

Emotional Gentrification - excerpt Single Stroke Seven

by Lavinia Ludlow

Sunday, Nolan and I drop by the ice rink on 10th and Alma to watch the amateur hockey leagues battle it out in an unspoken yet assumed class war: the buff, unemployed rink bums who can grind ice, cross-check, and stick handle like the pros, versus the doughy, affluent professionals who are lucky enough to make it to the end of the game without losing teeth or needing stitches. Regardless of collar, each side seems to believe that beating the shit out of each other is validating, which makes for cheap and engaging entertainment.

We don't say much during the first period. There's an inexplicable weirdness between us, which could be due to any number of things like Lyz's topless tantrum, the bomb threat she called into The Catalyst that cancelled our live gig, or that my cajón is warped and reeks of asparagus because Claire sat on it yesterday and her bladder control issues let loose on one of my finest handcrafted instruments.

“You see that boob tape infomercial?” I ask to break the tension and covertly inform him of what he would define as respectable jack-off material. To him, the difference between racy infomercials and a porno is that he feels no guilt jacking off to a suggestive product advertisement. And he doesn't consider himself officially watching porn if there are other people in the room, if it's a Victoria's Secret fashion show, or an avant-garde indie film. “Apparently this magic

tape is supposed to lift and support, and chicks can avoid those pesky bra strap outlines. The clip is almost all chest shots.”

“I heard you totally freaked out Hunter the other day,” he says as if I made no mention of boob tape. “It’s not like you have man hands or anything, but no guy wants a girl who can kick his ass.”

“Just ‘cause I can doesn’t mean I will,” I say.

“Christ, your proverbial balls have balls. Were you raised by wolves or are you really this clueless to gender associations? Take it down a few notches. You’re intimidating and impossible for guys to relate to.” I wonder if this animosity has anything to do with my refusal to participate in his Wikipedia gross-out fest last night when he gathered the guys around his laptop and looked up things like oral thrush, uncircumcised penis, and crabs just to squeal and cringe. “You’re never going to find a man if you keep buying Duncan dildos and letting him crash in your bed every night. And, maybe put on some weight. You have more veins popping out of your arms than a porno boner.”

“Have you seen the Shake Weight commercials?” I ask as if he said nothing about dildos or porno boners. “Must really work out the jack-off muscles.”

“How was Mother’s Day at Duncan’s? His parents are rich hippies who don’t believe in Adderall, right?”

“How’s the job search?”

I brace myself for another volley but he picks at a toaster burn scab on his forearm until it bleeds and says, “I know how to maneuver around Internet job boards better than my own cock. No one’s hiring my level of the software stack. I’m going to go down a bagel-selling slave.”

"C'mon." I scrape my optimism reserves and come up with something wildly irrational that Duncan might say. "Our gen's supposed to leverage the economic collapse as an excuse to fuck up our parents' momentum and chase our delusions."

"You want some mental illness to go with that denial?"

"What?"

"It's like saying, 'Do you want cheese with that wine?'...oh, forget it. We're just as intellectually fucked as every other generation. Only the select few are exceptional, the rest of us are just minions in an army of proletariat tools. Our middle class bones will go into the construction of an even higher wall that divides the rich from the poor."

"Geez, what kind of blogs have you been reading?"

"You think I have time to read blogs?"

"Is that what NPR's preaching these days?"

"I'm just so tired of sucking at life. If I have to cream cheese one more bagel, I am going to jam a knife into the toaster oven."

I can't think of anything to say that wouldn't come off as utterly patronizing, especially since I used to come home doused in industrial toilet cleaner with the stench of urinal cakes laced on my nose hairs and not once did he confront me with something vapid like, "You'll figure it out," "You'll be fine," or "Things will fall into place eventually," so I do the only thing I can think of doing and pull down my sleeve to sop the blood pooling up in his elbow pit.

“I had to lose a great job to realize that I want structure in my life,” he says. “I want to work sixty hours a week, be a part of a scrum team, and a victim of office politics and performance reviews. At least I'd know I was suffering in all the right ways.” This from the guy who used to refer to his previous company as “Satan's High-Tech Workshop,” which ejected him to limbo anyway. “I want to feel protected under the wing of a major corporation. I need that false sense of security more than my next insulin shot.”

“You'll figure it out.” I give myself credit for holding off an thirty extra seconds.

“I hope so. I need to find a stable job before Claire will marry me.” I scan his face for sarcasm because hearing him want to marry a twenty-three-year-old incontinent community college dropout who lives with her parents and makes rhinestone-encrusted jeans shorts and dog vests, should be, to use my mom's verbiage, federally recognized insanity. “Yeah, the sex is like eating a bunch of condiments, the main course is always missing, but she's loyal and young, you know? Those things just feel good sometimes, no matter the source.”

For fuck's sake. “Aren't there better things to settle for, at least some sort of appetizer or amuse-bouche?” I ask.

“At thirty-two I have a better chance of being simultaneously struck by lightning and winning the Powerball than I do of finding a woman who's single and sane. The dating pool must really be in the shit can if Duncan's rich ass is settling for a ditz who thought Martin Yan's real name was Yan Can Cook.”

On the ice, a gloved sucker punch launches the players into a mass fight, and as we watch the padded oafs pound each other into the Plexiglas, I realize that if our band doesn't break out of the slums

soon, we're going to lose Nolan to a full-time job, another band, or worse: a nuclear family.

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