Stages

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I took a bus to her city on a Sunday. Travelers are sparse on Sunday and for once I didn't end up next to a wino. The trip itself wasn't bad. I like moving towards places. She was waiting at the bus station. She looked much smaller than the last time I saw her or at least as I remembered her. We kissed, I put my arm around her, and her hand squeezed my hip reassuringly. Things were starting right."

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I took a bus to her city on a Sunday. Travelers are sparse on Sunday and for once I didn't end up next to a wino. The trip itself wasn't bad. I like moving towards places. She was waiting at the bus station. She looked much smaller than the last time I saw her or at least as I remembered her. We kissed, I put my arm around her, and her hand squeezed my hip reassuringly. Things were starting.

In the car, it was small talk. The windows of her car were dirty. She lived in a walk-up. I followed her into the apartment, letting her shut the door and I made a show of looking around. Everything looked fragile, figurines with shiny leaves. The curtains were delicate, the sounds of the city far away. I liked the place. When she asked me how I liked it, I said it was very nice, but I was already plotting my escape. She turned the stereo on low and left me listening to Cat Stephens. I heard her making coffee in the kitchen.

I wondered what she expected. Letters are like talking in the dark and it had been months since I'd seen her. How can you measure the effect of words without seeing the face you're talking at. I'd find out, for sure, but I'd drink her coffee first.

Watching Sharon put sugar into cups and smile at me from the kitchen saddened me, because I knew she was wondering what I expected. It had been a while. She had been beautiful when I first met her, then interesting, finally only human. That final knowledge colored my resolve. When she found a job in another city, I'd made no objection, but then I followed and now I was back in her room. She acted as though she was a part of me. She was treating me as before. Her motherly closeness left me unable to move or speak.

After we both agreed that the coffee tasted good, she asked, I said nothing. We sat there for a time in the dim room on a dim day, both of us feeling dimmed, I guess, and then she tried again. "How's the acting going?"

I knew what she meant by the question. "Fine, the lines are familiar now, but the feeling is hard to come by in my part. I am a bad actor."

She was watching my face. I knew she would tell me I was a good actor, though she'd never seen me onstage. She'd believe it too, which depressed me even more. I drank the coffee. It was too sweet.

"It sounds so exciting, from your letters."

I shrugged, "You make the best of what you've got."

Sharon repeated that she thought it was very exciting and I could tell that she really meant it. If I told her it was a pain in the ass, she would laugh. She'd go on believing it really mattered. So I agreed. Yet it was exciting. Then I kissed her and asked her what she had planned for me. I had the jump and she looked into her cup.

"Well, how long can you stay?"

It was up to me. "I've got rehearsal tomorrow afternoon." Rehearsal was in the evening, but I wanted a margin. Also, it meant leaving in the morning. She knew I wasn't sad about leaving, but she was ready to go along with it, so I told her. "Whatever you want to do today is fine with me."

"I thought we might go to the art gallery. And then, you know, walk around for a while."

"That sounds great," I said, but I sounded too quick.

I helped her clear the cups and saucers away and she looked a little surprised. I was giving myself away. In the kitchen, while she washed...
the dishes and put things away, I
smoked. It was a small kitchen, too
small, and she brushed me every
time she passed. She wasn't fin-
ished.

"Ross, there was so much I
wanted to say..."

I shut her up with a kiss and
told her to get ready to go to the
gallery. We'd talk later.

She wouldn't. "I don't know.
Things seem different. I'm
miserable by then, wondering why
"It happened,"

"You can laugh and joke with the other
nurses when you want."

"It's over.
McGee, moving
silently the way some women do at
quiet moments, was graceful,
almost pretty. I had to start. "What's
it like when someone dies in front
of you?"

"Ross, not now."

"Doesn't it really bother you
or anything?"

She stopped walking and the
silent gracefulness fell away from
her. She sat down next to me,
heavily, awkwardly. Then she said
softly, "What really bothers me is
that most people come to in the
last minutes and a lot of them are
alone. All alone. There's no one in
the room with them."

"You mean most people know
it's the end?"

She nodded. "They know
they're alone." She was silent for a
long time. Her hands were folded in
her lap, her head bent, "We lost
someone like that two nights ago."

The thought of it sent a cold
crawling fright through me. I tried a
couple of drinks, then even an
afghan Sharon kept thrown on the
couch, but I couldn't get warm. She
went quietly around putting things
in order and when she said it was
time for bed, I went into the
bedroom first and began to turn
down the covers.