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Thirty-Three Minutes in Sneakers

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Thirty-Three Minutes in Sneakers

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

"The color had drained out of the ends of her fingers, painlessly and into some invisible, uncharted air of a prickling, noticeably draftier September morning—the sort of morning senses thrive in. As she stepped out of the passenger side of a squatty Volvo onto a crumbling sidewalk, a gust of scarf-weather wind stabbed at the patch of exposed skin just above her shirt collar. There was a rapid movement of her hand racing with her zipper up her torso and a slight wince embedded in the curve of her mouth. Then nothing stirred, save a fluctuation of air in her stomach."

Cover Page Footnote
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In vain, she wrung her white fists like a dish rag, unfolded them and, for warmth, laid them across her neck underneath her still-damp, shoulder-length hair. Everything about her shivered with the fervor of a few dozen adamant knitters just before the Christmas season. She was as miserable as she was cold.

Somewhere to her right, a few feet and about a million molecules of animation behind her, sauntered the nonspecific, blue-eyed twenty-something object of affection. He called himself ‘the boyfriend’ and encouraged the title ‘Lovey,’ among other such atrocities. He opened doors for her, refused to let her pay, and took ‘care’ of her in every traditional nice-guy sense of the word; he even insisted on smearing Rain-X on her windshield twice a month. Occasionally, he ventured into the sensitive territory of what fork to use with certain foods, especially in the presence of his overstuffed grandmother, with the flawless tornado of white hair, pinned up so tightly it pulled her character, or lack thereof, out her nostrils.

But today, Boyfriend was quiet, breaking his silent streak only once to comment on the prestige and grandiose serving proportions of the unquestionably perfect, unreasonably small Sneakers Bistro & Cafe.

“I’ve wanted to take you here to eat for weeks, Lovey,” he said with an intensely annoying bulge of both his eyeballs. “It’s a good thing there’s no line yet; Sunday mornings are usually quite hellish.”

Roughly three yards from the car, the mismatched pair passed and acknowledged a blaze orange sign hung from inside the window of a paint-peeled front door, proclaiming in all its grandeur that the eatery was indeed “OPEN.” A rectangular card table with a harvest theme was set up outside the building, offering several containers of hot drinks to the anticipated line that never formed.

Upon entrance, she glanced down at her watch, noticing the leftover water bubbles careening above the seven, the three, and the zero scrawled on the electric green of her timepiece. Afterwards, she groaned something untranslatable to the please-wait-to-be-seated sign in front of her.

“I really do have to hit the road soon, Jonathan,” she offered with a politely detached glance to the mud streaked wooden floor. “I have hours of work waiting for me in Rochester and I’ve got to write that paper I told you about. Really, I can’t stay long.”

His attention, however, was elsewhere.

“Lovey, the food here is amazing, I swear! It’s right up your little Liberal alley; they even serve tofu home fries!”

His arm, adorned with an obnoxious button up work shirt (like he worked, ever) cuffed over a wool sweater, gestured to the freshly set table by the corner window.

“We’ll sit over there,” he told, not asked, the hostess, as the young woman beside him boiled over with disappointment. Silently irate, ‘Lovey’ watched a pair of adorable rotating stools at the counter pass her by while the two of them took a short, chaotic dance across a tight space of strewn, people-filled wooden chairs and food-filled table tops.

She was stuffed into a corner directly between her own dignity and her capacity for twisted, self-defeating situational irony. Somehow, amidst all that, she convinced herself it wouldn’t be so bad as long as the sun kept falling through the frosted windows, neighboring tables continued clinking dishes together, and the concentration involved in her inactivity kept her actively distracted from his big, trumpy, lackluster face.

“We’ll both have coffee and water,” he sang to the waitress before she even had a chance to whisper a ‘good morning, folks.’ She soon disappeared and returned with his demand.

As her lips parted again to ask what the two desired for breakfast, Jonathan broke out an order splitting the waitress’ sentence in half, forcing the better part of it into extinction.
“I hear you have fat-sliced bacon, is that right? (No pause for a reply) I’ll have that, two eggs over easy, sourdough toast, and could you get me another set of silverware? This spoon looks like it has leprosy.”

The waitress, who had just been exposed to such an earful of arrogance—she’d nearly gone deaf, nodded obediently and turned to the corner piece on display for her order.

As three rather stringy words left Lovey’s mouth, she glanced down at the art-deco menu. “I would like… um… that cinnamon granola and strawberry yogurt, with the fruit on top, please. And thank you, for….” an implied but unspoken fragment of “putting up with his self-important bullshit” sailed out of her eyes, but “everything,” was all she said.

“So Lovey, let’s get that map out and plot how you’re going to get home,” Jonathan interrupted a perfectly good silence yet again.

A few paper rustlings and pen clickings later, it was a “You know dear, I’ve been thinking,” statement that required him to clear his throat. “Burlington to Rochester is too much driving for you in one weekend. It’s too much driving in general. You should just transfer up here. I’ve already looked into your major, and you’d love it up here in the winter – all those snowflakes. Heck, pumpkin, we could even go to breakfast here every Sunday!”

She thought it was funny how the conversation began with plans to escape him and climaxed with plans to be adhered to his love handles and impressive beer gut for the remainder of her college career.

“You know I can’t do that, Jonathan,” she waved away his intrusion.

As he went into another rant of why it was more practical for her to uproot herself and be committed to this relationship fully, she drifted into the mindless routine of watching clouds puff up in her coffee, and mentally plucked herself out of his vicinity and onto a cliff she’d stood at a month earlier, overlooking the Colorado River as it cut deeper and deeper into the Grand Canyon. She was as far West as she could get by car from him, and she still felt trapped.

Her red pen inked a frail line from VT 30 to Route 87 South, then to 90 West. “I’ll be fine, Jonathan, stop worrying about me. I know how to get home,” she retorted across a desert of paper napkins, ketchup bottles, and maple syrup-scented air.

For once, he had nothing to say.

Still staring blankly at the road atlas, she was startled by a brief downpour of porcelain upon the table surface. She noticed first, the circles shifting in her coffee cup, then the strong, but soft hands presenting the food. They did not belong to the waitress. Her eyes traveled further up the arm of the man holding her breakfast (and interest) in his fingers, stopping at his strikingly familiar face and puddle-colored eyes.

Mind you, Jonathan continued to blabber about black-hole circumstances and impracticalities. All the while, and quite brilliantly, she managed to cater to his conversation while having a rather racy out-of-body experience with this figure hovering over their table.

“This granola’s gonna make your karma bubble, you just wait,” the server teased with a pretentious grin.

Jonathan cut his blank stare in Lovey’s direction, rotated his pompous melon ninety degrees to the right, and silenced whatever dubious comment he was about to emit.

The server, feeling as if he interrupted something terribly important, excused himself, set down the side of fat-sliced bacon, and returned to the kitchen.

Lovey, dumbfounded and completely drowning in an uncultivated lust, thought to herself that this last sentence was still floating in the hot air pockets somewhere under the diner’s ceiling. She’s also considered leaving her chair, and Jonathan, to discover the creature behind the counter capable of such description of granola’s impact on the human psyche.

The two bodies at the table in the corner of Sneakers Bistro & Café located at 36 Maine St. in Winooski, VT, finished their meals in flat silence. The waitress returned with the bill, he paid it, as usual, with his Visa, refusing to let Lovey even pitch in for the tip. She never got out of her chair, except to leave. Jonathan managed to clear his throat and complain about the service all in one, hot, short, foul-smelling breath on his way out the door.

She glanced at her watch and repeated the unwritten script of “I really have to get going now,” exchanging no emotional embrace before pulling away (in her own car now) from the curb at exactly 8:03 a.m.

Only a small piece of paper, with certain numbers and letters, ripped off a map, remained on the corner table at the diner. It was addressed to ‘Karma Bubbler.’ She drove home feeling terribly brave, rather dishonest, and blissfully giddy.