clean cut, and in from other parts of the country and world. They were enjoying a beer or a cocktail after a long day of meetings and work. They'd done nothing to deserve the sight of us. But there we were: our eyes swelled to black, dripping disks on our faces, clawing at each other, rabid, insane. I doubt any of you will read this, but if you do, we're not sorry.)

In March, reality started to pinch at the edges of the narrative we'd constructed. She was fired from the restaurant for punching the Squirrel machine (a touch-screen ordering system for servers), she got evicted from her building on Shipley, and she quit AWD all within about ten days. It was almost comical. Everything had fallen. I wanted to know if she was okay, how she was taking it, but we never talked about it. There were absurd rules between us about disclosure, mutual- repression, possession and dependence that forbade certain questions. We can't be like a couple, she said again, couples wreck each other. None of it made sense to me but I went along. AWD had been everything to her. She had founded it, funded it, created and nurtured it, and it seemed ridiculous not to address the effect its dissolution had on her; but then, a lot of what we were built on was ridiculous. There was no time for these kinds of

questions because she'd already found a new building in Oakland.

It was the third floor of a converted noodle factory that sat adjacent to a train-yard with vaulted, sixteen-foot high ceilings that reached to a broken skylight, two floors of unstable drywall, perilous electrical wiring, and an unlimited access to a one-and-a-half story three-hundred square-foot communal area. She was ecstatic. She pulled me through the place with her palm wrapped tightly around my little finger as she if were eight or nine and in the backyard of a new home in a new neighborhood. We explored every square inch. You see, she said, everyone has their own little studio and then they share the big one. . . See, look THAT is the big one. . . big enough for anything I want to do. We probably shouldn't be snooping like this, I guess it's a little intrusive, but I can't help it.

For the first few days her designated area of the building had no power so we tied flashlights to our heads, pretended we were ghosts, and chased each other through the squalor. Before sleep she lit her room in candles and made me hold her hand and pray, telling me, I know you're not religious, and this isn't about religion it's about SURRENDER. I did what she told me, the candles would go out and she'd run her hand over my head for as long as it took to put me out.

But it wasn't real. Her enthusiasm was manufactured. She could barely sleep before, and now, not at all. She'd float around in a kind of panic, had started smoking at night and her dismissal of AWD as having run its course, and being evicted as part of some predetermined alignment of the universe seemed false; like negotiations with truths that were unyielding. I'd watch her, try to will her to rest, whisper aphonic pleas to the tension behind her eyes to try to diffuse it, but never succeeded. When she'd come back to the futon in the dark she'd curl into me and we'd lie there awake, both pretending otherwise; and without windows we never knew when dawn had come and lay there together in that solemn posture in the blacked-out room and the mechanical noise of industrial Oakland like partners in purgatorial exile.

I'd hear her crying on the phone. She had a friend in New York named Kara and she'd plead with her to make sense of this, saying everything I built is gone and ask what was left for her here now. And then her whole tone would shift and she'd be elated for no reason that was evident. She was never the same person for more than an hour. One minute she'd be excited and jumping up and down with my hands in hers, and the next she'd be curled up in a ball on the floor sobbing and locked in a bathroom. I'd come to see her and she'd tackle me and demand that we take a bath and we'd be in there for hours. And when the first hour of excitement wore off it all receded back to the reality that everything she'd worked on for the last five years had dissolved and there was no way to navigate around that. Everywhere she went in town she saw people, she knew people, everything was charged with association and haunted, and there was no escaping anymore.

One night she climbed up off the futon. I watched her then, and was sure she knew it. This time when she finished her half-nude floor routine she pulled a pair of pants on and tied the laces on her combat boots. She emptied the contents of two sets of drawers into a duffle bag, pulled its drawstring and set the bag down, threw a backpack on top of the two of them, looked at me, and then looked away. She left the room and I spent the next two hours staring at the bags and didn't sleep at all.

She was walking backward, staring at me for blocks before she said a word. We were in the Mission. I was drunk because I knew what was coming. It happened this way:

You know you can ask me, she said softly.

Ask you what?

Whatever you want.

I shook my head.

She stopped backing up, reached out, put her fingertips on the sides of my stomach and stared at me as though I was only perceptible at the back end of something vast and cavernous. I know you know, she said.

I stopped breathing.

It's okay, she said.

How is it okay?

I'll make it okay.

You can't.

I didn't want you to ever count on me, she said, her eyes wet now.

I didn't, I said, lying.

Okay.

When?

She stared at me and said she didn't know. Soon. Kara was going to pay for the flight out there. They would work on a new project together.

Why? I shook my head.

I have to.

I'll come with you.

I'll come back.

Why does it have to be like this?

I'll come back, she said.

I remember thinking her eyes couldn't decide if they wanted to be blue or green, and then looked down. I'll come back, she said again, but neither of us believed her. And that was it.

The guy who owned the noodle factory in Oakland finally came out and installed a window in her bedroom. He removed the particleboard and placed two pieces of glass where it had been.

The room was different with the light coming in.

I stayed there for a few nights after she left, looking through the things she hadn't taken—hundreds of pictures, thousands of scraps of paper. I don't know what I was looking for, something to damn her maybe, absolution in some peripheral fact.

On the second night there I slept for the first time in what seemed like weeks and had a dream that went like this:

She and I were in a coffee shop. I had my hands flat on the table between us and on the other side she was staring at me, backlit in some formless conflagration. I told her to be careful, that she might catch fire. She said no, I won't, and smiled. I asked her if I was supposed to be running down hills by myself now and she said, absolutely. I told her I didn't want to do it by myself, and she said, yes, you do. Things began shifting here, the room rotating, the dream behaving as dreams do—without fidelity to space, time or basic physics. I was asking her why over and over again, and she put her hand on my shoulder, shook her head and said she didn't know but it was all right; and then grabbed my shirt, dragged me outside the coffee-shop and through the rain like I was her little brother. A few minutes of this and the whole scene devolved to unintelligibility, she'd transformed into something unrecognizable, and I woke on the floor through a blur of salt-fluid and the sun-spat blue dawn beyond the train yard's horizon.

A month later when we talked for the first time after all of it I told her about the dream. I knew she'd run with it. She dabbled in the analysis of dreams, believed in their communicative power, and she said this one was loaded with so much allegory she almost couldn't believe it.

I told her I wasn't sure if I believed anything that had happened in the last six months.

She thought this was fair.

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