

LOSING FOUND THINGS

Summer

The pick-up artists forage and roam
the dark corridors, hovering and
clashing like fluorescent
dragonflies. They gang-rush well traveled
paths, pulsing and bunching, crabbing
sideways and bouncing off walls with phones
and cigarettes extended forward, trapping
suburban sluts in their grapplers and
fighting over the scraps until every shred of
flesh is tagged and mapped.

In the back behind velveteen ropes,
drunken models whisper in hairy grey ears,
rubbing dormant crotches for answers.
Cocktail waitresses glide by on memorized

LOSING FOUND THINGS

tracks, dressed in translucent black and slinging trays of drinks tinkling with glow-in-the-dark ice cubes. They stumble and curse prettily, their thin arms traversed with colored lines of drainage from the swooping trays, snakes of pricey liquor tinkling down their armpits and disappearing into unwashed bras packed with soggy filler.

Miranda rests her hand on my knee, half in conversation with a trust-funder on my opposite side, looking at me while she talks to him. It's a little mean, and she does it on purpose. She lights a cigarette but doesn't smoke, leaning forward and resting it in the ashtray next to the others, then slides her head up to my cheek and kisses me, her hair smooth and cool against my skin.

“It's work, baby-boy. I have to stay.”

“No,” I say. “You don't.”

She's in Valentino, Prada, Gaultier. She wears her work as comfortably as pajamas. The trust-funder leans behind us and does a line, and Miranda and I both scrunch forward and laugh at the same time, our foreheads touching. The sharp angles of her

LOSING FOUND THINGS

face form a complex and intoxicating blend of freedom and need, a mean, unfettered beauty she wields better than any sword. She's the butterfly that lands on your fingertip one day and the crumpled wings left behind by your caring touch. We all want to be the first, but we're not.

“If you want to go, go,” she says, irritated all of a sudden. “I'm gonna dance.” She turns to leave and I see the little red line on her knee where she cut herself shaving this morning, naked in my bathroom and complaining of the dim light as she dressed and undressed and dressed again for a 6 a.m. shoot. I watch her slide away in silence down the crowded walkway, the depth of her indifference matched only by her desire to hurt and be hurt.

She walks through the ropes and I watch, past the demilitarized zone of outer tables of people who pay for drinks and I watch, her turning around, mouthing 'I love you,' bouncing on her toes and falling into the crowded dance floor like a rock into syrup, and I watch.

LOSING FOUND THINGS

The people around me drink and snort. They talk in text-message sized bites, 'pff he's mad hot', 'I wanna drnk smth,' framing incoherent thoughts in barb-wire grammar, murmurs mixing with the wordless music pouring down from refrigerator-sized speakers. I look around for something to do, something to pay attention to, but it's dark and loud and all I do is fidget.

One of Miranda's college friends at the table next to mine taps my shoulder and talks, describing for me how Miranda's body has changed over the years, trying to bait me into wondering when it was *he* last slept with her, and I look back at him and realize that it's all so...normal. I suppose what I feel would be anger, but I'm tired, and he's nobody.

Minutes tick down like draining water, the loud music thickening the air and tightening my sadness. To Miranda's friends I'm old and boring, an unwanted and barely tolerated veteran in this place or any other like it, and in the practiced eyes of these beautiful 20 year old children I can no longer hide the

LOSING FOUND THINGS

plague of age, nor would I want to. The pre-dawn turf of sexual imperialism is their command now, and I'm a washed up vagrant who fought in another time, with skills and scars unnoticed by them. Yet here we are, Miranda and me.

Another gin-and-tonic, another greasy waitress and spilled drink and I'm up tall, navigating on spongy feet through tables packed with whip-thin creatures touching my suit, offering up their dark lies and assuring an evening of uninterrupted beauty and chemically delayed inhibitions as if it really were something new.

An hour later I hover in the bathroom, watching unzipped elephants shuffle listlessly into unisex stalls and blast out minutes later on electrified rails. The attendant hands out Dentyne for oral fixations and Q-Tips for bloody noses. I lean into the mirror and stare at the unfocused shapes behind me, shifting and jerking, impatient for my dirty spot in line. Another snowy dawn in August.

Back in the club the soundtrack is

LOSING FOUND THINGS

mucous and despair. The 4 a.m. crowd seeps in like stale drift water, breathing cheap recycled energy back into the club. A dismal merger of exhaustion and desperation and hope. Last-minute women notice me, latching on and converging in narcotized spirals, twisting like old sunflowers towards a fake light. Ugly, used up people, turning like dirty snow, terrified of facing the sunlight alone, of the hour long commuter train home, angling at every last moment for a few hours of dreamless sleep-sex.

I walk faster on wobbling legs, chasing the dim glimmer of a exit sign, my eyes burning from blown smoke and spilled drinks and a chronic hangover that swells and pulses like arthritis. I cross the center of the dance floor, increasingly dependent on misused secondary senses. I read shoulders like Braille. Midriffs become bumpers, elbows spin like turnstiles. There is no singular direction. All roads lead to Miranda. The smoke is the noise and the music is the map and the alcohol is the fuse and I'm nowhere I want to be.

LOSING FOUND THINGS

I reach the other side bruised and angry, my eyes locking onto the exit sign. People look fresher on this side, happy and full of energy and intent, and it makes me feel ugly. I look back across the floor and all I can see are the lights and the noise and the smoke, covering everyone like a wet blanket, all of us, hiding.

Somewhere in the mass of sweat and Prada and lies Miranda wiggles and glimmers like bait, licking her lips and dancing with half-naked gays, both of us remembering better days.

Fall

I shake all hands all the way up the crowded stairs. The cold, papery palms of my patrons, the silky-soft fingers of girlfriends or wives or models, occasionally the rough and cracked skin of a sculptor or painter like me. When I reach the top my agent and friend, Rachael, hugs me like a proud mother, slipping me in front of the cameras before shooing me through the doors and onto the gallery floor.

LOSING FOUND THINGS

The rooms are fully lit now, the first I've seen of the finished arrangement. Muted spots on the ceiling and floor cross and cleave in soft ovals of intersecting light, leaving behind random islands of shadow. Each wall contains a single canvas and four lights, life-size portraits in blacks and shadows and smoke and barely detectable colors that I'm incapable of seeing. Some of the subjects are recognizable, others less so. Charcoal and sketches, with painted accents or highlights, all left incomplete, all somehow resembling Miranda. I use other models, but I always see her.

Outside the wall of windows a heavy rain falls sideways against the old brick building, giving waiting invitees a new and false eagerness to get inside, and when they do the relief and subsequent enjoyment their faces express is all the more palpable for it.

Rachael leads me from group to group, from wall to wall, me faking explanations for work I'd be the last to understand. Hours go by and I meet everyone two or three times. We drink and have pretend conversations.

LOSING FOUND THINGS

It's a wonderful show, we all agree, Rachael beaming and counting in her head the monies yet to come. She's hand-picked the journalists and most of the guests. It's corrupt in the same way everything is corrupt. The Manhattan art scene had lifted her skirt for me, and she never loses.

I'm standing alone by the bar when I see Miranda emerging from the foyer, soaked and barefoot. She wears a turquoise straight-cut cocktail dress, the patchwork seams curved slightly to accentuate her lanky form, her shoes probably left in a cab or back at the show. She lopes directly towards me, smiling at everyone she passes and leaving small footsteps of rainwater in her path. Everyone turns to watch. The paintings seem to follow her like mirrors.

She kisses me on the lips and hugs me hard, her dress soaking my suit as her small feet swing in the air, unwilling to let go as everyone stares. "I'm so proud of you, Nicholas," she says in wine-scented whispers. She kisses my neck before letting go and lowering her feet to the cold stone

LOSING FOUND THINGS

floor. “So, so proud.” Her arms circle my back like cables.

We walk the gallery holding hands and drinking champagne as the crowd thins, floating from wall to wall and remembering each day she sat fidgeting under hot lights while I worked, before she got her big break. After the last person leaves Rachael has her first drink of the evening, a tumbler of vodka, and begins closing the show, the colored spots snapping off in audible increments. Click. Snap. Click. Miranda and I stand in front of a wall near the entryway, her arms around my neck, both of us swaying and listening to the beat of the rain against the old leaded windows.

After a few minutes she lays her head against my shoulder and pulls my head down towards her mouth. “I’m coming home with you tonight,” she whispers, her lips brushing my neck with each word. I feel the familiar tremor in her bones.

“I thought you were leaving for Miami tonight?”

Nothing.

LOSING FOUND THINGS

"Miranda?"

Nothing.

She swallows hard against my ear. "I just didn't feel well."

I try to pull back to see her face but she holds me tighter in her arms, forcing me to stay close, to not look at her, and I stop struggling and lean further into her embrace. "Don't worry, Nikko. Everything's fine."

Flashes of three day yacht parties go through me, of rehab and men and women and meth and bulimia, a sharply compressed life of glued-together fragments.

Rachael walks by and slips the gallery keys into my pocket as she heads towards the door. The lights are all off, the rooms illuminated only by the rain-splattered windows. "Congratulations, kid," she says, winking and kissing us both on our cheeks. "You deserve this. All of it. Lockup when you're done."

Miranda squeezes me harder as Rachael walks out, standing up tall to rest her chin on my shoulder, staring at the first painting we'd ever done together. After a few long

minutes she sighs and slips her hands
underneath my jacket and shirt and rests
her palms against the bare skin of my back,
staring at the painting.

“Will I always be this beautiful?” she asks.

“Always,” I say.

Winter

The cold creases of uncurving
sheets, the greasy click of tumblers
turning, Miranda’s bony bare feet
sliding blind on the icy wood floor. She
scrubs in the bathroom as I lay in bed. Her
teeth, face, eyes. I’ve seen her do it a
thousand times. The sad smile, the shrug of
resignation, diligent in her habits and
hygiene, curious in her object examination of
passing time treading her young skin. Each
minute erodes my tired anger. Her work. Her
health. Her freedom. Her life.

She comes to my side first, leans in and
kisses me on the cheek, then pads around to
the foot of the bed, shedding clothes,
shivering under the white down comforter
and curling against the far wall. I lie still

LOSING FOUND THINGS

with my eyes closed, breathing in her complex scents. Sweat. Cologne. Wine. Cigarettes. Sex. I feel raw, unfinished.

Are you ok?

She answers in a strange voice, not hers. Yes, Nikko, I'm ok.

She's not. I'm not.

The night breaks record cold, well below zero, the wind sucking out the water from the world and revealing its steady devastation in the mad hissing of ancient radiators, the icy flatness of Miranda's skin, in the groaning and creaking of the building itself. I bury my head between her shoulders and she pushes back and lets go her crying, screaming into the pillow. I slide closer and kiss her shoulders, her neck, running my hand down her arm.

She pushes her small feet against my legs, slowing me, stopping me, and I turn back.

I awaken just beyond dawn, the sun brilliant as it only ever is after a bitter cold night. Next to me on a table is a cool cup of tea, next to that a turned chair. She can't sleep, she watches me, she lives her life.

LOSING FOUND THINGS

What I loved most about Miranda was her freedom. I always knew the price. She's more than the frail, silky web of her put-together flaws, too beautiful to be human, really; a vaporous ghost that turns to dust when you get too close.

You can't hug a butterfly.

I shrug out from beneath the sheets and walk along the cold floor towards the bathroom. Sunlight streams madly throughout the apartment, another cruel joke of winter. As I pass the door my feet hit warm water, all across the floor, greasy, pink water. I enter the bathroom and the water thickens, heat flowing out through the open door and buffeting against the colder air in the hallway, miniature tornados of steam enveloping me as I pass the threshold.

Miranda, peaceful and smiling in the tub, her long legs outstretched, her toes clenched against the dripping faucet, water flowing softly, one arm folded over the rim leaking blackness onto the worn tiled floor. On the clouded mirror, written in clear block letters in her lipstick, *I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

I'm sorry. I fall to the tiles and scream until I run out of air. I don't remember anything. I don't feel, anything.

Spring

I put all of my dirty dishes back into the cabinets and seal the kitchen door with plastic and pour my bedding into the bathtub and sleep for the first time in days. The food is gone. The mirrors are taped up and the windows dark.

My sister calls twice a day asking if I cry. Making sure I cry. It's important, she says, to let it all go.

My father attends the funeral with his new wife, younger even than Miranda. He says nothing, the wife even less. We're all thinking of Mom, of course, but suddenly it's no longer his fault. It can't be.

All the days since are dark, undelineated and unfinished.

I'd spent the last of Miranda's regression in the kitchen, a small, safe place that had become my default during our waning days. We had frozen ourselves in place, afraid of

LOSING FOUND THINGS

any direction. Her work, my painting,
everything just stopped. I did all the cooking,
Miranda poking her head in to tease me
about being the perfect house-husband, her
head wrapped in a turban and more
beautiful than ever. It wasn't difficult; there
was very little she was willing to eat. We were
happy, in a way. We had forced upon
ourselves the very normalcy we disdained so
often in the lives of others and deftly avoided
in our own. I did my reading at the little
table by the window and the plant, my
thinking, my talking on the phone, yelling at
the doctors, all the while stringing along the
leftover shreds of my own life and trying to
build a new one for us both. There are marks
on the table from my hands where I grabbed
the rim as I sat motionless and stared
through the window on the bad nights,
wading through my own bouts of insomnia,
Miranda sleeping a Xanax sleep, barely even
a shape in the bed.

Today in the tub I dream of the bathroom
turning to deep-freeze winter again, going
back there one last time, the pipes and tiles

LOSING FOUND THINGS

cracking from the cold. I dream of Miranda, full and plump and whole again, carrying me to the kitchen and putting my frostbitten hands above the open stove flame and holding them there until they melt, screaming in my wet ears, smooth, mournful screams to keep me conscious. I wake up in the bathtub with my elbows and knees bruised and rebruised.

A few hours into the day the phone rings. I'm still sitting in the bathroom. I answer, but I also don't answer.

The food ran out 10 days ago, the alcohol soon after, and I'm down to Miranda's weight now, staring in the mirror as she used to stare, examining, appraising, gauging what's left. I take some valium and a two hour shower, hacking off my new beard and making sure it's all gone.

I am forty years old.

Outside there is no more ice. Small rivulets of water stream down the pavement from an open hydrant a few buildings up. My eyes burn from the bright sun, barely slits behind oversized sunglasses. I fill my lungs

LOSING FOUND THINGS

in greedy big gulps, the air thick and
fragrant with spring.

Inside Rosalina's people sit in chairs
awaiting their takeout like resigned
prisoners. Old people, businessmen and
women rushing lunch, a mother with two
matching children in a carriage. No one
smiles. A young woman behind the counter
answers the phone and scribbles down
orders, hangs up and then answers again.
Next to her an old man looks down at me,
Rosalina's husband, a widower always nicer
to us than he needed to be. I walk to the
counter and the girl asks for my order, and
when I try to speak my voice comes out
cracked and foreign, sounding animal and
very wrong to me. She starts to ask again
but the old man puts his hand on her arm,
silencing her. He puts his other hand on my
shoulder, closing his eyes and shaking his
big head. I remember him from the funeral
now, surrounded by children.

He speaks to the girl in Italian. She hangs
up the phone and looks at me for a few
seconds, and then runs back towards the

LOSING FOUND THINGS

kitchen. The old man takes my arm and leads me outside the restaurant to a bench in the sun and then goes back inside, saying nothing.

I take the food to a small cluster of rocks in Central Park by the lake where we used to sit and watch the sunset. Rowboats of families and lovers glide by, taking photos, laughing, ignorant of me on my small rock, my small life. I open the container of pepper oil, swirling the rough Italian bread in the liquid. I take small bites, chewing slowly and gagging, watching the trees and clouds float overhead and wondering if I'll ever paint again.

I watch the boats for a while and then take out Miranda's iPod. I scroll through the songs, a roulette with no winners, not caring where I land so long as it all keeps moving. I remember her by my side so effortlessly. We'd sit together here for hours sometimes, connected with a single set of earphones, our heads mashed together, swaying and laughing, her singing into my ear until it was my turn and then giggling as I sang back.

LOSING FOUND THINGS

After a few minutes I turn off the sound and lay down across the flat rocks. I can still hear her singing. I feel her laughing. I close my eyes and cry, finally, listening for her voice in the wind. She doesn't tell me everything will be alright. She doesn't tell me to go on.

We never liked the same songs, but we always listened.

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