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Protesting the Free Trade Area

The second I walked into life-drawing class on that Wednesday night in January I noticed him because he started when he saw me, as if he recognised me. After a beat, I realised that I had never seen him before, so I pretended that I didn't feel his eyes on me. I was already nervous, entering this night class with fifteen or so strangers. I was in the third year of my Ph.D in history and needed something outside of university to keep me connected. I love art, so, like the stereotype of the bored housewife with extra cash, I signed up for an art class. Drawing in front of others terrifies me, but I thought it might help change my life.

Stan was an anomaly in that class, an unlikely hero. Among the black-clad, baggy-panted artists-in-training, Stan's crew-cut and muscular cleanliness singled him out. He looked like those men who entered bars in a pack from some military base, throbbing for action, sexual or otherwise. The types you stay away from. It would be joked about a man like Stan that he would take life drawing in order to gawk at nude women.

He wasn't military, though.

“Interesting,” she remarked as she moved along, defeated. Stan and I laughed about it later, over the second pint of beer, after the other students left the pub on rue Sainte Catherine where we collected after class.

pursuits and artistic endeavours were separated, as if by a wall that only I could scale. I needed this divide, then, because I felt helpless in school. Art class offered immediate action and power which I was declined, for the time being, in my lonely research: scanning primary texts, wading through dusty archives, compiling little books of notes. I wanted escape from books and advisors and pompous grad students who always seemed more successful than myself. I didn't want the two worlds to meet because I needed some sneaky secret about myself that other grad students or professors could never access, something unconnected to history. As if anything could be unconnected to history. I can say now that I was probably a little depressed. Art helps.

It wasn't just me. The other art students, for the most part, did not discuss their ordinary lives. It was as if the class connected us on a level that rendered all other considerations meaningless. Daphne had a child, I knew, because she always had to leave the *apres* class beer early or skip it altogether. George seemed very gay, but who knew? Karen was either anorexic or had a drug problem, but how could anyone know for sure? We came together for a common cause, in shared vulnerability and embarrassment for several hours once a week. Our daily lives receded before Peggy's demanding cry, "long, firm strokes."

As the weeks passed, I became thirsty to know more about Stan's real life. Did he have a romantic partner? I became a sleuth, examining fingers for wedding rings, movements for affectations. He was a canvas upon which was painted the bland, the tight-lipped refusal to reveal eccentricity or the unusual, like those paintings they produce *en masse* and sell to suburbanites to hang over their inoffensive sofas. But his art begged for more, for feather boas and stilettos, for un-ironed shirts, for cigarettes at breakfast, to

be recognised as beyond the reach of the ordinary. For all the depravity and depth his art promised, I still couldn't imagine him hung-over.

So each Wednesday when the group erupted in chatter after class, I felt myself strain towards Stan. We all banged out of the school and, variously, arrived at the pub on rue Sainte Catherine. I always angled to sit near Stan. He seemed oblivious. As people made noises to leave after the first drink, I had always just ordered another drink; therefore, I had to stay. Stan always did the gracious thing and ordered another drink as well, just to keep me company, of course.

I never told him about my lonely despair, the eye-burning exhaustion of reading all day, my normal life. There was so much else to reveal and discover, as if we were children with magnifying glasses and sunhats and little plastic shovels. I was fascinated by him, by his bold art, by his apparent slight indifference to me. I think, because of his art, I wanted him to love me, or desire me at least, as if that desire would bestow a stamp of cleverness or talent on me, by proxy. I guess that's what it was. We talked in the abstract. Toasters, and laundry, and libraries, and guns, all the stuff of our individual daily lives, were rooted in another world altogether, one that we could happily ignore for the length of art class and two pints of beer.

I haven't seen Stan since the second last class. Sort of.

As a scholar of contemporary Canadian gender history, I was quite caught up in the approaching Summit of the Americas. I was a part of the anti-FTAA group on campus. We were organising buses to Quebec City, April 20-22, to attend the massive protest against the Free Trade Area of the Americas. We met every Thursday night to

plan our protest. I drank red wine and listened mostly, nodding earnestly at all the right moments.

Those in power had erected a fence. The fence was so wrong, yet I acknowledged—quietly and to myself only, for the FTAA protesters wouldn't approve of my belief here—that the Canadian government had a responsibility to ensure the protection of all the foreign dignitaries. The so-called “wall of shame” was wrong, yet it brought the various protesting groups together under one potent symbol. We are on the outside, the wrong side of the fence, barred from power. I was infused with passionate indignation, preparing my protest kit: water (for pepper spray eye rinses and for drinking), bandanas, vinegar (to soak the bandanas in for tear gas), a plastic bag of clothes (the bag to protect them from pepper spray), granola bars (we really do eat granola), Band-Aids, cigarettes, and tampons (you never know). The Wednesday before the protest I could hardly concentrate in night class.

Over the second pint, I wanted to talk about the protest. Instead, I rubbed my hands, damp from the beer glass, on the thighs of my faded jeans and looked into Stan's eyes. The bar was dark, and his pupils were dilated. The air was smoky, smelled musty. The table top was sticky in spots, had beer spilled on it. We were alone in our corner. A few regulars at the bar. A table of older men against the opposite wall. And us. I looked at him intently because I wanted to speak but could say nothing. We didn't have a language, now, to communicate the real.

But, in staring into his eyes, I was suddenly aware of his eyes staring back at me. It *was* like electricity, that jolt that fired through my whole body. Do you believe in that electricity? Do you believe that, if one person feels it, that the other one does as well?

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I gazed at the downed officer for a split second before his peers attended him. He reached a shaky hand up to adjust his mask. Before he set it aright, he moved it completely off his face. He looked directly into my eyes, as if he recognised me. I looked directly into his. Electricity.

It was him.

I haven't seen anyone from art class since. I've hoped to run into a classmate so I could find out who went to the last class, what they did afterwards, if anyone asked about me. Since I didn't go to the last class, I don't know if Stan did. In my mind, I like to think that he did, and that he missed me. But maybe he stayed away from art after that too.