

Snow in Africa

I wasn't meant for grandeur. My mother dropped out of high school after flunking again and again. She then worked various minimum-wage jobs for the next nine years until, when most of her old friends were receiving college degrees, her shame guilted her to "settle down" and accept a demeaning but well-paying job as the school's janitor and groundskeeper. There for half of her life and counting she's seen crop after crop of gangly weeds sprout faces fresh with ambition and hope.

My father married her during one of her previous cookie-cutter careers. At a busy snack shop on a theme park's grounds, he'd been her manager. Their affair might have caused scandal and cost them their jobs had he not been the business' sole owner and she not the oldest of only four employees, the other three of whom were high-school students supplementing their ample allowances with part-time income. Then I was conceived and my mother, desperate for money, had switched jobs for an extra twelve cents per hour. Shortly after my birth, they borrowed enough cash from Dad's grandparents to cross the border and start up his canoe shop. They'd argued that Algonquin was a prime market, but the real fodder for their fantasy had been that, thanks to Canada's government-funded health care, Mum could get a free tubal ligation.

Though Algonquin operates an on-site canoe rental, Dad's done alright by us; after all, people do explore other bodies of water. In fact, my current self-dissatisfaction was triggered by his call boasting the store's successful addition of scuba gear. As he shamelessly spouted figures, I shamefully envied him. I'd just been thinking of downgrading my long-distance-calling plan to trim my cost of living. Though I had carried its seat with me, my bike had been stolen from outside a coffee shop on Broadview, its lock picked in blatant daylight, so I'd had to purchase a transit pass that month. The seat I had sold, finally—though only to a parts shop for a lousy \$3 store credit. What could I ever buy so cheap there? But, the certificate would never expire. You never know.

I hate Toronto, but I've never been away from her. I inherited my fear of relocation from my parents, who finally left their hometown of dying promise only by necessity to relieve financial crisis. Though sickly, my pocketbook at least keeps me safely above the tractor beam of poverty. My qualifications are so few that I can't imagine commanding a more luxurious existence. My roommate has a telescope through which she scans the skies each night hoping to glimpse any light not beaming from something man-made. She's shown me charts of "constellations" which speckle the darkness in secret behind the bright, smoggy veil thrown up by the city. She lives in the wrong place for these dreams, I tell her; it doesn't snow in Africa.

Even she doesn't know my first name. My parents have never met her, is why. Whether stubbornly supportive of their choice or forgetful of my persistent requests, they call me nothing but "Gaylord" or "Gay, baby." Who the *fuck* names a kid this? Since grade school I've gone by my middle name 'Sebastian,' though I had to endure the taunts of schoolmates who remembered otherwise until I escaped to a private high school to which none of them could follow because they were too stupid. Gaylord was Dad's gramp's middle name, which my parents saddled me with in gratitude for their new life he had funded. I would have preferred even Mortimer, the first name *he* loathed. I'm *still* afraid to wear any colour but the "manliest" black, lest I have to hear that haunting "Lord of the Gays" sing-along again!

I'd just hung up the phone when in she came, so full of joy she nearly danced. "Happy birthday to meeeeeeee . . .!" she sang.

"I'm not getting you *shit*," I said, "liar. Your birthday's not till August."

"Yeah," she acknowledged. "I've got something for you, though. If you want it."

"If it isn't a big wad of cash, I probably don't want it," I joked.

"More priceless! The night sky, teeming with stars."

"Celebrity airshow?"

Her lips pursed. "Very droll. No! I won two nights in P.E.I. on the radio!"

My previous roommate, Tim, had grown up there. He'd hated it—said "nothin' but cows and potatoes."

"Trip for two . . ." she dangled at me.

"Why would you take *me*?"

She was silent for a moment. Then, boldly, closed the space between us and took my hands. I smelled vodka and orange on her breath. "Because I have a crush on you, silly."

Something inside me collapsed at that moment. I wanted to ravage her drunken mouth.

I didn't. "Ask me again when you're sober," I said.

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To my surprise, she did. I closed up my street-meat stand for the weekend, tentatively convinced that I could afford to. She fell asleep next to me on the plane, her head lolled against my shoulder, the pleasant scent of fruity shampoo wisping from her hair. I carried her suitcase into the hotel, my lightly-packed duffel bag slung across my back.

We rode the bus to the Cavendish shore and collected shells. My jean cuffs got wet but she'd worn cute little flowered knee-length pants. Back at the hotel, she tacked holes through some of the shells and strung them together and glued the rest to a Styrofoam ball from a craft shop. We slept in separate beds and shared a bathroom; we were used to this.

In the diner off of the lobby, after an eight-o'clock wake-up call, we sipped coffee and chewed on buttered rolls while awaiting our complimentary breakfast.

"Let's go back," she blurted.

Hesitant, I ventured, "To Toronto?"

She looked disgusted. "No, to Cavendish," she corrected me. "Let's go back tonight and sleep on the sand under the stars." Her eyes blazed.

"You're crazy," I deadpanned. I was crazy for her.

But we did it. We spent the morning moseying around the Summerside market, split a pan of bruschetta at Pizza Delight at dinner, and paid from our own pockets to bus to the beach. The waves leaped. We were pleased to see one another again. But the evening was colder than the one before had been. My feet felt stiff, like they would shatter as I stepped across the rocks. I crouched on my heels in the dirt, arms folded. "We should've brought blankets," I lamented. She sprawled on her back beside me, her head behind mine, her expression secret—she smiled; I heard it in her voice when she added, "Or some vodka."

It was quiet except for the wind-tunnel whooshing of the water. I looked over at her. She was slithering like a snake out of her jeans, beneath which she was nude and smooth in the moonlight. My eyes flicked prudently aside. "What are you doing?" I gurgled, stupidly. It was obvious. "Are you drunk?"

She threw back her head, its crown furrowing a nest into the sand, and laughed exultantly. "I'm the drunkest kind of sober," she purred. She sprang to her feet; her breasts surged like the waves. "Com'on!" she cried. Her plush thighs quivered as she raced into the surf.

Helpless to do otherwise, I followed, though less exuberantly. After a . . . *refreshing* douse which had on me the effect of a cold shower, we plodded, naked, to dry land. My teeth chattered. "I feel awkward that you're seeing me like this," I mumbled, huddled for warmth.

"We'll feel warmer now," she replied, "after that. Bash—" Her eyes held mine. "I've another crazy idea."

I waited in silence, in my gut an inkling of her desire.

"Let's make love."

Are you serious? Why me? Why now? Might you regret this? I choked on everything I'd planned to say if ever this came up. I choked on her optimistic euphemism. I uncoiled over her and sunk into her warm sea-caves.

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The sun is lifting on the horizon. We haven't dressed, slept, or spoken. The promise of her last suggestion lingers in the air, its pastness haunting the present. Our bodies don't touch now. Confusion weighs upon me. Does she feel it? She stares into space, her mind working. I try to follow her to these dark places, but I am lost. She's shared her secrets with me. My lips need to move, to prove that they still can. I've sighed, but always failed to push away the silence.

"My name," I get out, "is actually Gaylord. Sebastian's my middle name. But please don't change what you call me."

She whispers, "Sebastian." The name doesn't snag like a frock that no longer fits, but rolls from her tongue as naturally as it always has. She smiles kindly. "See the lights."

I focus skyward and only now can I see what I am seeing. Through eternal blackness millions of eyes twinkle. There's the Big Dipper, she says; the Seven Sisters; Cassiopeia; Leo. Imaginary immortals. I savour her every word. I see and hear nothing and it's everything. I fill my lungs with fresh air.