

## RIVERBANK

### 9

Black smoke escapes the muffler of the bus leaving me behind. The day is radiant. I usually walk before that mass transit vehicle resumes routing but not this time. Its reason to ride was to attend my transportation needs, as if all things in the universe were literary functions of my life. But as I see the half-eaten bumper turning around the corner, I know I am a mere adjutant on the metal mammoth's trajectory.

In the bar behind me a second class football match grabs the attention of all shades of collared workers. I am still prostrated at a precarious last decade stop waiting for no line in particular. The match seems to be almost at the 90 minutes mark. the joint halts its service. They are fixed on the bargained flat screen television. A player of the team in blue and white has the ball, smoothing past the last defender and now is facing the goalkeeper. The screams were stuck in their throats, but they could not release their chant before the actual goal.

A woman glides from out of this world into the sidewalk besides the bar. I say woman assuming her maturity but I'm not so sure about her age. I have never seen such unique beauty. Her skin looks soft and her legs bounce just enough. She doesn't exaggerate in anything. Although a sumptuous short dress accentuates all her qualities. She removes the polish of her nails with her finger while ignoring the rest of us. All workers, businessmen, and loan sharks miss her stroll because of their obsession with a game. Even if their team wins, they are all losers.

Winning or losing was always a mystery to me. I couldn't stand the idea of either. Both mean something has to be over. A football match hears the chants of "champion" only after the final blow of the referee. A poker hand cashes the money from the poll only after the last draw and the last faint. All the persons in the bar missed the opportunity to enjoy the most exotic beauty of a young girl in that sad part of town. They were munching someone's else spoils.

To reach the end of anything is quite terrifying because we can never go back. We are left to reenact a few of the already forgotten memories. I would rather continue not knowing if I am losing because I can carry on enjoying the little details of everything else. It moves with the perfect pass from the adversary that crossed the field without reaching anyone. Or it lives in the misleading grin from a tired cowboy that gave away his bluff. It sighs with the gorgeous young girl who was so focused on being beautiful. She didn't smile at me.

My cell rings. "Trim trim trim." Her dress gave a queue that it would lift, but it descends to cover her olive thigh. I sigh in contentment." Trim trim trim." The beautiful girl ventures to a perpendicular street, leaving my sight. I look down at my pocket where the phone is still ringing. "Trim trim trim." And it is now calling the attention of the few persons on the street not celebrating an innocuous victory. "Trim,

trim, trim.” I can hear their lifted eyebrows: “What a monster! He is not picking up his phone! His wife is calling him and he dare not picking up in three seconds or less. ” Give it or take it. “Trim , trim, trim.” “He is not even interested in responding to the god-damned device! We are finally in the future and there are still people who do not pick up their telephones!” I won't bother with the silent voices. I will please myself by answering it whenever I damn want:

“I will be right there, don’t you move.” It is a girl’s voice.

“I saw this gorgeous girl who just passed by.” I say it distracted at a poster on the bus stop display.

“That’s good! Keep girl watching.” The other side hangs up.

“She was wearing the most beautiful spring dress, if that is what you guys call it.” A car passes by way too fast.

“She didn’t even take the opportunity to watch her admirers. I think she just started college not a couple days ago. Isn’t it fall already?” As I distract myself from Spring, I neglect to identify who said what.

I hang up and put my phone in my side pocket. The poster on the wall advertises a future movie. It was something related to people who decide to have carnal experiences as friends. It is easier said than done.

Movies continue to sell ideas we cannot afford. The 1980’s held the idea that a dork and a cheerleader could find true love could on each other. I cannot count how many of those movies I watched as a kid that gave me hope to achieve the same kind of relationship myself.

The direr damage those movies cause is the idea someone can be their archetype rather than be a person. They seem to be telling us that there is no other way out besides choosing a few options.

*We can be romantics. We can be dorks. We can be jocks. That is decided in high school and we never remove those jerseys. You cannot transform your inner dorkiness into swift speed neither your jockiness into ingenious smarts. That is game over upon graduation. So you better embrace or you will eat dust. - James Halloway. Senior at GCHS*

Now contemporary movies are trying to sell free sex without emotions. We are those dorks and jocks from our high school times but we leave these uniforms on the floor besides the bed we actualize the coitus. No one will ever ask you about your past. We buy these without looking at the price tag.

From the same corner the beautiful girl left me, a gorgeous redhead appears coming towards the bus stop. She has a serious face behind a superficial half-smile. She is not as tall but her stride takes up the whole world. Her glasses hide her piercing —not flattering— eyes cutting through my flesh. I think did something wrong.

“Did you see the girl I was telling you about?” I direct my voice to Annie without much enunciation.

“She is hot.” She stands beside me looking straight at my head while I continue gazing at the streets. “We could grab a beer at this bar and talk.”

“I’d rather go for a walk if you don’t mind. We might bump into her again.” I put no effort in believing what I was just saying.

“Stop pretending you obsess with that girl. You wouldn’t even like talking to her because she is shallow. She has nothing of whatever bullshit you allow yourself to say to justify the girls you like.” She is not even mad at me.

“Okay Annie, anything you want.” Something was quite dead in me.

Today something ended and I turned out to be the loser. On that ride that just left me, venturing to the wilder parts of town for a fruitful picnic, my girl broke up with me. Out of boredom she drops the “it is not you it is me” bomb gazing at a few kids playing football on the field outside. She leaves the bus

carrying my weaved basket with delicious pastries and a glass bottle of Swiss lemonade. I remain catatonic for about six stops after her departure until I decide to leave myself. I was not familiar with that part of the city. I hope it is not a dangerous place to be when you have your heart broken.

“She left me.” I place a foot after the other.

“Good. You know I didn’t like that bitch.” She looked into my eyes, taunting me. She wanted me to get pissed off at her. But I remained calm. Of course she was a bitch.

“Of course she is a bitch, but that doesn’t mean we need to treat her as if she is the scum of the Earth.”

“That’s why you get hurt. Why do have to be such an idiot? Not all girls need ‘good’ guys, no matter what they say.” We continue strolling through narrower streets avoiding beetles older than me. I can see myself living here.

“But if everybody avoids the bitches, who will love them? Everybody should be loved.”

“Don’t you worry about them before you are all well. The right guys will love them. Pussies like you cannot survive girls like her. You are far too sweet.” Annie thought with her guts. While I paced my mind around universalities she walked barefoot on grass fields.

“So what is the kind of girl should I be in love with then?” I cross my fingers behind my back hoping to be the kind who is beautiful to me while being the most ordinary girl to the rest of the world.

“You love all women, so don’t worry about finding the right candidate for your affection. Worry about what is good for you.”

“Are you sure you know me?” She did.

“Poophead. I am not saying you should settle, but you definitely need to be more aware of your choices.”

Annie and I are about the same age but she has a successful life instead. We were never sure when and how we became friends. Strangers often believe we are married with children. Every time newcomers ask us how we met we offer a better spin about our lives. We tell our fathers met in Vietnam, a shared nightmare of a sandbox, a scam my grandmother played on her grandfather...

“Have you ever been here before?” She finally looks around.

“I do not reckon being here. It might be a dream of sorts, induced by sour fermented lemon juice.” I let my tongue act free from my thoughts.

“Can you drop the nonsense just for this ride?” She was right.

Our past was whatever we wanted it to be, to whatever purpose we came to fulfill. This would usually entice my fantasies of being a spy having to sell a story to a new recruit or to weave the plot of my crowning inside a walnut. Annie would leave these feelings at bay because they were quite dangerous to have. She says : “You ate so much shit when you were a kid that now you have an overactive imagination. But, like, real dog poo.”

“Look. She left you and that is over. I am happy for you even if you are not happy yourself.” She smiles at my cowardice.

“I am not unhappy. I am content that it didn’t end worse than it could have been.” Contentment is the worst feeling.

*“Coo.” Goes the dove inside the temple.*

“You can fantasize as much as you want today. You have a pass and I will believe in any of your bullshit.” There were times her judgment weighted gold.

*“Coo.” Goes the dove lying on marble.*

“You know you will regret saying that, don’t you?” She was my friend.

“That doesn’t prevent me from punching your face if I have to.”

*“Coo.” The Dove flies away.*

Do I think Annie is gorgeous and that we have incredible synergy? Yes. Have I ever thought of dating Annie? No. We knew each other from so long ago, and feelings of lust never arouse in us. If I met someone like Annie right now I would marry her at the first opportunity. We would ensemble the most beautiful family in this world. She would enslave me as an obedient husband and I would heal my ego at night with her almost nasal voice.

We reach the concrete riverbank that divides the old part of the town from the boonies. A man on the other side raises his head to observe the barbarian invading his unpopulated wilderness. He guards his hoe on his shoulder and drifts behind a little shack, away from our curiosity.

Annie can only understand me because of time, how long we have known each other. That is my logical answer for why our relationship is so successful. If this is the case my connection with Annie is nothing more than duration. I could never jump into an instant relationship because no girl would ever accept me from the start, not if she is sane and has no extra limbs. But I am confident that this isn’t the case, though that people can only know me with persistence carries some truth to it.

“I think that farmer over there plants tea. It would be nice to drink some fresh green roast.” I consider the idea of finding it so close to the city confusing to my taste buds.

“Let’s take a look then.” Annie announces serene.

Little bushes aligned themselves in streaks up the little mount behind the shack. The perfection of the disposition of the *Camellia sinensis* was quite unnatural, although I thought it quite organic. That could only be the doing of giant ants toiling to place each of these bushes at planned intervals. Their fangs, the size of a small electric car, cut the trees in front of their path while their mouths would secrete mucky fertilizer. The point of their monstrous gaster plough a ditch for the placement of the saplings. That farmer didn’t want us to see his abnormal plantation of ant fluid tea not because he was particularly xenophobic. He was the mere peon for dangerous people. And if the knowledge of their gargantuan workers slipped the fringe of the orchard, the old man feared the witnesses would find their final breath beneath a sharp blade made of keratin exoskeleton.

The bridge halts and the farmer returns bearing a small red box. It crests an immaculate presence of handmade details. He is Asian beyond middle-aged affected by ethnic globalization. I bet his father married a local woman he fell in love when he arrived from Thailand with his hopes in a wooden suitcase he stole from a dying Korean soldier. I bet he was also married to a woman coming from a different far away country. She was the most beautiful woman he had put his eyes on. I bet his daughter, if he has a daughter, is gorgeous beyond possible just like that young girl who passed by me earlier. Mixture of any kind brings the better in people.

The old Asian man asked us to approach him with a swing of his soft hands while balancing the fancy red box with his other. The shack settles in an angle that hides a wooden table on the side. A picnic table, with long benches, was rotting because of the rains. He dresses as any other contemporary city farmer: the worst and freer clothes he could find. You know you will ruin them by working on the soil. He currently bears the face of a dubious politician on his chest with some scribed numbers under the photo. You could waive your liberty to him with those numbers. He would gain power while liquidating responsibilities. The young politician smiles at me with no remorse. He knew we had no time to lose with tea. Time we could be working to find a way to time travel and vote for him again.

“I want you to meet Mr. Toyota.” Annie knew that was not his real name, I am pretty sure. No Mr. Toyota exists outside Yakuza movies.

“Nice to meet you, youngling.” None says youngling besides Sir Sean Connery as a Jesuit detective.

“My pleasure. I saw this beautiful girl passing by me not 15 minutes ago. Maybe an hour. She was stunning. She knew she was pretty.” I was not even a little interested in meeting Mr. Toyota.

He suggests us to sit at the far corner of the table where the red box awaits us. He reveals different sets of white porcelain inside of it. Delicate velvet covered the interior to protect his treasure from time and mishandling. After setting three combinations of items on the table, with the addition of a bigger kettles and utensils, he returns inside his house for mysterious machinations.

“I thought the bizarre arrangement of the tea bushes would attract you here so I warned Mr. Toyota in advance to prepare us some hot tea.” Annie always wanted to sound more mysterious than she was.

“I take care of his finances at my office and he gifts me with the occasional treat of passionately grown tea.” Who am I kidding? She just knew more about me than myself.

“You know I never drank tea in my life. I thought you haven’t either. I bet his daughter is beautiful.” My eyes start to burn because of sun rays entrapped by the quick white clouds overcasting the whole city.

“I don’t think he has a daughter but she definitely would be beautiful. His wife is anyway.” She mimics the posture of a geisha from a low budget direct for TV movie.

“What a pity.”

A quiet glow emanates from inside the house, followed by a comfortable and textured yellow light. I finally sit down and I turn my messenger bag from my side to my belly to open its flappy mouth. I would feed my bag with all sort of delicious treats while it would grant me infinite freedom to walk without having my hands occupied. But the main compartment was sick of the diet I submit it to. Inside there were around seven paperback books on different stages of deterioration, cresting different covers from different decades. Besides the latitude of different physical characteristics all these books shared a fundamental element. They were all copies of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. Most Anglophones will know it as “On the Nature of the Universe.” It was a single book behaving in different qualities of paper. They expressed different voices through an amalgam of always changing translations. But my attention gravitates to the most intrinsic agglomeration of juvenile notes on its margins.

I browse without much joy through the thick arrangements of cheap pulp and pick at random one the books. I flex in arc a section completely covered in yellow highlight—from the page numbers to the running title. Those two pages together meant something extraordinary to someone who was reading this specific copy at some point in the past. It might also have been the result of several markings throughout the years made by different philosophy and literature undergraduate students. The last of these students was possibly amazed his previous fellows considered a lot of the text important. He decided to mask it all back to its original state of indecision. What he failed to perceive by trying to return the text to its initial state, was that he created a completely different set of judgments particular to that section of this specific copy of the *De Rerum Natura*. It is a post-modern artistic form of annotation.

The comments on Epicurus’ Philosophy in “On the Nature of the Universe” are elegant and insightful by themselves. But those remarks about Lucretius’ text is a common effort for plural understanding. It evokes an unseen universal care for humanity. Translations are far more interesting when critics use them to understand the period the writers lived in rather than to discuss the quality of the rendering itself. The different annotations and highlights in a classic are similar to the many versions of a text. They are evidence of the behavior of the youth of a determined region and time. A young farmer expresses his angst to go against his father's will and changed his major from agronomy to literature in thick, almost brown, yellow highlight of a section about the first men who populated earth in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*.

“You haven’t touched your tea and now it is cold. Put that book aside. You know it by heart I would assume.” Annie was pours more of the green liquid while I concentrated on the nature of things.

“This copy is fascinating.” I show Annie the completely highlighted portion where Lucretius discusses the immortality of the soul on book III. I hold the book in front of my face with my hand holding both sides of the binding.

“All I see is someone’s boredom.” She savours on her second bowl of tea, extracted from the third cycle of the brewing.

“It doesn’t matter if it is the result of someone boring their lives away. This exaggerated marking will forever, or until a fireman burns this book, imply infinite importance on a discussion about the soul of humans. And I don’t know this book by heart because I don’t care to read it. I rather place my attention on the comments themselves.”

“So you proceed your entire project ignores clear evidence that most herculean institutions crush their professors with tenure standards who in turn neglect their students with exploited texts?” I sense the mockery, jumping from synapses to others, pointing at my heart. “Are you saying that the motivation of the annotator is a mere detail on the grand scheme of commentary production?”

I decide to sip my cold tea, which besides the ungrateful temperature is quite pleasant.

“It is good tea Mr. Toyota. Although this is my first time drinking the legendary TGFOP, I don’t doubt this is a special kind.” I notice particles of the roast sunk at the bottom of my bowl fluttering, awaiting to emerge and live free from the oppression of the drinking container.

“I knew you would enjoy it. I always know anyway.” she always do.

“Why Sabrina left me?” I realize I didn’t quite understand the reason on my sudden departure from a life as two.

Sabrina was not the kind of girl I usually fall in love with. Nothing in her appearance was appealing to my aesthetic sensibilities; neither was her personality too resonating with mine. There wasn’t nothing special about the way she polishes she nails although I was often impressed on how the thick cosmetic paint would last on her hands far more than in any other girl I knew. She was sweet at first but in the end her favorite pastime was to criticize, in a subtle way, all in this universe that when put together results on me.

I drink the remaining of the brewed tea in one gulp. Every taste attaches themselves in different walls of my mouth surfing down to my acid full stomach. My bowl refills with more tea in a more appropriate temperature and I drink it with the same violence I drank what was left of my first cup. The warm liquid didn’t go as far as burning my mouth but it lit every one of my cells, reaching further places of my body much faster.

“She left you” Annie fails to explain “because you are asking this question, now, at the end.”

“I guess it should make sense but I cannot understand still.” I continue to pour hot tea in my mouth, one after the other flowing together in new words. It was an addictive stream of consciousness.

“You should be glad that you didn’t leave her instead. She would be tailing you forever and beyond. And you don’t want someone like her following you around.” Sometimes I would wonder where all Annie’s certainties came from.

Sabrina would make me smile on the little things she would be playful about. She had a way of forcing herself to be sexy that was cute. She would look a certain way that I learned being her way of saying “I am pretending to wanting you” that I enjoyed playing along with. But her hands were faithful and would present me with genuine care while harassing my hair. It was a dangerous game though. She would exploit her insecurities with my willingness to give in to her games. I played as if it was my second nature at first, but the more complex it became more my feelings about her became a painting in the school of tenebrism. Fantasy and reality would mix together in response to her alluring traps. I entered the match prepared for a friendly confrontation on Christmas day and I ended up having my body thrown in a shallow ditch after an unexpected mustard gas attack in my trench.

It was the last bowl of tea, the tenth, and surprising, cycle. My eyes were wide open while I retrieved the copy of *De Rerum Natura* back to her friends inside my bag. I crossed my sight to the other side of the bridge and the city constructed itself in my consciousness in a elegant wave. The buildings agglomerated themselves in their respective space-time positions. They erected scared as the drill sergeant catches the recruits who were looking for what was wrong in their uniform. The white clouds were turning gray announcing a more than deserved rain.

“I guess the picnic wouldn’t have worked out either.” I smile while enacting in my head the wet danced performed between my red checkered picnic blanket and Sabrina trying to avoid the water on her ironed hair.

“No, I guess everything would have been pretty much pointless in the end anyway.”

I stand up and let Sabrina’s rain dance ritual leave the boundaries of my mind. I put my hands up in the air and jiggle them from side to side like a snake trying to reach heavens. My feet stomp on the ground raising a cloud of dust. I let my cheeks free themselves from the prison of the face by shaking my skull from one side to the other. I feel the happiness of the tea flow through my body up and down. The sky responds with the first few drizzles of water. Mr. Toyota gathers his tea set and returns to his shack. From the bridge the same girl from the bar approaches the house on the same swing she had before, ignoring the first signs of rain. His daughter is beautiful.

“I hope her picnic was completely ruined .”