

ROTTING PORCH

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SHE TOLD ME ONCE THAT I SHOULD COME AND VISIT HER ANYTIME. So on lunch breaks I began to come by and visit. It must have been about noon that I would come to see her, and getting to be summer, since it was sunny and sometimes quite warm on the patio where we would sit and talk.

The age gap between my boyfriend's group and me did seem outside of what was normal. When we first started dating it sounded tremendous: 15 and 20. I knew what it sounded like, but I believed it was just a unique situation. Back then I thought I was a special case, caught these situations that only happened to look obvious from the outside. I believed it very strongly. The intensity of my conviction elaborated into an almost physical cloak which, in the end, did seem to protect me from lasting harm. When I first started looking back at my adolescence, I used to marvel that I hadn't ever been seriously hurt or damaged in some way that prevented me from moving on the way I did. Another theory is that my sanity or sense of self was very elastic: it was stretched around for a few years and took different forms, but was able to recover its shape across time and so in the end I couldn't claim any harm had been done.

At this time of day she usually wore pyjamas or other sloppy clothes, and her short hair was often sticking out in flat little pigtails. She wore glasses with narrow rectangular frames and had a silver stud below the center of her bottom lip. On some days she would answer the door fully dressed, in jeans and a fitted striped t-shirt and bright red lipstick. Her legs were very long and I always admired her scrawny body and birdlike appearance. Her pointy nose and small chin were accentuated by her striking squeaky baby voice.

It was popular for girls in the music scene to have their hair cut into mildly 60's-inspired styles: this usually included bangs, and could take the form of a bob, a studiously groomed shoulder length cut, or a very short crop. Hers was sort of a hybrid of these three. I noticed that she was fond of tidy 60's clothing, like flat shoes and straight pants. This was when slimmer cuts were considered an advanced proposition, before they became the norm at the mall and in high schools.

She would tell me stories about whatever had happened to her the night before, and more than once I was the first person she encountered the morning after some abject scene. She smoked continuously as she spoke, her legs and ankles folded and pointy elbows hanging off the railing made of rotting plywood sheets. I was captivated by her relaxed expression as she drew the exhaled smoke into her nostrils and back out through her mouth.

Though not every story was of a sexual nature, it could still usually be traced back to an encounter with one of the boys in the group. Everyone gathered at the same bar on the busy street a few blocks down. Most of the boys played in the bands which would serve as opening acts for the bands from Seattle, Olympia, Portland, San Francisco, and Vancouver when they came to town on tour.

The end of our friendship was Halloween in what must have been my last year of school. I took the suburban bus all the way downtown in costume, getting off to walk the rest of the way to their place.

I'd dressed up as early Lydia Lunch because I was the same age as she was when she played in her famous band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. I didn't really look up to her but I thought it was clever: I was in a band too and, like her at the time, was much younger than everyone else.

My costume wasn't very inspired: it was basically a sluttier more ripped up version of what I already wore most of the time: a jean skirt, pointy boots, ripped tights, hairspray, and dark lipstick. I arrived as girls and guys were beginning to gather in anticipation of a trip a few neighbourhoods over to a party going on at someone's apartment. She had chosen to dress up as Audrey Hepburn and looked like a slightly more groomed version of her usual self: red lipstick, boat-necked top, slim-cut pants, and pointy little flats.

I'm not sure what happened here but I remember playing a few records before she became really annoyed. I definitely took a DJ Jazzy Jeff album out of the wire rack in her bedroom without asking and brought it into the living room to put on. I may have been playing a lot of records all in a row, probably loud and probably not letting anybody else have any input.

My boyfriend was still living in this house, and we would all convene in a common area on the main floor near the kitchen. This was where the record player and tv set were located as well as assorted IKEA furniture with bright pink and green slip covers. I remember being fascinated by the collection of IKEA things that she brought back with her from trips to Vancouver, coveting her blue kettle and perforated brushed aluminum utensil holder. I would later buy identical items for myself when I moved away for college the following year.

She took pride in explaining everything in the kitchen to me. She told me her favorite food was avocados and I think toast with avocado on top was the only food I really saw her eat, apart from chips maybe. She had little Bodum drinking glasses with monkeys on them. One time I poured myself a juice in one of them and dropped some ice cubes in. The bottom inexplicably gave out and the glass shattered as I held it in my hand. I've never seen a glass do that before or since and I attribute it to the effect of cold ice on the fragile Bodum shape: the glasses were mini replicas of their french press coffee carafes, which were always covered in warnings about temperature in white sans serif font.

I know she was really annoyed that I broke that glass even though it was a random accident. I felt a little bad for a long time afterwards. Even after each of us had moved to separate cities and not spoken for years, I still thought about whether I might have been able to postpone the abrupt end of our get togethers if I had been more careful. Even back then I used to regularly tell people that I did "NOT want to be on her bad side." I was proud to be able to stick on the edge, cool with her moods, hanging out.

Her reason for forgetting about me was pretty simple and seems reasonable in hindsight. I didn't get it at the time. It seemed as if she stopped talking to me out of nowhere: at the beginning of the night she greeted me at the door, and later on, before we all left for the party, she began to ignore me. I don't think I tried to speak to her after that; I don't remember asking her anything about it but maybe we did have a confrontation. I used to get so drunk at these things that I would forget almost everything, but the way this goes in my mind is quiet and confusing...fades out and I felt hurt and angry but I guessed she was crazy.

I must have decided that I somehow deserved the treatment, since I accepted it and only complained behind her back to my boyfriend and the other girls, never asking her about it or trying to reinstate our friendship. This is striking to me now. I guess I was embarrassed by my lack of grace, even though it wasn't to be expected at my age and maybe I deserved more compassion. But I also wanted to be part of the older crowd and be treated that way, so I could have seen it as an important exercise to bear the nastiness of their customs.

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