

Chinchillas in the Air

by Rae Bryant

“Each smell has a story,” he says then tells me of a special odor he's kept for years, high up on his shoulder blade. “This one's special. My lover left it on me.” Addie scoots closer and onto the middle couch cushion, whispers, “Not a lover like wanting to be inside her, but a lover like wanting to be with her. We went to school together.” He pauses. A moment that means I should say—*yes, yes, I remember her*—then speak out her name so to memorialize this lover and the odor she has left on his shoulder blade.

Blurred images of a plain girl in blue jeans, an oversized pink sweater, pulse hazily. I try to draw her images in my mind, push them into sharper focus. The moment grows awkward.

“She calmed me. Had a way of making the worst okay. Hurt like icy hot when she left. You know, on the balls.”

I had assumed he'd left her because he had always been the prettier gender, the mallard with an iridescent green head, a yellow beak, the poet-musician with the perfect amber curl at the nape of his neck. Addie walked the halls strumming fingers on invisible guitar strings, moving girls' hips and legs and chests in time.

He hasn't lost it, not even a little. He shifts his hands, curls his fingers. They play air chords like Mozart on piano keys. He leans over, yawns, and funk vibrates from his armpits, adagios from his mouth, staccatos from his feet in yellow-orange waves of tone and melody. I resist the urge to move away from him, sit on the chair, give him the entire couch to make his music. But he is too beautiful, now.

He rounds his back to stretch again, circles his arms like a ballerina, settles into the couch cushion behind him. “We made plans. Real plans. New York City. Live like bohemians. Fuck like chinchillas.”

I don't say rabbits.

“Chinchillas fuck meaner. Die easier, too. It's the cages.”

“What happened to her?” Her. I have no name for the forgotten girl who fucked like a chinchilla and somehow the story moves into a faraway place, belongs to him secretly and I cannot access it because I haven't the key, the name of this chinchilla lover.

“Run over by a bike.”

I almost say, *sorry*, or *that's sad*, or *wow, how random* but instead I do the one thing I hate and compare his chinchilla lover to a lesser, a distant Uncle who was hit by a Harley, nearly killed.

“It wasn't a motorcycle. A bicycle. Schwinn ten-speed. Those things roll like NASCAR when they get going.” Addie explains how the ten-speed clipped his lover at the bottom of a hill, knocked her unconscious. Never woke up. He sits straight, unbuttons his dark green jacket stained with darker spots of coffee? Whiskey or some other sort of alleyway drink? The nights must get so cold. He pulls at the top layer of shirts, rips the haze thermal, the dinged tee shirt, the sweat-yellow tank top. He pulls the layers down over his shoulder. “Here take a whiff.”

I stand, move to the back of the couch so to study his shoulder better. His skin appears normal but for the faint red irritation high up on the blade that disappears into his dark greasy hair line.

“Blood splatter. I was able to brace my fall when the biker hit us, but it was all too quick for her. She hit the asphalt. Head splattered. I never washed it off. Can you smell it? Her blood? I can smell it. Every day I smell it. Every smell has a story.” Addie pulls his shirts up over his shoulder, puts his coat back on and I envy him. I envy his memories like melodies, his chinchilla lover smell. I've never loved so fully.

“I should get going.” He rocks to standing.

I make to stop him, put out a hand, consider offering him a shower, a meal, a cup of fresh coffee then remember that I haven't been to the grocer's in over a week. I offer him a bowl of stale, dry Lucky Charms. No milk.

We sit with our bowls of Lucky Charms, watch the stark white canvas that has abandoned me, denied my brush for too many days now. Addie sets his bowl on the table then moves about the

apartment, his arms and legs and odors wafting like ribbons in the air, dancing cavatina to our choir bites of frosted oats and yellow moons, orange stars, green clovers. So I open tubes of acrylic sunshine, burnt ember, coal black to mingle with his ribbon air. We open the windows—not to let fresh air in, but to share our symphony with passersby, the world en route. That night, we toast plastic champagne flutes filled with Carnation Evaporated Milk.

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Sometimes, late at night, when the air is too clean, too empty, I join Addie behind his dumpster where we hum and wave our hands in putrefaction. I return to my clean bed in the early morning hours—unwashed, funk lingering on my skin—whisper Addie's melodies, imagine he and his lover in New York City. I lay and draw chinchillas in the air.

