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Clashing

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clashing.

by courtney coburn

For a moment, in a Dublin club, I forgot about Freddy for real. Not for long, but entirely. She was either perfect for me or the picture of me. Her name was Allie. “London Calling” brought us together, waiting for our separate drinks. Heads banging, four fists pounding out of time on the sticky bar, we bumped into each other. Then we introduced ourselves instead of pulling away. It wasn’t easy with shrill, excited screeching and clumsy dancers encircling us from all sides. A woman tripped, and two-dollar vodka mixed with warm countertop lemonade rained down on us, a joyous yellow aura. *Come out of the cupboard, you boys and girls.* We toasted Jameson to our health, “sláinte.”

“Who are you?”

“Who’s asking?” I replied.

“Someone who’s trying to leave this place. Can I take you away with me?”

“We’re both already away,” I said, watching my fellow compatriot brush away a piece of blue hair that had slipped through her hoop nose ring.

“Exactly! Half the work’s already done. Now, how do I convince you to go away with me? Like, the hell away from this bar?” *The ice age is coming, the sun is zooming in.* She walked backward, looking toward the door and back to see if she was tempting me.

“You’ll have to buy me dinner,” I said.

“I’d do that, but I call fish and chips at three in the morning first breakfast.” She was getting further away and nodded to the door one last time, “Come on.”

I rolled my eyes but set down the whiskey tumbler and squeezed through the few grinding crop tops to get to her. She grabbed my hand and started walking.

Her right leg’s tattoos crept out of her shoe all the way up to her kneecap, like a stocking. I cursed myself for being too intoxicated to take her in. What was that tattoo? Was her hand

sweaty or was that mine? Did she hear those last lines of the song the same way I did? Did she find it to be the fateful soundtrack to our stumbling into each other? Or was I drunk?

Freddy put the Clash on for me when we first met. But I wasn’t going to think about that. “You like curry chips?” she asked after we were inside a lit up, light blue diner.

“No, I like normal chips with garlic mayo!”

“Disgusting. We’ll get ‘em both,” she told the grungy cashier.

He averted eye contact with us as I leaned against the plexiglass divider near the register. Allie planted her hand on the counter and leaned into me, resting a bit of her thigh unshyly against mine.

“Is it too early to ask what you’ll want for second breakfast?” she whispered, looking me straight and almost soberly in the eye. A paper hat and faded plaid apron flashed in my periphery and broke our gaze. Allie paid and tipped him. “Go raibh míle, my man!”

She was close. Almost thanked him a million, in Irish, but undercut it with an American accent and general air of disregard. He didn’t seem to care though, having gotten a taste of American gratuity and even a bit of groping. Allie handed me the fat brown sack, saturated in grease and I giggled looking over my shoulder as we left the diner. He looked away so quickly, he almost jumped. “So, Greta, you’re coming home with me, aren’t you?” We walked over to a green, wooden bench and popped the tops off our dipping sauces. Allie ate handfuls, not bites, and laughed with her mouth full. Now that was someone that could teach me to control my happiness, to create it even. She licked a spot of ranch off her finger. I kissed her while she still tasted of buttermilk.

* * *

I woke the next morning wrapped haphazardly in a white fur, silk lined blanket.

The morning sun streamed into my eyes, but the girl next to me didn't stir. A collection of vintage Nintendo and Tamagotchi toys decorated a shelf. A Royal Air Force parachute canopied directly overhead on the high ceiling. My clothes strewn about, half mixed into Allie's suitcase, the other half not immediately visible. I shifted under the weight of her leg hooked around me, inspecting her shin bone scenery as best as I could without waking her.

It glowed next to the white fur, its colors vivid and exciting. It was all underwater. Green squares mosaicked to create the shell of a tortoise swimming through her blue lapping skin. A pink octopus writhed on the broadest part of her calf, and a koi fish glided along her ankle. The other leg had two small tattoos: an upside down cross on the thin skin beneath her ankle bone and a Wu-Tang sign across her Achilles' tendon. The cross was homemade, comprised of faded lines formed out of single needle pricks. I wanted to touch part of it. I wanted my own. I was jealous of whoever had given it to her. Why didn't I ever get that carried away with someone? There was no chance Fred would ever do something like that, neither of us had any tattoos. He would hate to have ever hurt me, and there was a time I wouldn't have imagined hurting him either.

"Do you want to check if there's tea?" she asked before I knew she was awake.

I pressed my body back against hers. She rubbed her nose on my ear before kissing it and sitting up.

The Airbnb host, Broden, apparently always stayed in the spare room, even while guests were there. Not unheard of, but not what I imagined our morning to be. He made us each a mug of tea. Allie and I sat smoking cigarettes on his window seat, cross-legged. The skin on my knees was hot where they pressed against hers. We blew smoke until we were burning filters and then tossed them.

Seven stories up we watched our butts fall, our torsos following through the window. We were giddy if the smoking ends made it near a dumpster and guilty as hell when innocent strangers narrowly dodged the cherry. A quick,

bright firework followed by a mini explosion as they yelled indiscernible curses in thick accents, wagging their fists up at the seventh floor. We laughed, ducking back into the apartment to escape.

Broden sat on a leopard couch and observed, his bare chest boldly exposed, wiry hairs and all. He wore tie-dyed parachute pants and apparently couldn't tell how hideous his man feet were or how unpleasant I found his company. But the excitement that smoking indoors brought us simple Americans sure did amuse him.

"Really? So, you'd walk seven flights for every fag?" Broden asked.

"There aren't any seven-story buildings to navigate where I come from, but you risk frostbite going outside for each one," I added as he and I sat awkwardly, alone for the first time.

"Well, wherever we smoke them, we don't call them that," said Allie, lighting a new one on her way to refill her tea. She was wearing retro yellow cross-country shorts with a white stripe down the side. They were tight enough to know she hadn't put her underwear on yet. Her high white socks with yellow lines at the top matched too nicely for a girl who could not have possibly done school sports.

Broden did. You could feel the banal soccer stories this guy wanted to tell by the way he leaned back on the couch, chin up, legs spread. Allie wouldn't be into dudes like that; I sure wasn't. Fred was laid back, nerdy even, boring maybe, but he wasn't a douche. Whatever the case, her sporty tracksuit captured both of our attention. His gaze was uninterrupted by my noticing it.

"After you two leave, I'm going home to Scotland, up the Highlands, to a small town like that. The Lost Village is its name." Broden licked the seam of a joint he was rolling and smoothed it down with a thick, red finger. "Well, we live outside the Forest of the Lost Village. No one's lived in any of its original structures in over a century. They're magic... fighting nature and time."

Allie was back quickly then, sitting flush at Broden's side, asking about her next adventure.

I left to pack for my own. Two tiny blue buns tied on the top of her head and the crop-top from the night before made for a lovely last picture of my dream girl. I looked up to the seventh floor from the ground, and there she was waving. *I never felt so much alike, alike, alike...* I could almost hear the Clash. I waved back and laughed when she tried to hit me with her cigarette butt. She seemed like she needed the Highlands or Broden. Whatever she needed, I started to realize what I didn't.

I didn't need to look for answers in someone who hadn't found them. And who has? I didn't need something from her or Fred, or from the world. I needed to be something. Preferably, happy. Then, maybe, I could figure the rest out and love them just for the sake of it.

* * *

Allie's vintage, high-waisted, cotton underwear flashed in the bus's window and on the back of my eyelids. I was nodding off. I'd had little sleep and a rushed morning in my hotel room packing. I dreamt of Freddy begging me not to leave at the airport, asking if he could come with as I cruelly laughed and rolled through a metal detector. A movie played on the flight. Allie and Fred starred on screen, eating fish and fries on a bench. They laughed and fucked, and their faces blurred into one hideous person. As it focused I started to recognize who it was. The breaks wretched beneath me and I was startled out of my sleep. My frightened face sharpened, looking back at me in the window's reflection.

A black car had clipped the curb and flipped upside down in front of us. *Meltdown expected, the wheat is growin' thin...* A man across the aisle from me looked at his girlfriend only briefly before rushing down the stairs and out of the bus's accordion doors. That was something Freddy would do. A hand fell limply through the open window into a pile of broken glass. *Engines stop running, but I have no fear...* All around, people crunched the numbers. Would they miss their flight? *'Cause London is drowning, and I, I live by the river...*

I wanted to stay with the girl. I couldn't get the notion out of my head as we approached the airport. She was helped from the car and laid on

the ground. *Forget it brother, you can go it alone...* Our bus had pulled away. I didn't know if she would be ok, or if the next car would stay with her until an ambulance arrived. I thought she might've been on her way to the airport, and that maybe the accident saved her from her destination. Perhaps, she wasn't meant to go by herself. Or, maybe, she wasn't meant to go at all.

At the airport, I stared into my backpack. I couldn't unpack it all again; I knew my wallet wasn't there. Thank God, I'd kept my debit card in the cellophane of my cigarette pack, and I never let those out of my sight. I tried never to take my passport out of its secure pocket inside my carry on either.

So, I had some money, but the majority was on travel and credit cards left behind. I could technically make it to France, but I wouldn't have enough to stay. It was fucked up, after everything, I couldn't end the adventure on my terms. I powered on the cell phone that I used sparingly. Allie had written her number on one of the back pages of my journal, right beneath a doodle of "Freddy the Fox."

"Hello?" Allie answered.

"It's Greta. Are you already up in the Highlands?"

"Yeah, we got here this morning. You should see the cows they have. They look like fuckin teddy bears," she comfortably ticked on. I wanted to listen to her snarky, sexy voice, but I was all too familiar with cows. I wasn't calling to chat.

"I think I left my wallet at Broden's. Did you happen to see it there?"

"I certainly did. And you can certainly come and get it from me!"

"I can't believe I left it. Holy fuck, what do I do?"

"You could, you know, come here. I'll mail it to you otherwise. Anywhere you need it sent. But I do want you to come."

I'd been traveling around this area for a while and knew it couldn't cost more than a hundred dollars to get to Smirisary Village. I had just enough money to get there if I left Freddy waiting for me in France. It irritated me that she sounded excited at my misfortune.

“My mom’s calling, I’ll call back and let you know.” Half a second after I’d said it, the phone fell out of my hand and landed face first on the concrete floor of the airport café. I cried into the triangle of my elbow, hunched over a sticky table.

“Oh, my heart. Dear, I couldn’t help but overhear.” The concern in her Irish accent made me smile.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be making a scene,” I offered. When I looked up, two soft, white-headed women cocked their necks at me in concern.

“Your wallet’s gone, yeah? Safe though?” said the same voice that called me dear. She had a tangerine shade of lipstick and bright blue eyes.

“That’s right, only a week before I’m supposed to be home.” I was cut short by the next burst of dramatic tears. I didn’t want them to worry too much, but also kind of wanted one of them to hold me on her lap like an old nanny of mine used to.

“Can I give you some money?” the other woman asked. “My daughter’s in the States, and I’d hope someone would do the same for her.”

“That is so nice, the nicest thing anyone has ever offered me, but I have enough to get where I need to be. I can’t shake the feeling that these are all bad signs.” I gestured to the shattered screen of my phone. Then, my tears came for another reason.

“I must get ya something before my daughter comes to pick us up, so choose,” said the orange mouthed one. She winked and pinched the bottom of my chin, so I knew it was time to lift it.

“A hot chocolate to-go. I’m sure that’d help.” I attempted my brave smile.

She came back with the largest size they had and an M&M covered Rice Krispy treat. When they left, I took my cocoa out to smoke a cigarette. I looked at the passport in my hand and then at the line of taxis in front of me. An ad on the side of one touted a sinister silhouette and the words “Black Siren Body Art.” I longed to be enchanted again. Staring into the waters of her skin, under her spell. I snapped my head at

an ambulance that wailed by, and when I turned back the tattoo ad and the cab, were gone.

* * *

“Um, excuse me, do you know which line I go in?” I asked a fit blonde woman in a blue pantsuit uniform.

“EU is automatic, everything else, over there,” she said in a surprisingly German accent and pointed towards a line positioned next to the glass wall.

“You look pretty young to be traveling alone,” said a girl my age. I’d been stuck stagnant next to her since un-boarding the plane. We were almost to the front of customs. I was shocked anyone would dare break out small talk when we were so close to escaping each other.

“I shouldn’t be for long. Hoping someone’s out there with flowers,” I quipped back.

“That them?” She pointed at the glass wall I’d kept my back turned to.

I whipped around to look. He was bald, and I had to laugh. The man seemed offended at that, and I should’ve felt worse than I did. I was too caught up searching the rest of the room for someone who wasn’t there.

“No, but now I’m thinking about going home with the old fucker.” I returned her sly smirk.

Once in the waiting area, there were no flowers. The only people there were speaking French, too thin and polished to be mistaken for Americans. Maybe Freddy had gotten in an accident, or maybe, he had met someone. Perhaps, I admitted to myself, when I was learning that I needed him, he learned not to need me.

In that case, I could leave and pretend I never showed. I could find another Allie and keep drifting. But I’d come all that way to do my searching. It was time to buck up and accept what I’d found.

* * *

I left the bathroom stall and washed my face. I rubbed a wet paper towel into my ponytail where hardened lemonade remained. Some mascara I’d failed to remove had drifted like pieces of sand into the crusty inner corners of my eyes. I wasn’t about to let them water,

besides my best justifications. I stood firm for an hour in the face of countless beautiful, judgmental, impossibly happy foreign faces. If I could do that, I could enter and leave that bathroom, make a graceful exit from the airport and maybe, yes definitely, get to the hotel before I cried. *Quit holding out and draw another breath...*

I didn't. But I made it to the taxicab. I bawled to the dismay of a concerned and annoyed Englishman driving. He didn't love my dramatic coughing and hyperventilation either. When we neared the hostel, where I'd sleep by myself in a twin bed in a room shared with strangers, he turned up the radio a bit. I stopped crying so I could hear the words.

*London calling, yes, I was there, too
And you know what they said? Well, some of it
was true!*

*London calling at the top of the dial
And after all this, won't you give me a smile?*

He parked and handed me my bag. I made sure to meet his gaze.

"Thank you," I said, but couldn't quite get myself to smile.

He seemed to recognize the meaningful squint I managed, though and smiled back.



boy ▲
by mary mccormick