

Richard Lovelace, Poet, 1618-1648

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I'm lucky to be alive. Standing in the principal's office in Cambridge last week, listening to the charges against me, I could feel Dad's blood pressure blow through the roof. This was not a good moment to be tipping the family boat. Mainly because it had already capsized. The ever-clueless Dr. Post droned on about my "crimes against humanity." I wanted to ask if he was wearing a butt-plug. Truth is, I felt fine. *Je ne regretted rien.* (Is that right?) Shit these old guys get away with....They were just trying to scare me. Part my cheeks before the stun-gun dildo of authority until it drilled into my brain and bending over became an addiction. Say *Thank you, sir.* Maybe: *Wedge the boot in deeper, sir – yum!* But what was their worst? As it was late May already, the Principalities and Powers decided I should take the rest of the term, plus summer, to reflect on my sins.

A few minutes later, walking alongside my sour-faced Dad, I saw Dickie amid the gauntlet of classmates lining the hall. Stepping forward, his loose shorts almost dropped to his ankles and he stumbled. Falling, he managed to grab my shoulder and whisper: Watch yussef, man. Remember Hermano?

Dad gave us a both a look and we hurried on.

Of course I remembered Hermano. A year ahead of us, Herman "Goat-Boy" Hermano was celebrated for many things. Foremost among them was his girlfriend RapChur. RapChur, people whispered, was one of the original "Suicide Girls." Older, she lived in New York where he spent most weekends. So he said. At first nobody believed him. A Suicide Girl! Hot as a porn star, cool as a runway model, smart as Natalie Portman...hanging with the Goat-Boy? Then, one evening he brought her along to the Pit in the Square where we sometimes chilled. Rene and I were watching Harlan practice fakie hardflips near the subway entrance while I buzzed *La Marseillaise* on my mouthpiece. The board kept dipping away and several times he sprawled on his ass. We applauded anyway. Then I saw Dickie waving us over to the kiosk. Goat-Boy was leaning against a pillar looking on while the legendary RapChur smiled a million watts and talked with some of the guys, including Jizm, who hawked *Spare a Dime?*, *The Wall Street Journal* of the homeless, on the corner. In a matter of minutes our world changed. It was like meeting a magazine cover. Proof positive a higher order existed. RapChur in the middle of Harvard Square on a smoky November afternoon, as the world shrank to winter, shimmered like a great iridescent bird. Our standards and expectations of life itself fundamentally altered. From that moment we

became captives of the shimmering. We knew immediately we'd hunt it forever. Later, we looked her up on the web and marveled all over again at what had passed among us. Only Rene remained unmoved. She watched from a distance, hands across her chest, long eyes squeezed to a dime. Then, on April Fool's, someone dropped a cherry bomb down the toilet of the boy's room. The eruption splattered the walls and ceilings with waste. Nobody could say for sure who did it, but the next week Hermano was gone. Rumor had it Post had "disappeared" him. Some of the kids insisted he was now in Guantanamo, or worse.

But Hermano had no secret weapon while I did: none other than dear old Dad, my father, whose executioner I would one day become – or so he kept telling me. Don't give me any ideas, I wanted to warn him, but didn't.

Since you love the web so much, he said when we got home – his voice softly savage – why don't you learn how to use it correctly? Looking at him, I wondered: was this was my future? The shaved head and green eyes of a hairless cat – Dr. Spock hybrid. Weird, even for a published neo-formalist poet. Then, like the good Harvard professor he is, he gave me an assignment. I am condemned to write an essay on the importance of literature in the age of Twitter. Five thousand words, minimum. His last sabbatical, we were living in Rome, he tried to make me him talk to him in Latin. *Ita, baby, ita.*

After my suspension, because things at home are so crazy these days, Dad put me on the Megabus and sent me to stay with my godfather in New York for the summer. The GF had had a stroke in January, leaving him partly paralyzed and, as he has no family of his own (how did he work that, I wonder?), Dad said it would do me good to help take care of someone else for a change. Probably right.

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The evening before I was to leave, Rene stopped by. She always insisted on coming in to say hello. Dad was prepping for his class in the living room with the television on. He's working on a sonnet sequence based on an imaginary reality TV show and is a tireless researcher. When he saw who it was he mumbled hello and turned right back to the set. I'm sure he was embarrassed. He knew Rene knew.

Mom was in the kitchen smoking a joint while designing a flier for one of her insane political groups on her Mac.

Where you going? She asked, flicking the ash.

Just the clubhouse, I said. The “clubhouse” was the unoccupied and barely finished apartment above my parents’ garage on Avon Hill.

Mom nodded, Hello, Rene.

‘Evening, Mrs. Wainscotting. How are you feeling?

Rene engages everybody. She talks to bus drivers, hall monitors, cashiers, and the homeless. I’ve seen her whispering not only to dogs and cats, but also to birds and squirrels. She knew Mom had been sick. Unfortunately, she didn’t understand how seriously fucked things are around here. Mom was on a hair trigger: a feather could ignite a flurry of anxious non-sequiturs.

As indeed it did. Stubbing out the jay, mom looked up. Her tiny pupils and red eyes bored into us, pinning us where we stood:

Well thank you and the Lord for asking, child. Nobody around here seems to care how I am. Better learn the lot of women worldwide. Pricks kick. And stomp.

She looked at me, and added:

This one's all right. But you watch your back anyway.

You haven't finished packing, she reminded me, turning back to her computer. Then she added, this time to Rene:

Never trust a poet!

Sound advice.

The bang of the screen door reverberated in the warm night.

The clubhouse, in fact, is where Rene, Dickie, Harlan and I—i.e., *The Vocal Virgins*—rehearse. Of course often we debate the big questions, like: what's better: anarchy, democracy, or dictatorship? Dickie, who always has the best weed, which has nothing to do with his being of African-American ancestry and living in the projects on Harvard Street in Cambridge surrounded by professional drug dealers, favors dictatorship. Rene, whose parents adopted her from China when she was eight months old, feels the typical immigrants' gratitude to liberal democracy. Me, I say: brothers and sisters, kick out the jams. Take the very doors off their hinges.

Harlan? Well, he doesn't have much of a clue.

Now Rene and I sat in the dark, on opposite sides of the room, on the clubhouse floor. I fiddled with the microphone Rene normally played with like a whip. Our equipment lay scattered where we left it after our last rehearsal: a couple of Fenders, the Olds cornet I'm desperately studying, to impress Rene. She gave me a book by this Dead Musician, Miles Davis – DM/MD, i.e. – and now I have to read it but who has time when he's penning a survey of world literature for Dad? Anyway I couldn't think about this now. We were facing catastrophe.

Rene kept her eyes down. Every so often she looked over at me, running her tongue over her lips like she was trying to remember my name. Like she couldn't quite finger me in a line-up, even though I was the only one there. Most of the time, Rene is the anti-Medusa. In the right mood, she can inspire a boulder to rock. But she wasn't in that mood now.

Except for the occasional horn from Mass Ave a few blocks away, the only sounds came from the mice in the walls and the hoot of their nemesis, Athena, the neighborhood owl who seemed as full of questions as we. Moon-salt sifted through the skylight. Shadows on the wall and floor filled out the space between us which might otherwise have felt intolerably empty and still.

Somebody had to speak first. Since Rene was the visitor, I thought it was her call. She took a different view.

Aren't you going to say something, she finally said.

I'll miss you? I offered.

You're such a dick, she snapped back.

As this more or less echoed how I felt about myself at the moment, I let it pass. I couldn't think of anything to add. We knew where we stood, more or less. Gynecology isn't rocket science. What good would it do to go over again the plan we'd agreed on? Nothing had changed since last week. We had less time, was all. Were we going to be parents? Did we want to be? Such were our questions.

Something crashed to the floor below. Probably just the resident raccoon foraging through the trash. For a city, Cambridge has a lot of wildlife.

Finally Rene got up. She pushed her long loose black hair out of her face. Her skin in moonlight was white as paper. For a second she looked just like Yoko Ono. I thought she was going to come over and give me a good-by kiss or at

least a hug, so I stood up too. Instead she shook her head, looked away, that small straight nose pointing her path, and walked slowly for the stairs.

See ya, she said, without looking back, going down.

Watch out for the raccoon, said I.

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After she left I sat rocking in the dark awhile, listening to Athena, the mice, the raccoon, and my endlessly chattering brain. But the noises of late spring made me think of how little I knew about the critter world. I'm a city kid. I've only seen it in movies. Once we spent a week in the Berkshires so Dad could hear Ozawa's last hurrah with the BSO and hang with Spielberg at the Blantyre (fyi, the room we stayed in had a commode once owned by Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio). After dressing for the show, I sprayed myself with bug juice head to toe. Nature red in tooth and claw, Dad quipped each time we stepped outside. It stirred his inner berserker, nature did. Neither did we do beaches. Not the Atlantic, nor the Pacific, not even the Adriatic or the Mediterranean, to say nothing of the North Sea. Once, driving some poet around the North Shore, Dad looked out at the people on the small strip of sand and said: Took us more than a billion years to work our way out of that mess. What's to see?

Our destinations were either museums or restaurants or both. The Louvre, The Rijksmuseum, Bilbao, the Uffizi, the Prado. Bernardin, Bouley's, Café des Artistes. For starters. This summer Dadsky had been threatening us with the Hermitage. But Russia's still a bit wild.

Mom's idea of a good time, on the other hand, is visiting disaster areas. Hurricane strike? Tsunami devastated your coast? Tornadoes erased the trailer park? Volcanoes, earthquakes, and nuclear accidents! All have one thing in common: mom. Fortunately she's only taken me a couple of times, once to New Orleans, and once, when I wasn't even five, to Manhattan.

Bingo: no more family vacations! I pulled the mouthpiece from my pocket and buzzed the anthem of the free French to the walls.

Before packing, I decided I needed to see Dickie, whom I have begun calling Miles, for obvious reasons, so I can apologize. What Harlan and I did was so stupid I can't even tell you about it yet. Even so he tried to warn me. He's a *Vocal Virgin*, after all. As I said, he lives in "the projects" outside Central Square—a city block of two-story brick buildings around a narrow strip of green and concrete. Do they call them "projects" because they know nobody would really want to live there, except as an experiment? Don't get me wrong,

in the People's Republic of Cambridge they don't allow abandoned buildings, broken windows, or crack vials. There are air conditioners in the living rooms which are all painted a beige shade of beige. I've never seen a rat racing around the kitchen or chasing one of his ten brothers or sisters. Yet there's something so helpless about the place, even in summertime when the babies are out in the yard and the mothers are all smoking and talking, it makes me want to curl up under the stairs and sleep. Going there reminds me Dickie has a world of friends and experiences I'll never understand, unless he tells me. But he doesn't like to talk about his family much.

When I arrive his mother is sitting on the stairs in a violet nightgown smoking, a purple feather in her hair like a black Pocahontas. Ever since Dickie's older brother Tupac was killed, she's been getting weirder. Dickie says she often wanders to the little variety store on the corner in her pyjamas. She nods at me and moves her long skinny legs out of the way.

Between you and me, my mother, loves Dickie. She says it's still tough for black and white people in Boston to stay friends. I have no idea if this is true.

Inside, his brothers and sisters spill around the house like rolling batches of mercury, shattering against a wall, scattering, regrouping. Seeing me, they stop a moment.

It's Jon-jon, shouts Beulah, age four.

He's in there, Simon says, pointing to one of two bedrooms down the hall.

I knock on the door. No answer. Not even the holy holler of the P-Funk he hides in when he's down. I nudge the door anyway.

Immediately I trip over a bed. Five crowd the room like a barracks. Dickie's curled in the corner near the window. The shades are up and the same damn moon that's followed me everywhere for years fills the room.

Yo, I say.

Silence. This is turning out to be the night of the silent friends.

Look Miles, speaking for Harlan and myself, I'm sorry. We're assholes. I admit it. We fucked up, I say, meaning it.

Outside Beulah is singing a Miley Cyrus song.

I stare at his motionless small silhouette a while. The air smells weirdly of patchouli.

Dickie, who taught me so much: preemptive masturbation before a date, how to get immediate attention in the *ER* (tell them you're uploading to YouTube), what to say to a cop who's harassing you (*my uncle, Barack Obama* – which works better in some cases than others).

Don't know what else to add.

Old man's shipping me out tomorrow, I tell him. Remember the *Virgins*. We need y-o-u, man, I jab a pinkie and index finger in his direction. Okay? I gotta get home.

Dickie seems intent on staring down the streetlamp.

He'd been having such a good year, what with Obama showing black folk how to kick white butt, until Tupac's death. His mother got a flag and all. Made her feel a whole lot better.

Finally he turns to me and says softly: We cool. His eyes shine.

He's forcing it because he knows I'm going. Even so, I'm grateful.

This time I'm the one who slips out without looking back.

Home, I check Asia's room. My baby sister sleeps with her arms around a stuffed horse large enough for her to ride. I feel guilty leaving her alone with the rents, but she needs to find her own way of coping.

I'm in bed flipping through Smiley's book on embouchere when the door opens and Dad's bulb head lights up the room like a bad dream. I can smell the whiskey (Glennfidich, single malt). He grins and walks in. I know that grin; it is a terrifying sight. In his hand, a sheaf of paper. In a familiar and dreaded ritual, he hovers over me, booming: Listen to this! He then proceeds to read his poem (which he, for some reason, pronounces "poi'-em").

Don't get me wrong; I dig poetry. Really. This year in English we read *Tintern Abbey* which I thought was almost good as an Alan Alda *Nature* special.

Besides, Dad has been reading to us since before we were born.

Unfortunately, his own poems make me think of *Sponge Bob Square Pants*. That I can't respect.

He closes his eyes. He throws out his hands. His voice grows louder. I turn over on my side and glare at the wall.

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The next morning Dad said:

You're pissed at us, Jonathan. Me. You're especially pissed off at me. Because you think I'm doing this to you and Asia. You personally. At your age you can't understand that some things aren't about you.

The usual bull.

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Not all men are equally capable of keeping it in their pants, I think, scratching my balls as I stretch out in bed, mouthpiece in hand. I was born during the so-called "Clinton era" – though that seems overemphasizing his importance, because what did the dude accomplish, really? A financial bubble. A "free trade agreement" enriching the rich. Ten million dollar book deal for himself. His legacy? A scrap of scar-lipped cigar. Mom thought he was hot. Rene's sure he's into sexting. Imagine getting a tongue sign from Bill, she said. Many

of my classmates credit him with inspiring the new sexual revolution. It's a legacy all right. Sex is an occupational hazard of living.

I try buzzing *Satisfaction*.

For several weeks, in fact, we were a house divided on the subject of Sandra Bullock and Jesse James. To those reading this in translation or maybe a hundred years from now: Bullock was a decent actress who won an Academy Award (will they still be around in 2110? We like to think our values absolute, but get real. What if the big prize goes to robots with hot chips? If them friggin' ice caps hold.). She was smart, kind of fakey aristo. But she married a Monster-Car-loving shit-kicking biker dick named Jesse James. The subject arose because Asia (my aforementioned sister) loved the movie *The Blind Side* for which Bullock won her award. Mom said it was tragic that such a smart and gifted woman would want a bimbo like James. Dad said it spoke volumes about the values of the American female: she wants to be righteous while getting drilled hard. He said this in front of Asia and myself at dinner. Mom then said there was nothing wrong with getting drilled hard now and again. Quoth Dad: I rest my case. Asia then asked what it meant to get drilled hard. All three looked at me to cut this Gordian knot. I was at a loss. Look it up on the internet, I said. Then Dad left the table.

While we're on the subject, let me say outright: I'm a big believer in homosexuality. What I mean is, people are who they are and they should stay that way. But when your dad decides to come out of the closet at forty-five, and you are fifteen years old and your girlfriend just might be pregnant, no one is happy. This goes back to my philosophy that people should stay who they are. But they seem determined not to, and it's hard to adjust. Take me, for instance. I am famously undergoing many hormonal changes. I could almost grow a fucking moustache overnight, if I wanted. This will surely help me get laid in the future. Right now, though, I've got a big problem with Rene.

Gay's no biggie these days, especially for a poet, where it's practically a professional necessity, and in Cambridge, where I live, it's more rule than exception, but it's a blow to learn a person is not who they appeared to be all your life. Seems people don't always know who they are even when they're old. And Dad was never interested in anything except poets, poetry, and apparently, desk clerks. Sorry, Dad, but it's true.

When I'm old, will I also care less how my kids feel? Maybe.

It's funny how, except for Rene, the rest of us hate our parents. Yet if they were to die suddenly, we'd be *verklemt*.

You don't know the half of it, says Rene.

You were adopted when you were eight months old, I point out. You don't remember your family of origin. You don't remember anything.

I don't rub it in, don't remind her that her parents *gave her away*. Wonder when that'll start happening here. Way things are going, people will soon be bidding for babies on e-bay.

I remember everything, she says, giving me a look that makes me want to bury my face in a hot waffle and just tear it to shreds. In truth, she has a remarkable memory. Lethal. She can practically recite all the presidents forward and backward while solving quadrilateral equations and strumming a guitar. I appreciate her qualities, I do.

It's also true that my mother is a little insane. If my father is crazy because he is a poet, my mother is because she is not. I know most teenage boys think this about their mothers. We did a straw poll and Harlan and Dickie sided with me. Rene remains the grateful one, saved from a Chinese orphanage by the benevolent white man. But consider the facts: my mother, who is drop dead gorgeous, has begun keening randomly. Seems random, anyway.

Something heavy going on below. Won't say what, beyond the obvious, i.e., Dad. Maybe that's enough.

There's more. For example, the time she took my father's collection of rare manuscripts – handwritten letters by Rilke, Wordsworth, and Baudelaire – and made origami swans out of them. Mom's skilled that way. She is an incredible origamist.

But numero uno on the short list of Mom's symptoms appeared six months ago when she began pulling out her own teeth. Two of them, anyway. She said she'd chewed more than she'd bitten off, and that she never wanted to draw blood again. The metaphor rang true. Mom had teeth and claws for judging folk.

2

The biographer Aubrey describes Lovelace as one of the handsomest men in England. So I ask: was Aubrey gay? *Je ne sais quoi*. I mean *pas*. *Je ne sais pas*.

Another source declared Richard was "the most admirable and beautiful person that ever eye beheld." Two men, just friends? Doesn't smell right.

Richard was heir to the great estates of Kent. No proof he palled around with the Archbishop of Canterbury whose primo episcop, St. Augustine, converted

King Aethelbert to Christianity in 597. That was when all the trouble began.

Don't get me started. It's hard to stay focused on a sunny day.