

We Are In Our Thirties Now

by Chanel Dubofsky

For years, Nina lived in an apartment with furniture that was silver or clear or metallic, she could see her reflection in every surface. She had an enormous television that took up one entire wall of the small living room. She and Anna and Desmond, Nina's downstairs neighbor, would sit in front of it for hours, often stoned, sometimes painfully sober, watching the bright, fabricated world pass by, loud and soft and wicked and safe. Their heads would droop and fall against one another, hands and arms lazy and heavy, wandering over warm flesh and settling there, undemanding.

"I couldn't live there forever," Nina told Anna, when she announced she was moving in with Richard. Anna nodded and said, "Of course," but she was thinking about helping Nina move in; early September, sweat dripping into their eyes, everything damp and slippery and hopeless. Desmond, a stranger to them both then, appeared in the fourth floor hallway while she and Nina tugged and pushed and shoved boxes and garbage bags. Without a word, he stepped into their path, took a box labeled "dishes!" from Nina's hands, and waited until the surprised look on her face faded before following her up the stairs. He went back and forth with them, all afternoon, until everything was inside the apartment, and then he disappeared, before Nina could offer him money or even water. It was only then that Anna remembered him, from the day Nina brought her to see the apartment before she moved in. He had been standing out front, wearing a faded plaid bathrobe, sweatpants and a baseball cap and smoking a cigarette.

Nina was determined to do it all herself, with only her own money, nothing from her parents, who had offered to pay rent for an apartment in a better area of town. A mover would have been more money than Nina had, and so she packed her own truck, and drove

it, wobbly and pale faced, into the city. When Desmond was gone, and they were standing in the middle of the living room, Nina let out a joyful shriek, leaping onto the coffee table she had smuggled from her parents' garage. "I'm going to live here forever," she sang, her hair clinging to her neck, her t-shirt damp and taut across her breasts, patches of sweat on her abdomen and under her arms.

Now, Nina is living with Richard, a man who displays his Harvard diploma in their bedroom, propped up against the window, and keeps his Princeton diploma rolled up in a cardboard tube on the hallway bookshelf, near volumes of Dickens, Defoe and Swift.

Among the things in Nina and Richard's apartment are a collection of jazz cds, accompanied by a thick binder that lists each album title in alphabetical order according to the artist's' last name, a long mahogany table with solid, sensible chairs around it, a responsible high grade leather couch, and an expensive espresso maker that Desmond admits to being more than slightly jealous of.

Tonight, Anna and Desmond are in Nina and Richard's kitchen holding crystal tumblers containing something that smells and tastes like gasoline. Anna has been sipping it, shuddering, and sipping again, getting steadily drunker, while Desmond's glass remains belligerently full.

Nina has been cooking all day. "You didn't have to do this, baby," Richard says, kissing the side of her throat as she stands at the stove, stirring. He has soft looking gray hair and very blue eyes. "I told you we'd order in." Nina shakes her head. "They're my friends," she says, as though Anna and Desmond weren't standing there. Richard sighs, squeezes Nina's shoulders, nods at Anna and Desmond, and leaves the room. Anna can see him through the opened kitchen door, sitting on the sensible sofa, flipping through the binder.

"You don't think this is fucked up?" Desmond says, and at first, Anna isn't sure who he's talking to. Nina pretends not to hear him, continuing to stir something that cannot possibly require any more stirring. "Nina, what is going on? What are you doing?" "I'm

cooking," Nina says, and even though she's slightly buzzed, Anna is pretty sure that Nina thinks she actually answered the question.

Desmond is waving his arms, and in his oversized shirt, he looks like a bird. "I mean, what are you doing here? This isn't your house, Nina. This is someone else's house." Nina turns from the stove, her face flushed. "I live here, Desmond. Adults live here." He drops his arms, staring at her. "Then where the fuck do I live, then?" His voice is low and soft and Anna has to stretch towards him to hear the words. She's standing near the two of them, watching, but it's like the floor is shifting, and everything is blurry. She rests against the refrigerator.

"People have to grow up, Desmond." Nina says. And then—"You are not a grown up."

Anna manages to push herself away from the refrigerator and barrels through the kitchen door. Richard is still sitting on the couch, thumbing through the binder, going back and forth through the pages, running his fingers along the edges. Somewhere in her foggy brain, Anna wonders if he's going to give himself a paper cut.

She sits down beside him. "Something's going in there," says Richard. He doesn't look at her. Anna is staring at his earlobe, small and curved. Earlobes are so strange, she thinks.

"She's having a hard time," Richard says, turning towards Anna now. "But she wants good things for you, my Nina. She loves you." Anna watches him as he speaks. There's no sound coming from the kitchen. His face is suddenly beautiful to her. She is leaning in, her lips aching, reaching, imagining how soft his will be, how gentle they will feel, how they will manage to surprise her.

Someone is screaming. Suddenly, Anna is alone on the couch, her head spinning, while in the kitchen, Richard whispers to Nina and touches her hair, holding her tightly as she whimpers, her hand red, stinging, quivering, cold water rushing over it. Desmond turns the stove off, moves the pot away from the burner. Anna watches him as he pokes a cautious finger down inside and licks it clean. From the look on his, she understands that it tastes like nothing.

