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This Body, Long Distance

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Although I am twenty-five, hardly the nasty girl I was at eighteen, my body is dewy-slim and bashful, and I walk with the consciousness of muscle and bone and patella-clicks, like a nubile ballerina in clashing yellow stockings performing for her family. This is why the video Dino is making of me right now in this haunted warehouse will turn out like kiddy-porn. I have never overwhelmed a man with my womanliness, only aroused the pervert in him.

I have a garbage bag over my upper body, with a hole for breathing. Dino thought it would be interesting if I flailed around on the futon as if I were exorcising a devil, the mud-green plastic crinkling, reflecting.

“What about ripping the plastic with your fingernails,” Dino suggests. He is strong, that Dino. His directions and mastery of the camera make me think of sex. When I do the things he tells me to do I feel myself swelling inside like those red gut-balloons Eskimo kids make from caribou—playful like that; nevertheless, obscene.

He doesn't want crotch. If I could see I would find a prude-Dino, avoiding my bush, zooming down to my shrimp-curl toes and the hieroglyph tattooed on my ankle when the thrashing yanks the bag above my belly button.

“I don't want this to be nasty,” he explained
beforehand, “though knowing you, there will no doubt be an element of kink.”

Dino: a boyfriend, never a lover. Two blind smooches, fifteen years old, memorized my love poem and jumped on his skateboard. He was almost my prom date.

He is growing a Rasputin-black goatee and a senior art student's contrived bravado, though I believe in his vision, the way he stares at people beyond the appropriate time, transfixed like a kid, like a hungry dog.

The political part of the video is when I push lipstick and compacts and tampax and earrings out of the hole as if excreting symbols of socialized femininity. Then I tear at this industrial cocoon until my arms burst out, my breasts like alien eyes.

“How 'bout my head?” I ask.

“Yeah, your head. But keep your eyes closed then slowly open them, like a kitten birth.”

And so I claw through, glad that I am snookered, bold in this sense, feline-furious, because this could be the silliest thing ever or the coolest. You have to trust. When my head pops out we are both jarred. The lights are hot, I am sticky, and the appearance of my human face, doused with the shock of exposure, seems more absurd than the bag antics. I wonder who's going to see this video, then how come Dino and I never really talked about the afterwards, how come I'm so naked, so childishly bare, and he still shuts the door tightly when he pees.

There is a wind outside, there is a tin can wind chime. We are in the bad part of town. Whenever I walk to Dino's I listen closely to my footsteps—do they make clicks and clops, feminine noises, or do they pound like adrenaline, a pissed speed?
“Kat,” he says, “you were perfect. I can't wait to add the music. Want a gardenburger or something?”

We eat on his hard futon and it's okay if the pickle juice dribbles on the bedspread. He shakes his size twelve Converse foot as he thinks.

“I was tempted to exploit you,” he says, smiling. “But you are so sweet-looking, I don't know, I didn't want to be some wanker wanking around. I could make a hot erotic video but I'd rather do something cerebral. You looked good, violent and delicate.”

“You looked good too,” I say, then roll away from him.

If you look me in the eye you will see that something is askew: one eyeball wanders distractedly like a dreamer while the other stares hard, making up for its twin's nomadic lapses. I am told the effect is sexy and confusing. It is as if I am not completely there.

There are other tricks my body plays. It starts at my sacrum and ripples up, my spine like a corkscrew, throwing my torso this way and that: left ribcage jutting, right shoulder lower. Scoliosis. It curls on the tongue, it is like some code sent in waves when I was forming: as in the game Telephone, the message was misheard, altered, each translation playing off the last, an earnest gibberish.

My body, an experiment in communication.

“Look at me,” my mother says.
And I do. The woman whose breasts I sucked, now white-haired, wistful, wearing an acrylic vest over a sweater. My mother's eyes have never been icy,
always warm like toasted almonds. She is symmetrical.

“I think I'm drying up.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“There's nothing to do in this house.”

It is a house on top of a hill. The mailbox is a quarter-mile walk. There is a cornfield, high Douglas Firs, a rarely used Jacuzzi. There should be more pets than Andrew, the turtle dove. It is not the house I grew up in, it is far more luxurious than that little shack that tilted and made doors swing open, water slide westward.

“It would be nice to have a grandchild,” she says, as if it were the first time she's wanted this; we know better.

“It would be nice to be married first,” I answer.

I am her last one, I wish I could help, I am often torn between wanting to live with her forever in this country castle and fleeing, breaking the bond which makes me call her twice weekly, compare myself to her, wear her hand-me-downs (though I would not wear the red acrylic vest).

She has a tired look but she is still so sensual: round, seesawing hips, muscle on her thighs; a way of moving casually, as if movement were only transportation, not a sly language.

“I had a dream last night that I had a baby,” I say, joining her at the window, our sunset ritual.

“I had black-and-white photos of me nursing it, my breasts were huge and tan, I looked so grown-up and beautiful, I thought. And you and Dad were proud of me, even though I didn't have a husband. But I couldn't decide on a name. I couldn't even remember my favorite girl-names, it was a question of symbolism and sound, deciding my girl's future. I kept landing on names I never really liked—Marla, Bianca. The dream
became annoying and all my happiness got
overshadowed by my search for the perfect name.”

“I named you after myself,” my mother says.
“And now you are Kat and I am still Elizabeth.”

Katherine Elizabeth: As a little girl I never wore
skirts or dresses because I didn't want the boys to see
my panties when I climbed the monkey bars. That was
the only reason. I never explained it. When my mother
took me to Sears I just requested Toughskins in girly
colors, acting disinterested in the Holly Hobby dresses
that came with matching bonnets. As I grew into slim
jeans with sequins on the pockets, my blonde hair
always tangled, my name, Katherine Elizabeth, still
seemed top-heavy, an enormous pink velvet bow on a
tiny head.

I became Kat at sixteen, when my sister moved
to New York, my best friend lied to me, and Mickey T.
got me so excited on a cemetery lawn, midsummer, I
thought: there is no turning back, I am sold.

Dino was editing the video when Sandra, a
colleague, snuck a peek and launched into criticism.
He's telling me this as we sit in the courtyard outside
the school, sipping charred coffee. Rust-colored leaves
stick to our butts; the sunny, northwestern chill of
autumn.

Dino says: “She walks in and goes, ‘Whoa,
porno!’ , watches the last part, and says, ‘Dino, this is
mono-conceptual.’ So I said, ‘Okay, tell me the
concept.’ And she goes, ‘It's eager propaganda for a
man testing out his feminist wings, it's a little young,
and who is that girl, she looks like a twelve-year-old.’
We actually had a good talk, it didn't bother me. But in
case you're wondering, you turned out bitchin', and I
owe you."
   "Nah, just give me the master when you're through."

He pauses uncertainly.
"Do you mean that? You don't trust me? You think I'd mass-market this ten-minute exercise, to hell with our friendship?"
"No, goofy. I'd just feel safer if I knew where it was at all times."
"I guess that's fair," he says. "People can be so evil."

He pulls out a pack of cigarettes from his motorcycle jacket and sticks one in his mouth like a lollipop. I am aghast.
"Hey! Since when are you a smoker!"

He narrows his eyes, pushes his black shaggy hair off his handsome Navajo brow, and says, "Since I started filming naked nymphets writhing around in plastic bags."

"But Dino," I whine.
"But what? Aw, it's just an experiment. As you will note, these are generic Lights, not exactly high-powered tar sticks. I won't do it around you if you don't want me to."
"I'm sorry. It's just so unlike you, Mr. Broccoli."

"Yeah, Mr. whole wheat mac-and-cheese with turkey franks. I only go so far."
"I thinks it's all those art students you're hanging out with. They all smoke probably."
"Keep this up and I'm going to start teasing you about looking like a secretary."
"Dino, I hate you."
"I hate you, too. Are you as turned on as I am?"
"More."
We look at each other with theatrical lust, about to draw together for a smearing, ridiculous, sitcom kiss, then something makes us freeze. We stand up, brush the leaves off our pant seats, and giggle nervously.

“Just remember: I’ve seen you in a compromising position,” he warns, grinning. “No other tight-assed bucking bronco has that claim to fame.”

The part about looking like a secretary has a ring of truth. I wear blazers and gold earrings and tortoise shell glasses for typing. But it is all a disguise, my joke on the corporate wasteland. I have no threshold for sleaze, I am constantly churning out superior little fantasies involving my co-workers in the Marketing Department. I have also been known to push the dress code to the point of getting my palm rapped by Human Resources. It's all such a travesty.

Like the other day I was watching a seduction at the water cooler, Brian preening, wanting to pry the pants off Becky in a tasteful, new age way. He kept saying, "truthfully" and "to be honest..." He had a low, handsome-man chuckle which implied that he never wore the same jeans twice and had the drycleaners do his laundry, including socks. She was pert and sassy—shampoo adjectives; she was acutely aware of the value of her wildly assertive ass and therefore insisted on carping on bad client transactions, making the water cooler banter appear legitimate.

I thought to myself, Young love, young love, and this vision surfaced: me, opening my legs, Brian lapping quietly underneath my desk.

My mother's sadness ebbs and flows. I believe
she needs a new pet, though that is my girl side speaking. The other side believes that menstrual cramps are desperate wails, that the uterus cries Fill me; then the blood oozes out, defeated. Women act perplexed that they are moody during ovulation, but to me it makes sense: the body craves something that the mind rejects again and again. And now that my mother's womb is at peace, her mind misses the dilemma.

My mother is sad. She bakes honey-sweetened cornmeal-oat rolls, strolls around the neighborhood daily, reads her art history books and Annie Dillard, but still she is sad. She begins to reveal disturbing details about my family that I'd never heard before during our weekend walks: Grampa didn't just die, he committed suicide. My aunt has always been a pothead, all throughout her successful career as a psychotherapist. My sister, Nina, had an abortion in New York, that's why she was so weepy on the phone that winter.

These secrets unveiled make me lose my footing, make me think I was so clueless, will always be clueless; maybe it's these crooked eyes of mine, one perceiving, the other dreaming.

She speaks of spanking Nina when she was young, regretting it. "She was such a stubborn child and I didn't know what else to do," my mother explains, as if I were the one to forgive her. "Always screaming and crying—you go crazy."

And again, I think of Telephone, the sound of a slap, the sting, the realization, Mother hit me, traveling long-distance, hot, indignant, twisting shape over years, coming out funny, like this: I let myself be hit.

Now Dino has finished the video and talks about
it paternally, using child-rearing phrases, describing me as "the figure," which I find oddly flattering. I heard him say to Ellis, our gullible friend, "See how the figure goes from severe to sensuous in this scene—it took a long time to coax that effect in the editing room." His class is impressed—all except Sandra. A week later he hands me the master as if it were a bouquet of flowers.

I end up in bed with him. We are like brother and sister, cozied up in funky blankets with the remote control and popcorn.

"Did I tell you you're pretty? Did I ever tell you I want to marry your legs?" He asks, tucking a pillow behind my head. "Kat, I'm such a pervert," he adds, happily.

We are like brother and sister, but I feel a heat between our flopped bodies, I want to move into it; the wind chimes are singing from the fire escape, dented and hollow.

"So you claim," I say. "Turn it on."

"Okay, but just remember this: in the words of Billy Joel, 'We didn't start the fire, it was always burnin' since the world was turnin'...""

"God, that was dumb. I love it. Okay, Dino, I'm ready. Showtime."

"I think there's one more thing you should know."

"Yeah?"

"Well, it's kind of hard for me to say.... It's not going to sound right, I shouldn't even bother, but...what am I, sixteen? In a nutshell: when I was filming you I felt this exciting tension, this sexiness after all the video mechanics were taken care of—you really turned me on, the way you would look at me when we were working out poses, and your little body.... I pretended like it was all in the name of art, but sometimes I just wanted to
throw the camera aside.... And then I felt so deranged, agh—I didn't like the thought of getting off on plastic and headless torsos, so I tried to objectify and pretend it wasn't really you, just limbs and skin and whatnot, to be true to the concept.”

He's running his fingers through his hair, eyes black and gleaming, trying to dodge my gaze. I remember the first time I saw him with his shirt off, on the soccer field, tenth grade, how surprised I was by his chiseled ribs and smooth muscle, dark hair, dark nipples. The girls were tickled by him, sweet Dino. I was the lucky one, I got two kisses; then he got scared and thought he should do more kissing, grazing, running around to see who loved him best. And then Mickey T. said, Aw, you don't need that Flintstone, and we danced to Prince's "Little Red Corvette," our legs cross-hatched, his advanced cock hot, pressing a Morse code against my hip, and I thought, Look, there's a body that will enter my body; this is the way things go. Dino never asked me what happened between me and Mickey T. I assumed he didn't care.

Now Dino is looking at me thoughtfully, as a twenty-five-old man, cat-scratched, through it all. I think of things I could say, jokes we have resorted to, but I stutter before my mouth moves; I am pounding inside.

He shifts his weight and turns on the video.

There is a woman's back. I recognize the curves, the geography. There is a woman's hand brushing down her pubic fluff. There is my tattoo. There is my mouth, opening and closing like an angelfish. Things are separate, puzzle pieces. I am blinking in the light, lying on my back; I smile for some reason. I look as though I am in love. There is no plastic bag, no thrashing.
“And then,” Dino says, “I started to miss Kat.” When Dino's hand wraps around mine I am a thousand women at once clamoring to be heard, noisy, insistent, bumping down vertebrae. The naked body on TV, my mother in the country, Nina in New York, Katherine Elizabeth losing it, gaining it, ribcage rotating to the left when I love, to the right when I hate, and all these bones in this body trying to make sense, trying to follow the pitch.