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44 True Things About Being Gone

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44 TRUE THINGS ABOUT BEING GONE

1.

At the Ethiopian restaurant on Baltimore Avenue, I can sit at the bar and not be bothered. On Sunday afternoons, I watch the owner and his wife and two children in the corner booth, eating the spongy flat *injera* bread with their hands. I stand at the electric jukebox and watch the trolleys slide by outside and pick songs that remind me of home. I wait as long as it takes for them to come on. I can wait for them all night.

2.

I live now in West Philadelphia, where the houses are jammed up against each other so close they share walls and the porches sit in a line you can look down. At home in Viney, everyone I knew grew up on Viney Mountain and everyone was white. Here, there are many black people who grew up here, and a few white people who didn't.

3.

Where I live now, I pretend I'm a vegetarian. The craigslist ad said: *vegetarian roommate wanted for communal house*. I buy meat anyway, in Styrofoam rectangles, and hide it in the back of the freezer behind the frozen broccoli.

4.

A young black man lives in the underground apartment below the Victorian house where I rent a room from the vegetarians. We are supposed to share our porch with him, but mostly he sits on his concrete steps. When he sits on his steps and I sit on the porch and the wind blows just right, I can smell his weed and hear him talking on the phone. He is a PhD student and his father is dying.

5.

"Bonjour and welcome to Chez Lincoln!" says Fred, my boss. I

work at a coffee kiosk in an underground train station, serving people rushing to and from commuter trains and rich people who work in the glass office building that sits on top of the station.

"Yes, hello," says Five Shot Americano, a man in a sleek dark suit. "I will have a venti Americano with five shots."

"Excellent, certainly, coming right up, sir," says Fred in customer voice. "But unfortunately here at Chez Lincoln we have only pequeños, medio, and grandes. What size is right for you?"

Five shot Americano is already talking on his bluetooth headset and looks at Fred, annoyed. Fred rushes to the cup dispenser, pulls out one cup of each size, rushes back to the counter, and holds them up. Five shot Americano points to the largest one and Fred rushes off to make it.

"Five shot Americano," says Fred to Lea so she can ring the guy up just in case she hasn't heard the conversation that went on right next to her.

"Did you see Halladay just positively *demolish* the Padres?" Fred is saying to Five Shot Americano as I come back out with milk. "Fourteen strikeouts, I mean wow!" but Five Shot Americano is already walking away.

"OK guys, we really need to think about efficiency," says Fred. "For example, put a cup under the coffee spout and then hand it off to someone else to put the lid on it."

All morning we run around and try to manage the line that never seems to get any shorter no matter how much we haul ass. Men who are small or fat like to order the dark roast coffee that Fred has named "Black Gold" because it sounds manly. Guarding the espresso machine all morning, Fred repeats the Halladay story to every customer that is forced to listen to him while waiting for their drink.

At 10:00, Iced Dirty Chai comes and flirts with Lea on the register. Later in the morning, Medium Mocha comes by, a fat man

in his early fifties who also gets a scone and sits on the side. I get his scone and put it on a plate and give him extra butter. He's not in a hurry. He's a composer with his own keyboard. He says he's been writing songs about giving it one more try. He asks me if I play any instruments, and I tell him I used to.

6.

I use the public train station bathroom, and when I come out of the stall there's a homeless woman in a long overcoat lining up all her shoes along the edge of the sinks. In Viney, West Virginia, there was a man named Jimmy who sat outside McCaul's gas station every day and told Catholic jokes.

"Which ones?" the homeless woman asks me, and I stand there for a long time, considering the shoes.

7.

A woman with kind eyes and a crew cut comes and orders a large Black Gold and I feel like someone has jacked the lights up. She wears a blue blazer and a skinny tie and has nice shoes. She carries a messenger bag with a seatbelt for a buckle. She waits patiently in line between two men wearing suits the same color of blue as hers.

8.

In the tenth grade, I slept at Carla Daniel's house every Friday night until her mother made us stop. There was a plastic lamppost in the Daniels' front yard that shone through the blinds in Carla's room and made lines like prison bars on the blankets as we hacked away at one another.

9.

When Large Black Gold comes back for a refill around 2:00, she talks to me as I'm pouring the sugar from the box into the dispens-

ers. She works in the glass office building above the train station, for a company that collects body parts for transplants. She's in charge of the livers. I ask her about her messenger bag with the seatbelt for a buckle, and she tells me she bikes to work.

"That must be nice," I say.

"It is," she says. "And also harrowing. Bicyclists are the number one liver givers."

10.

With the money from my first month at Chez Lincoln, I buy a cell phone, a squat squarish thing that slides forward to show a keyboard with tiny buttons when you push it with your thumbs.

11.

I sit around with the vegetarians and drink their home-brewed beer. They are all thin, all runners, all working for organizations with the word "community" in them. Two of them speak fluent Spanish.

"How's your job?" one of them asks me, and I can tell she pities me, and the question stinks, a smell like something dying.

12.

I use my tiny phone to call Carla Daniels. I get a message saying the number isn't in service. I dial the number for my house, hold my breath, press the green *send* button. My sister's voice comes on, saying to leave a message for her or Mom, then a too-long silence, then the beep. I tell them I'm doing good, ask after them and the new horses Mom is training. Ask if they know anything about Carla Daniels. Maybe she moved? I'd like to write her, I say. I speak my new address out loud. Love you guys, I say. Then I hang up.

13.

I get a drink of water and stand over the sink. I feel all scraped out

but the tears won't come.

14.

I cook a small beef patty in an iron skillet that belongs to one of the vegetarians and eat it sitting in a lawn chair on the porch.

The young PhD student from the basement apartment climbs the stairs with a book under his arm.

"Oh," I say, startling a little.

"I have just as much right to be here as you," he says. Then a little softer, "That's my apartment down there."

"Right," I say. "Hello." He takes a seat in another lawn chair a few feet away. He looks to be a little older than me, maybe twenty-five, and wears dark jeans and a red hoodie. He's reading a big book that looks brand new. He's struggling to hold it open and still smoke his cigar. I finish my patty in a few bites and get up to go.

"Stay," he says. "You're not bothering anyone." I sit back down. I listen to the sound of a police car getting closer and then farther away. A low-riding Lincoln town car goes by, with a shot muffler.

15.

The boy from Viney who thought he'd marry me had a Subaru with a shot muffler. We tried to fix it with paste, but it still clanked.

16.

Large Black Gold is tall, possibly six foot. She comes around more and more, bringing a big blue glass mug for me to fill. One day, I pull a double shift, and she is waiting for me at six.

"You need happy hour," she says. "And you need it bad." I don't argue.

We go to a crowded bar in the fancy business neighborhood around the train station.

"I'm going to get you something good," she says, and puts her hand at the nape of my neck just below my ponytail.

17.

When you go underground, when you move, in a standard cab pickup truck, from your home on Viney Mountain to a place where no one knows anything about you, not one person, not one thing, when you really make a home for yourself there, alone, at the bar, it can be so good.

18.

At an Italian restaurant in an alley, Large Black Gold and I eat penne Bolognese with rosemary and heavy cream, and slices of mozzarella oozing fresh water and salt. Large Black Gold takes out bottle after bottle of wine from her messenger bag, and the waiter opens them and pours them into big, heavy glasses. Oil runs down my chin and onto my napkin, and Large Black Gold laughs. There is tiramisu, Limoncello on the house. I thank and thank the waiter each time he refills our water glasses.

19.

When we fuck, my fingers smell like coffee and places I will never travel: Ethiopia, Costa Rica, Sumatra, Chiapas.

20.

Here, in this city where you can't see the sky, it goes from light to dark and back again in the strangest way.

21.

Large Black Gold drives me home, a classy touch. It rains and she plays good jazz. My knees are pushed up against the dashboard of her old black BMW. The music is full in the car and the windshield wipers hit back and forth, and there is the brassy sound of a cym-

bal being hit lightly, over and over again.

22.

In front of my house, I consider her face, which looks straight ahead. I decide to tell her about the music. I tell her I used to play banjo, that I sing a little. Then I tell her that I left my banjo on Viney Mountain, following rules I made up, but now I'm sick without it. She looks at me, smiles, changes the radio station, and when I don't say anything else, she kisses me then sits back in her seat, waiting. I pull the door handle, put a foot on the cool blacktop, walk up the stairs to my door. But she doesn't drive away yet; she's making sure I get inside. Standing on my porch, with my key in the heavy wood door, looking at her wet black car in the tree-lined street, the simple fact comes to me, truer than true: this woman, she is, as my sister would say, going to fuck my shit up.

23.

"Craig," says the PhD student holding out his hand. This time he is already on the porch when I get there.

"Kendra," I say, taking his hand, which smells like Old Spice and cigars.

"You a friend of these girls?" he says, gesturing to my house.

"Not really," I say. He nods, looks back at his book.

"They're all vegetarians," I say.

"That's rough," he says.

"You couldn't do it?"

"I did it for too damn long."

"Guilt?" I ask. "Religion?"

"Sort of. We were Rastas. Rastafarians? Well, my ex-wife still is. That's how I was raised, but not anymore."

"What are you reading?" I ask.

"*Madame Bovary*. Ever read it?"

"Nope. You're a student, right?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Heard you on the phone," I say.

"Creepy. At least you're honest," he says. "It's alright, I get to read a lot and teach and talk to people about ideas." He pauses, puffs on the cigar and lets out the smoke. "I guess you heard me talking about my dad then, too?"

"Yeah."

He nods. "He has cirrhosis of the liver. Do you know what that is?"

"That's probably the only medical term I know," I say.

"Someone close to you?"

"Everyone."

His cigar smoke wafts over to my side of the porch. There's a sound like a car backfiring, then the same sound again.

"Gunshots," says Craig, and we listen. "Come on. I'll fix you some breakfast. Sun'll be up soon."

"I should get some sleep," I say.

"I've got bacon," he says.

24.

Down in Craig's apartment, books explode from the laundry hamper, the kitchen cabinets, the floorboards. He turns on the olive-colored stove and heats up a cast iron pan.

As the bacon sizzles and the toast toasts, Craig tells me he has a seven-year-old son named Arnie who lives half the time with his ex-wife in their old house in North Philadelphia, where everyone on the block is Rasta.

"Why did you move?" I ask.

"I used to go with my ex and her mom when they went to get their dreads tightened," says Craig. "I sat outside on the bench

and read. These old guys on the corner would come over and talk to me about our people, about the revolution, about how empty and screwed up the rest of the world was. They told me it was good that I liked to read. They told me it was good I was smart. But the more I read, the more I didn't agree with what people were saying at the meetings and on the corners. I wanted to go find out for myself what was so bad about everywhere else."

Craig puts two plates on the kitchen table. He pulls out a chair for me and I sit in it. He hands me a yellow cloth napkin and spreads his own over his big knees.

"Where are you from anyway?" he asks. I get ready to say, West Virginia. I feel my whole self, down to the bone, spin again and again around one thought that is caught in the center: this life that I have today, here in this city, alone, I will not survive it. I cannot endure it. Not one more year. Not one more day. Not one more minute.

My cheeks are wet.

Craig's watching me. He puts down his fork.

"It's good bacon, but it's not that good," he says, smiling, and I laugh, and pick up a piece of bacon and swallow it, and then take another bite and then another, until there's nothing left on the plate but blue and white flowers.

25.

Fred's anecdote of the day is the story of a little girl in South Africa who had third degree burns over eighty percent of her body. The odds were bad, but her doctors used a kind of spray gun to re-grow her skin and save her life.

"These are amazing times we live in," says Fred to Medium Mocha, "when it's possible to create new skin."

26.

Large Black Gold's shoulder blades scraped against my cheek when she turned away, briefly, in sleep. She grows there, in my throat.

27.

Large Black Gold is only ever free on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings, and I spend Monday through Saturday afternoon holding my breath.

28.

I learn to hate my cell phone. Its small squarish screen blinking blankly at me. When I'm at home, I put it in a tin and put the tin under my bed.

29.

I start spending my afternoons after work with Craig. He reads me Willa Cather and Susan Sontag and Thomas Hardy, and I alphabetize his record collection. Then he smokes weed and reads by himself on the asphalt steps, but he lets me play any record I want as many times as I want to hear it.

30.

We go song for song, playing each other our essentials: my Stanley Brothers for his Bob Marley, my Bill Monroe for his Jimmy Cliff, my Del McCoury Band for his Peter Tosh.

31.

Craig's ex-wife drops off his son Arnie at his apartment one day while I am there. Arnie wears a loose-fitting embroidered shirt made of heavy cloth over his blue jeans, and carries a big backpack. The ex-wife is a short woman with dreadlocks down to her shins.

"You ever have locks as long as that?" I ask Craig.

"Just about," he says.

Arnie tells me he wants to be a city planner. On a slab of

asphalt that juts sharply up out of the sidewalk, Arnie builds a city of cement chunks he's picked up around our block. He's divided the pieces by size and put all the big ones in one pile and the small ones in another. Between them he's smeared blue Crest toothpaste.

"It's a river," he says.

"I see that," I say. "Where's the bridge?"

"No bridge," says Arnie, munching on a Cheez-It. "They have to stay on the side they're on."

32.

I buy a bike at a porch sale and clamber awkwardly on top so Large Black Gold and I can ride together along the Schuylkill. We go over the bridge that separates West Philadelphia from the rest of the city and she asks me if I see, in the distance, four small boys standing at the river's edge. I say I don't so she'll stop peddling and put her arm around me and point.

33.

A letter arrives from my mother, but when I open it, all it says is: *Carla Daniels left the mountain, joined the Peace Corps?* Carla's email address is written in sharpie at the bottom of the page.

34.

I email Carla Daniels. I tell her I think it's tricky, this business of moving away from home. I tell her I get confused, that reasons I left become reasons I could have stayed. I ask her to tell me one true thing about what it's like to be gone.

35.

The space where Large Black Gold lives in my body has settled down and expanded. It's moved from my throat and lives now somewhere just behind my sternum. There are other things stored there, and they're jostling each other. Carla Daniels is in there.

The boy who thought he'd marry me is in there. Also, the moment when you're sitting in a circle with friends about to play music.

36.

When Saturday night comes, I look for clues in Large Black Gold's apartment. It's clean. Brightly colored walls with nothing on them. We sit in her living room, watching an old Western on TV, and she puts her hand in my crotch. She touches everything there, and the blood won't stop flooding my body. I picture the curlicue f shape of the sound holes on a mandolin. She finds where one kind of skin stops and another kind begins. She tells me how I give myself away, easy as a book. I breathe out, all that weight. With Carla Daniels, what I remember is fear. Correction: what I remember is a mashup of fear and sex. Here, today, I feel something, way down in my gut. Not like sex. The word I would use is comfort.

37.

Osama Bin Laden is found and killed. Fred tells customers lines from last night's Letterman, the theme being what Bin Laden might have said just before he died. Fred's favorite is: "I need a house full of Navy SEALs like I need a hole in the head." He tells this to Large Black Gold as she's waiting for her espresso. She laughs.

38.

Large Black Gold calls on a Tuesday night, late, and asks to come over. The vegetarians are already in their beds. I sneak her up the old wooden steps of my house, the sound traveling through every floorboard. She takes her contacts out in the big tiled bathroom and looks at me, blinking, in her socks.

39.

There is the way Philadelphia looks sometimes, biking home late at night across the bridge. Below me, on I-76, cars rush east to the

city and west to the mountains. The lights of big office buildings on the water. There is the way all that light feels good on my eyeballs and in my body. I can get to thinking: this big gorgeous city, this is where I live now, this is where I live.

40.

Carla Daniels writes back. She tells me that it's good to be gone, and also, agony. She tells me it rains more in Cameroon than it ever did in West Virginia, but that the sky can go from sunny to pouring in ten seconds flat in a way that reminds her. She tells me that every day, in the small village where she is stationed with the Peace Corps, she climbs the Moabi tree in her front yard.

Here, she writes, is one true thing about being gone: I climb the tree to the top. I sit and pray to God. I pray that I will fall out of the tree and break something or hurt myself so bad that they will have to send me home. Then, I climb back down.

41.

"I don't actually live here," says Large Black Gold, over a nightcap in her apartment.

"In this apartment?" I say.

"In Philadelphia," she says.

"I know," I say. She knocks back the two fingers of Knob Creek and goes to sit on the window sill. "Where do you live?" I ask.

"A little bit of everywhere," she says. "Phoenix, Albuquerque, San Francisco, Madison. I go wherever the livers go."

"And I guess next you're gonna tell me you have a girl in every port? A wife and kid?"

"Not the kid part," she says quietly. We let that one sink into the air a while.

"Why did you even call then?" I say. "What am I even do-

ing here?"

"I don't know," she says. "I guess, I didn't expect you to matter."

"Because I work in a train station? Because I'm from a hick town?"

"Because I'm married," she says. "And when you're married, no one else is supposed to matter," and I go and get my coat.

She walks me to the train station, but on the way we cut down a cobblestone alley where people are waiting in line. The alley's pulsing. I can feel Large Black Gold hesitating as we pass, and in a few more steps she stops completely.

"I know things are fucked," she says, "but do you want to dance?" I say sure because there's more to be said and we haven't said it yet. I follow her down the long velvet-roped hallway and through one set of doors where the music's quiet, then another where the music's louder, then into a huge room filled with pink light. I take it in like a 360 degree windstorm – the giant white bulb above our heads that is shaped like a hot air balloon, the balcony that wraps all the way around the room, the electronic music that seems to come from the hot air balloon, the people every way I turn, and nowhere to put my feet. Large Black Gold takes my hand and pulls me toward the bar, and for the first time, as we pass by couples making out and men in suspenders jolting their knees in place, I notice that she is shorter than me. At the bar, it's so loud we can't talk, which is perfect, so I just let her buy me round after round and we stare out at the crowd. We switch to drinking shots. The room goes from mainly looking pink to mainly looking orange. Zebra spots and spinning stars are projected on the hot air balloon. The music changes to something with more of a beat.

"I love this song," Large Black Gold yells in my ear. I smile, but I just lean there. I don't owe her anything. She starts flopping her arms, dancing on her own. I start doing what I think is danc-

ing, or is at least the kind of dancing she wants. We do the robot. She grabs a hold of her ankle. We laugh.

Two girls come on stage, one singing into a rotary phone, the other on electric guitar. The singer's face is pale and a little fat. Splotches of pink, rash-like, sit high in her cheeks. My teeth bite into the thick shot glass. We get crowded into a corner, against a big speaker. We stay there, in the static. We want to hear and not to hear. We want to dance.

42.

And I think: this is how I will come to know people from now on, in cavernous rooms flooded with light.

43.

The girl is still singing into the rotary phone. She keeps perfectly still as everything else in the room moves around her. We look for any way up, and a man with arms covered in lions pulls us there, onto a kind of platform. We stomp on the floor like a last ditch line dance. The girl singers' flesh jiggles in the bright light. Large Black Gold gets down on her knees in front of the band.

"What are you doing?" I yell at her, looking down at this woman who can't give me any piece of what it is I need. And then I get on my knees too. It's called closing your eyes. It's called music. It's called giving of your whole heart.

44.

When I get home, Craig is smoking a cigar on the porch and reclining on a blue corduroy couch he's dragged out here. I'm drunk so I tell him everything about Large Black Gold, and he is too, so he tells me about his father who is now not dying, but dead, and his ex-wife who says that him turning his back on their lifestyle is one of life's few unforgivable things.

I ask him if he wants to go to the Ethiopian restaurant and sit at the bar.

"It's closed now," he says. "Too late. But there is another. I and I will go sometime." He stops talking, puts a hand across his mouth, rubs his beard.

"What?" I say, yawning.

"It's an old Rasta thing. You don't say 'you and me.' 'I and I' is what you say when you're talking to other people in the cause, other exiles. It means we're alone together."

I don't ask him if I can drive him to the funeral and he doesn't ask me if he can make me breakfast, but we understand the other is offering and also saying yes.

Craig lights another cigar and I take off my coat.

Down the block, a car backfires twice, then once more.

We sit there for a long time. We sit there until we can't hear any sound coming from the street but cicadas. We sit there until it's not pitch-black night anymore, but blue-black dawn. Then, we get up.