

Oyster

by J. Daniel Taylor

Between clouds, the sun shined longer on all things in Roc City than in the previous months since Desiree came back. That gradual turn of the earth, a counter-intuitive notion of the planet revolving around a star millions of times larger than itself, yet so small in the sky from where it peaks and rises over the eastern horizon of Roc City, falling swiftly toward the western edges. Things that once made sense long ago are considered fallacy, though standing on solid ground and looking at the sky above, one can see how it all made sense. Desiree found herself, so many weeks after their impromptu reunion at the bar, sitting in Deeb's apartment, on his couch, waiting for him to get back.

Life had gotten confusing for Desiree. She had been in school so long, she wasn't sure what to do with herself. She did her best to not spend money, knowing that it would mean less cash on hand for when she returned to New York. She didn't feel comfortable getting a job. She wanted to spend as much time with her mother as possible. She did not want to admit that to herself, so instead rationalized her unemployment as a strategy to keep funding her education. She knew whatever money she made would count against her financial aid, so whenever someone asked what she was doing about money, she could say that she was doing nothing as her rationale and not feel bad.

She and Deeb had reconnected, not as lovers, but as the friends they were when they were lovers. Desiree had feared he resented her for leaving. But he had called her up a few days after they were accidentally reacquainted. While she accepted his invitation, she made it clear that it was - had to be - platonic. She didn't want to break his heart again, or get involved with anyone at this point in her life. She was too focused on her goal of finishing school, but more immediately, being there for her mother. The latter motive still hidden from Deeb.

He never questioned why she was back. They had hung out

at least once a week, going on faux dates. Dinner, movies, museums and art openings - events where she might have held his hand if she wasn't holding back so much else. Saturday nights he worked late, but they would meet up now and again at a bar with their mutual friends. She felt no pressure to spend all night hanging out with him, but most of her conversations took place with him. Maybe it was nostalgia, the memories filed away under the category of contentment, a familiarity that kept her coming back to him as a touchstone. She would think about this from time to time, but did not dwell. Her mind changed quickly to thoughts of her mother and the suffering she was going through. She felt any comfort felt with Deeb was an affront to that pain, and shame replaced contentment, supplanted happiness.

She put that uneasiness aside on this night, though. Waiting for Deeb to return with food, she flipped through the channels on his tiny television while sitting on the hand-me-down couch. She recalled the blue corduroy relic from his parents' house. It was in the basement. The same tiny television sat on a shelf across from it. A lackluster rec-room placed in the corner of the cellar, across from the washer and dryer. That's where they first had sex. The spin cycle covering the noise of their midnight frolic. She had to coax him. He was so shy, she had to remove her top for him to get the message that she welcomed his hands on her.

She slid her hand along the arm of the couch, feeling the fabric remind her of the tactile sensations of that night, when Deeb returned. A gust of cold air snuck around him as he closed the door. Desiree shivered and pulled a blanket that rested on the back of the couch around her body like the shawl an old woman might wear.

"I got you some sushi from Village Gate," Deeb said. He took off his boots, walked over and dropped the food off on the coffee table in front of the couch. "I figured tonight we could work on your chopstick skills, seeing as you have none."

"Shut up!" she said, watching him take off his coat. "I have mad chopstick skills, my style just unconventional."

"If by unconventional you mean an ability to flick the roll

onto your lap or the floor, then yes, you have mad skills. Unless you've been spending all your off-time in Chinatown, I have no faith in your abilities," he said with a wink.

They set up the food and flipped through the channels, finally settling on a nature documentary on the Praying Mantis. The got as far as when the female ate her mate before Desiree was overtaken by thoughts of death and the meaning of relationships. Deeb picked up a few stray grains of rice from the floor. They had made it there before Desiree decided to eat with her fingers. When she finished, she picked up the remote, held it for a moment trying to find words in her mind the way a tongue picks at poppy seeds stuck between teeth. She turned off the television while he wiped some wasabi off the floor with a napkin. He looked up noticing the silence.

"Did you know that my mom used to work for PBS back in Bisonville?" Desiree asked rhetorically.

"No. What'd she do?"

"She created 'Reading Rainbow'," she said.

"Really?"

"She didn't come up with it herself. She worked for someone who was asked to develop a show for kids. It had to connect with getting kids to get books out of the library. It was called something else, like 'TV Library Club' or something, but it had the building blocks for the format that became 'Reading Rainbow' later."

"Wow, your mother helped raise a generation of kids."

"She left that job for my dad. He got a job in Roc City, we all moved here after the twins were born."

There was a pause as the television reception blanked out for a moment, then returned.

"Deeb..." she stopped and sighed.

"Yeah, Diz? What is it?"

"I don't know if I told you this before, but before I picked law, I thought about going into medicine."

"No. You never mentioned it. You always said you wanted to become a lawyer, fight for the disenfranchised, save the meek

from being eaten," he put the napkin with the rest of the refuse and rested his calves on the free space of the table.

"I started college around the same time that my mom got diagnosed. It was a silly thought... and I'm glad I didn't. Especially after walking through the hospital today. I hate those places. I just... I don't know why I even thought about it. You ever think about things like that? Choices you might have made, but more why you thought about them in the first place?"

"I wanted to be an astronaut once. But I didn't want to do science stuff, I wanted to be the first person to photograph Mars or something. Not a robot, but a real person doing something no one else had done before. Go down in the history books. So... yeah... I guess I have. Thinking back on it, I guess what mattered more to me was accomplishing something worthwhile, have an impact on the world somehow. I think everyone does that." He stretched out, lacing his fingers behind his head.

"Back a few weeks ago, when we had that little bit of warm weather, the family talked about my mom's art work. Rusty asked about why she never pursued a career as an artist. Something about that stuck with me, but probably more with him. For me, thinking about it - my mom is the youngest of her siblings, but she's going to be the first to..." she swallowed words she couldn't get out. It was the taste of bile, indigestion, and frustration. "It just makes me angry."

D.B. looked at the ceiling, then turned to her and said, "It sounds to me like you're more interested in fighting injustice than you ever might have been trying to cure cancer."

There was a brief silence, comfortable, but sad. She stared at the television. Deeb turned his eyes away from her face to the documentary. She began talking at the television, not even thinking that Deeb was still sitting next to her.

"She didn't work for a long time after we moved here," Desiree began. "She stayed home. I guess dad made enough at whatever job he had gotten back then. He bought himself a new car before I went off to school in New York. Leather seats and covered

in buttons. A fuckin' moon roof. I mean, yeah, college is on me so they don't have to have us pay for a nursing home and what not, but he bought a luxury car, they drove to the Grand Canyon in it. I'm sure it doesn't get a mile a gallon."

"But he took her?" Deeb asked.

"Yeah, of course. They would never spend a vacation apart. That's just dumb..." she responded, turning toward him. He was giving her a quizzical look "I mean the idea is dumb, not you. I just don't understand him, I guess. It's like everything she did was for us, but he only bought himself expensive toys to play with. Like he's a child. It upsets me...."

"Maybe..." he began searching for some comforting wisdom. "Maybe it's like this. Husbands live for their wives. Mothers live for their children. And children...well...until they're husbands or wives, they live for themselves."

"Wow, that sounds like a wonderful future..." sarcasm masked her surprise at his insight. "You're just a clam chock full of pearls today, aren't you, Deeb?"

"Oyster."

"What?"

"Oyster's have pearls. Not clams. You would have made a horrible doctor. You're terrible at biology."

"Jerk," she said, sitting up and swatting his arm. She turned back to the television and leaned over to his side, putting her head on his chest where his arm met his shoulder. He must have been surprised as his hand hovered above her arm for a moment, then dropped and stroked it with a gentle, familiar caress. When she got home it was late, and everyone was sleeping. She slept well that night.

