

MOVING PARTS

She waited for him. It was two in the afternoon, and she sat at one of the wooden, new-made-to-look-old tables. She ordered a soda water that came in a tall glass with a black straw and a slice of blood orange. Fancy, Edie thought. Fancy water, in a trend-setting restaurant, for the clever folk of the West Queen West Toronto neighbourhood. All the waitresses were actors, their hair twisted up in haystacks with chopsticks poking out. Messy cool, like Montreal.

A Lululemon family sat by the window. The svelte mum with painted-on eyebrows and neutral-coloured lips thumb-typing on her BlackBerry while Daddy fed the kid whole wheat Cheerios from a baggie. The toddler's stroller, boy or girl, Edie couldn't tell which, blocked the aisle. No one was bothered by this.

Edie dipped her pinky finger and the one next to it into her water and tried to flick out her hair just above her ears. Messy minus cool. Was this church pew bench made of concrete? She lifted both cheeks off the seat by pushing her hands down and extending her elbows, then lowered herself back down. She shifted side to side to the bossa nova remixes piped into the

room, but nothing made the hard seat more comfortable. She waited, praying he would show up here, at the United Church of Gentrification.

They had met at No Frills, the supermarket on Lansdowne. In her peripheral vision, while in the lineup at the cash, she caught him eyeing the contents of her red basket. Bananas, green beans, jumbo olives, raspberry kefir, and a box of Jell-O pudding (vanilla). She became self-conscious about the Jell-O. Edie had been feeling a cold coming on, and this was a thing from her childhood; her mother had made it for her and her sister when they got sick. Edie later learned that milky sweet treats were not at all helpful in getting rid of a cold. Lemon tea with ginger and Cold-FX capsules was what her mother should have given them. Edie knows better now. She knows she should be buying those things, not vanilla pudding. But her mother had let them eat in bed and watch TV past their bedtime, and they never stayed sick for long. She nudged the pudding box behind the bag of beans.

As she got closer to the cash, Edie turned and pretended that she was looking past him. He looked like he might be in a band. Maybe he was one of those guys who sat at a drafting table, drawing plans for buildings using different kinds of rulers and special pencils. He smiled at her then and she was forced to smile back. It was one of those polite smiles she gave to gas attendants or cashiers or salespeople who accosted her at The Body Shop. It all seemed pretty grocery-store normal. Not flirty at all. Not until he tapped on her window in the parking lot while she was letting her car warm up.

With a gloved hand, she rolled down the window.

"I never do this," he said.

He was hunched over, craning his neck, careful not to come too close. His teeth were remarkably white. Straight as a toothpaste ad. Edie was not afraid, or offended, or particularly flattered which, she thought later, maybe she should have been.

"Okay," she said, drawing out the second syllable of the word.

"Do you, uh...do you want to...maybe meet for coffee sometime?"

She met plenty of perfect strangers on a regular basis—volunteers she organized at work, people at Scrabble tournaments, out walking the dog. But none of those strangers had ever asked her out.

"Oh," she said, "Um." She adjusted the fingertips on her green wool glove and tucked her lower lip under her top teeth. This was weird.

"I know this is weird," he said.

It looked like he was going to say something else but instead turned and watched a car drive out behind him. One hand was shoved in the pocket of his cargo pants and the other carried a recycled grocery bag that she knew contained—from having also checked out his basket back in the line—bananas, a carton of skim milk, Quaker oatmeal, a glass jar of whole-grain mustard, and a box of Triscuits (original). His hair was curly and light brown, like a wheaten terrier's, and he had on a tan corduroy jacket, almost the same colour as his hair, with a furry collar that was used and pilly. His jacket was undone too far for such a cold November day.

He was nodding as he spoke, "But I said to myself, Ditch, you've got a fifty-fifty chance here."

If he were an animal, Edie thought, he would be a chipmunk. Cute, a bit jittery, harmless.

Edie hadn't been on a date since Joey, the disastrous blind date that Sandra had arranged. Sandra met Joey while temping at HSBC during tax season. He had recently broken up with someone he'd been with for eight years, which was all he talked about when he and Edie met at a Russian martini bar. During drinks, a line of spittle stayed connected between his lips when he went on about Julie, the ex. Overactive salivary glands. Edie knew the name for this, ptyalism, from doing crossword puzzles. At one point, when Joey was near tears while talking about their old neighbourhood, a blip of drool ran down his chin and fell right into his Sputnik Appletini.

Going in blind was one thing. At least here, with the chipmunk, she could see what she was in for. What's the worst that could happen? They go out and have a great time? They like the same foods and discuss documentaries because they are both members of the Revue Cinema? In three years, after some debate, they try to have a baby. They have a baby. They name him George, partly because of the curious monkey and partly because they are both Orwell fans. George grows up to be a male Jane Goodall, and Edie and Ditch spend their retirement years in Kengoya—an African fusion country (Congo plus Kenya), because by 2030 the Chinese have taken over a lot of the continent, but Canadians and Australians have automatic POW (Peace of Way) status from the Chinafrica Immunity

Act (the CIA)—running George’s gorilla sanctuary. They tend to the apes who are named after Canadian towns like Digby, Terrace, Sherbrooke, and Wawa. They eat stewed gumbo and bitter chocolate. They drink strong coffee with goat’s milk, and in the evenings, they play Scrabble in the gazebo protected by mosquito nets. Edie wears her hair in a long grey braid and Ditch, now bald, never takes off his safari hat. All their clothing is cream coloured and made from natural linen.

Or, they could meet for coffee and realize they have nothing in common other than the fact they both bought bananas at No Frills.

Then she said, “Yeah, okay.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Okay?”

“Sure,” she heard herself say, followed by, “Why not?”

He waited for her. It was fifteen minutes past two o’clock. He filled his glass with water from the vodka bottle the waiter had brought over. A sprig of rosemary floated inside it like a plastic fish. It was a crap shoot, Ditch knew that, but he had to try something. It had been nearly two goddamn years since he’d been on a date. Then his colleague Peter, the host of the morning radio program Ditch worked for, practically advertised it on air one day.

“What, really? A good-looking guy like you, single?” Peter had said.

Thank you, Peter, for that.

“I wouldn’t think you would have any trouble meeting someone.”

“Well, you know, busy-busy, always on the go,” Ditch said while they were still live.

Of course he wanted to meet someone. Who didn’t? Come to think of it, when was the last time Peter had been on a date? Ditch had hoped, secretly, that things might have picked up because of the embarrassing on-air comment. But the most he got was a few sarcastic Tweets and several questionable Facebook friend requests.

Later that week, he saw her in the lineup. Pixie haircut, vintage leather coat, bananas, green beans. Maybe it was simpler than he thought. He had grown up in a tiny prairie town where, because there were so few of them, people talked to each other. Standing there behind her, it occurred to him that he was losing those small-town sensibilities. He used to strike up conversations with complete strangers all the time. On a crowded subway car where people were jammed up against each other, he’d try to lighten the mood and say things like, This is a sporting event, right? Full body contact! Or, on Monday mornings, while getting a coffee to go, he’d tell the cashier, Cheer up, it’s almost Friday.

Just say something to her.

But in the express line, Ditch could only muster a smile. Now that he was secure in his professional life as a reputable sports journalist, making decisions in his personal life was becoming increasingly difficult. He was even having trouble with small things. When Dove stopped making the moisturizer he liked, he had stood for twenty minutes scanning the options in the lotion aisle. Couldn’t he just slather on some Noxzema and be

done with it? He ended up taking the advice of the drugstore employee with heavy eyeliner at the makeup counter and paid over a hundred bucks for a small jar of Biotherm. She said the face cream was enriched with something-*ylase* that was going to help battle the toxins found in urban environments. "It's for puffiness and dark circles," she talk-whispered. "You know, right here," she said, patting under her own eyes as if she were giving a forbidden tap to the side of an aquarium.

Ditch checked the time on his iPhone. Two thirty-five. Was she standing him up? Perfect. That would be just perfect. Was she just another egocentric Toronto woman who led him on then left him hanging, for no good reason? He had been excited, hesitant to admit he was giddy, after their phone call. He had hoped Edie might be different, with her vintage style and anti-technology ways. Who doesn't have a cell phone?

Or was there a good reason?

Maybe she'd been hit by a bus on her way here and was lying on a gurney in a hallway at St. Mike's because there were no beds left. Maybe her leg was broken and she was lying there thinking selflessly, Who is going to walk my dog? Ditch imagined her being excited to go out with someone new, do something unexpected, with a guy who asked her out in a parking lot. He had approached her in the parking lot. Who does that? It's creepy and stalker-like, now that he thought about it. Now that he thought about it, he *really* should have talked to her in the lineup. That's what a normal person would have done. Of course she was having second thoughts. She probably wondered what else he was capable of when he wasn't busy approaching

unsuspecting women. She probably thought it through and realized he could be into roofies or secret basement rooms or collections of strange beetles he'd captured and tacked to bits of cardboard and framed behind glass.

Yeah. He was getting stood up.

Five minutes before three o'clock, Ditch asked for his bill. He paid for his Funghi Assoluti and tipped the waiter fifteen percent. She took the cash from the faux leather folder and wished him a nice afternoon. "Well, I doubt that," Ditch said under his breath. Nice, not nice, what did it matter? He would never be back here. He was never dating again.

Outside, his corduroy coat hung open in the cool afternoon. He'd done laundry and had worn his short-sleeved brown T-shirt with the Atari symbol over a long-sleeved white T-shirt. He looked casual good, like he was ready for a first date. But seriously, why bother? Why even make the effort? From now on, he was going to cook his own goddamn chicken soup and watch National Geographic documentaries by himself. Who gives a crap about finding someone special to—

Wait a minute.

Weren't there two Terroni locations?

Eddie stood on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. She should have known better. When they spoke on the phone last week she detected something in his voice she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"I lived in Montreal for five years," he had said.

"And you can't speak French?"

"How did you know?"

"It happens," she said.

Through the receiver she thought she heard water running. Was it a toilet flush? She wasn't going to ask.

"Well, yeah. So. You're lucky."

"It takes practice," she said, and added, perhaps too quickly, "It's a commitment."

She chalked it up to nerves. Something she hoped he might be experiencing too. But she had been looking forward to this.

Yet here she stood. Stood up.

Behind her, The Sunny Pawn Shop window was crammed with abandoned items. A guitar, an old blue chair, a pyramid of digital camera boxes, and a jewellery display with a ruby ring the size of a lozenge in the middle of it. She rested her hand lightly on the glass, inches from the guitar. She might learn to play one day. Maybe today, now that she had had a change of plans. Maybe if she got good enough, she could play at those variety nights they had in bars with exposed brick walls on streets like this. Maybe she could find somewhere to fit in. Maybe, when she performed, she could wear colourful knitted hats and sparkly scarves and a white tank top (like Feist used to). Maybe she would find something worthwhile to—

"Eddie!"

The sides of his corduroy jacket flopped out behind him like a cocker spaniel's ears. He narrowly dodged pedestrians on the sidewalk like ski markers on a downhill slope.

"I was at the wrong one!"

He was still two blocks away but he was loud.

“Hey, Edie!”

He charged full-throttle toward her, and she couldn’t suppress her smile. The muscles in the front of her neck tensed up, in a good way, as her plans changed once again.

Parts of it happened then.

Parts of it happened later.

Parts of it happened like this.

Edie sits beside him in the stands of the soccer stadium. They have very good seats, not that she would know the difference between a good seat or a poor seat as she has never before attended a professional sporting event. It’s a step up from watching roller derby, she knows that much. The clouds, staggered in shades of grey and blue, hang over their heads. Ditch is working. He scribbles on his notepad, recording strategies and style, players’ numbers and positions that will be included in his report the next day. Never in her life, Edie thinks, has she been so close to people who make as much money as these athletes. When the game pauses, she leans over and rests her head on his shoulder. He stops writing for a moment, turns his head, kisses her hair.

After, they go back to Ditch’s place where he makes the meal he knows how to make best. Baked trout with green pepper slices on brown basmati rice.

“The secret is whole-grain mustard,” he whispers, displaying the jar.

Edie nods and sips her glass of pinot grigio. She still remembers the small glass jar of mustard he had in his grocery basket

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when they met over a year ago. She marvels at the two of them now, together like this, and can't picture the random encounter ending any other way. Perched on the stool facing the kitchen where Ditch cooks, she swings her leg, tapping a socked toe against the counter, and allows the wonder of it all to rest silently in her heart.