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Feminist Book Club

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DANI BLACKMAN

FEMINIST BOOK CLUB

WE WERE READING the poet. And we had to be reading her, right then, so I couldn't skip the meeting. It was my week to hide Lucy and I didn't know what else to do but bring her along. Lucy didn't know the women in book club and they'd hardly heard of her, and I preferred it this way—these canals of my friendships separated by years and interests and different discernible versions of myself

When it came time for introductions, Lucy instructed me to say that she was “staying in my basement,” which was much more acceptable than “hiding.” What kind of woman leaves her three children and her husband, the good husband, often believed to be the best? Lucy didn't leave space for the women to ask. She shook their hands and walked past them. She pulled an extra chair up to Michelle's table. A long twenty minutes went by before she said another word.

Feminist Book Club had met every month for almost a year. We went the first three months without a name. At first, we were sheepish about our gatherings. Of course we were. We felt a certain disgrace, then a push to dissolve our disillusionment, and finally a need to move more.

We thought of how our mothers spoke of their revolution and then we

understood: if we could get through the next four years, then everything would change, and our longing for change would expire. So the women marked the first Wednesday of every month, checked in with their husbands on their shared calendars, and arranged for babysitters. Jill, my wife, always let me go.

Early on we'd decided that Michelle would always host book club. She lived freely in her house, despite how much she handled each day. At Michelle's, we never had to worry about keeping quiet, or clean. We could throw our coats on her couch. We never removed our shoes.

Between the chaos of hugs and hellos, Michelle put out the food. She hardly folded back the foil. If we wanted to eat, we'd reach for and unwrap the dishes ourselves. Lucy tilted her head toward the cheese board and I handed her a knife and watched the women watch Lucy cut large chunks and load her plate. There was a bottle opener on the table. The rest of us started with wine.

We opened our books as soon as our glasses were full. We flipped through the pages. The women loved the poet and we had her in our hands—the poet, the speaker—and we searched for who she'd been before being buried beneath the two titles. But then we didn't dare get her. I was sure to leave certain words untouched. We let the wine settle.

Soon I will stop speaking in the we, and I assume it will be much harder to tell the story from there. But that's what had sustained me—the we, and the assumptions that the we is what we were all there for, the we with the same urgency and certainty for what we were supposed to feel:

enough anger and passion to stand for something bigger than our children, to do something bigger than our children, to be something bigger for our children.

Lucy pointed to the smallest poem. "Let's start here," she said and cited the page number. "What did everyone think about this one?"

Lucy hadn't read the book. I knew that. We all knew that.

"Lucy," I said.

I was still mad that I hadn't been the first friend Lucy ran to when she left her family. I had always been the one to take her in on all those nights during all those years. With the lights off Lucy used to tell secrets, and I knew all of hers. One night, after meeting the bodies of three different men, Lucy joined me under my blanket and put her head to my chest. She smelled like old pennies. She said, "This is so we're not afraid."

Before book club, Lucy and I had shopped for more than one extraordinary dish to bring. We were running late and Lucy paced impatiently, waiting for the window washer to finish cleaning the front door before we could walk through.

The window washer looked like a traveled farmer, a wanderer in suspenders and a khaki ranger hat, with a faded snake coiled on his neck.

"He's you," Lucy said. "But shittier."

"You know, if you want to talk about things," I said, "I'm here."

"What things?"

"Like how you're feeling. Like why you left?"

"Why do you need a reason?"

We watched the water run down the glass. Then came the soap, and Lucy noted how the man steadied his hands, evening out the water until all the streaks were gone.

I drank a glass of wine. I poured another. I picked at the cheese on Lucy's plate. "What about these words right here," Lucy said, returning to the poet.

Darkness had hit early. November arrived with all its expected rain. Before book club, we exchanged emails in which we asked the same questions, again and again: "Was it just last year?" "What else can happen in a year?" "How many more years?" But the tracking of time was what had us edging toward trouble.

I sat across from Jackie at Michelle's kitchen table and tried to keep my eyes above hers, my eyes to the window, watching leftover daylight scrape the night clouds.

At home, I had a kid waiting out this almost-black sky without stars, waiting for my return. How was I to picture him then, curled up against Jill, both of them warm in our bed, unbeknownst to him that if all went well, I would not be back until morning. And, of course, it killed a small part of me to know that he might've stayed awake begging for more books, for one more minute, until his eyes were no longer able to focus. And Jill, who must've been holding him tight and then tighter, who I imagined stroking his hair and saying, "Stay, and sleep, and dream."

"I want to say something," said Jackie. "But what is there to say? I'm still just so depressed."

So much about Jackie made me believe I'd moved past the glib attractions I had in my twenties—the desiring of the unattainable or the coveting of qualities that I believed exceeded my own—and toward something worthy of the risk.

Jackie wore purple glasses with thick lenses. Her smile revealed a small amount of fear. But her lips could never be ignored. That much she knew. Jackie wore a fringed scarf that might've been a blanket, and the wool covered half her face and all of her mouth and yet whenever I had the chance to stare, I did. Her eyes were down, on the tacos or wine or the book of the poet, but never straight ahead.

Michelle's fat hound was asleep under the table. His paws were at my feet and I was afraid to stretch my legs and disturb him. His snores sounded like seconds ticking away on the clock. I only wanted to drink and drink. I wanted Jackie to finally face me.

“I'm getting hungry,” said Lucy.

“Then I think we should eat,” said Lisa, who never wanted to be rude.

We passed the plates and scooped helpings of soft, organic sides. We ate in silence.

“What's wrong with us tonight?” asked Michelle.

It was 8 PM and I was exhausted and I hated myself for that. I ran through unwritten lists of what had to get done. I'd never lived with more timers: the sting of the sounds from the microwave telling me my coffee had reheated, for the third or fourth time, until the cream became a film on top that I had to pull off with my fingers; the beep beep beep from the

stove that let me know my son could emerge from his timeout; the sand timer his preschool teacher gave Jill and me, to turn and turn, until he was compelled enough by this new toy to listen to us. And now the poet herself, nudging us to move along.

Lucy played the role of uninvited guest, and it took only a few more glasses of wine to get her going, to craft the small talk that made the women lean in a little closer. “Blake and Barrett are the twins,” Lucy said. “And Lacey’s my girl.”

“How do you think they’re doing?” Lisa said.

“You don’t have to be afraid to get right into it,” Lucy said. “What do you think I’m losing? Or lost? I’m here. They’re here. There’s just a little more distance between us.”

“That’s what you decided,” Lisa said.

“I saw that my life didn’t look like it was supposed to look. And that had to change.”

And now one of us would have to speak.

When we didn’t, Lucy said, “So what did we decide? About the poems, not about me.”

I wanted to say that I thought the poet positioned us perfectly, right here, spiraling as we stand. Instead, I decided to dream of Lucy back in her house, completely content for some unseen reason, sharing her space with all of us for next month’s meeting. I could see Blake and Barrett and Lacey stomping down the steps with such fierce purpose, as they tend to do. I could see all of us stopping to look at their small faces, their curved

shoulders, their hands stiff against their legs. And then I imagined Lucy, understanding why she had to return, knowing that maybe we all had something to do with it.

“How did we personally relate to the poems?” Michelle said.

“If you make me talk about my life,” Jackie said, “I will claw my fucking eyes out.”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I said.

“Use the downstairs one,” Michelle said.

“I have to go too,” Lucy said. “Wait for me there.”

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MICHELLE WORKED WITH spray paint. I mean, that was the key element in all of her decorating and every piece of hard furniture in her house had been sprayed the same color. The paint on the picture frames in the bathroom was grey too, and one frame already held Michelle’s annual family photo. There they were on the beach, standing inches away from the breaking waves, and I wondered how long the photographer held out for the surprise of water splashing against their heels, how long she waited for the screams. In this picture, they are not screaming. Michelle’s two daughters are standing tall with their hands on their hips. I imagine the photographer told them to look proud.

“She wants to fuck you,” Lucy said when she finally joined me in the bathroom. She had also noticed Jackie. She had seen the lines that crossed

between Jackie's eyebrows. And there was more about her features, sure, but that was what got Lucy—how old Jackie looked, much older than Lucy had thought based on the description I had given. Lucy wouldn't let me leave the bathroom. Her back blocked the door. *So foolish, so juvenile*, I thought, but it made me want to whisper something in Lucy's ear: like how much I missed sex or how loose Jill's arms had always felt on my body, and how unsure her hands were, sliding from my shoulders to hips, her hands that spent so much time measuring what they could hold.

"I want to come again," I said without feeling regret. "I want it to be so good that it hurts under my eyelids."

I'd once shocked book club by revealing that since I'd met Jill, I'd never fantasized about anyone else. The women met my statement with laughter, and maybe even some pity, then clear jealousy. I'd stayed attracted only to my wife, attracted still, which even I recognized as some kind of feat. I had made desire and kept it alive. And until I had said it, the statement was entirely true.

Now when I think about desire, I think of the hours spent stepping into leather straps, and adjusting myself, and showing Jill what she could always have—me ready to just give and give and give, even after she stopped wanting to receive. Me, unnecessary of her hunger.

"She really wants to fuck you," Lucy said again. I kept my hands on the cold of the bathroom sink. Maybe it should've been Lucy, like it had been on so many other nights, when we were young and unaware. How much safer would it have been to stay with her in the bathroom, to parade her

around the kitchen table after we were done? That would've been being a good friend, because that's what the women were waiting for—the first of us to crack so the rest could follow.

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A NEW BOTTLE of wine sat in the middle of the table. The women wanted to know what had taken so long in the bathroom, but I didn't answer. I walked to the kitchen and returned with two more bottles. I did this as a dare, but no one responded.

"It's getting late," Lisa said.

"That always means you should stay for one more," Lucy said.

"Easy for you to say," Lisa said and refilled her glass. "You have nowhere to go."

"I have therapy in the morning," Michelle said. "Then I take Madison to therapy. So you're right. We definitely need another glass."

"If I go home now, then I have to think about tomorrow," Jackie said.

"If you had a day to do nothing, what would you do?" Lucy said.

"Maybe get high and binge Netflix."

"Really?" Lucy said.

"All day long," Michelle said.

"We wasted so much time when we had nothing to do," Jackie said.

On Fridays, I live for many hours without my family. After dropping my son off at school, I drive around the city, listening to my favorite albums

from college. The first time I did this I began to think about Jackie, to remember possibility. How easy it became then, to transport myself back in time, to undeclared love and all uncertain things and desperation disguised as courage and a lover lifting the hair from my neck and holding my twisted strands in her hand and pulling me closer and keeping me there and wanting me to stay because we weren't supposed to be together, not then, not ever. If I let the music play, if there's more stretch of road to drive, I can reach that sensation that feels like floating, like freedom, like space that has yet to be occupied. And I'm twenty again and present, and even oblivious, for just a second, to how life unfolded before me.

"If we had a day to ourselves, don't you think we should do something really good?" I said.

"Like what?" Lucy said.

"I don't know," I said.

Lucy pushed away her full glass of wine. "Of course you do," she said.

• • •

WE CLEARED THE DISHES. We scraped beans and rice and half-eaten slices of chocolate cake into the compost bin and stacked our plates in a pile next to Michelle's sink. Lucy and Jackie and I offered more help, offered to wipe the wine stains off the table. We lingered. But Lisa had to leave. She picked up the poet, bent the corners of the pages she wanted to return to, and closed the book. She hugged us all, even Lucy, and said she'd see us soon.

“Fuck the dishes,” Michelle said when she closed the door behind Lisa.
“Just sit down.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I want Michael to see the mess when he gets home,” Michelle said.
“This is the weapon I use against him now. Dirty dishes. This is how he’ll know I’m mad at him.”

“What are you mad about?” Lucy asked.

“I don’t know,” Michelle said.

We moved to the living room. The hound surrendered his space when he saw us, took the big leap off the couch. We kept our bodies close to one another. We sat for minutes without speaking, heard nothing but our thick exhales, exorcised energy, descending but remaining. Then came the banging from outside, a scream, glass shattering against the pavement. Then we were back to ourselves.

“What the hell was that?” Lucy asked.

“Stupid kids,” Michelle said. “They’re out there every night. They were supposed to have cleaned it up by now. The halloween carnival. All the neighbors have been complaining about it on the community blog.”

The one drawback to Michelle’s had always been her proximity to the park, because even when we were without our kids, they were still there. All kids sounded the same. At each month’s book club, we could hear the laughter coming from across the street, the glee from a successful head-first slide, the cries from a slip off the drawbridge. At least once during every meeting, Jackie had to cover her ears.

Jackie was drunk. She stretched across the sofa with no regard for where she put her head, which ended up near my leg and across Michelle's lap. Her arm dangled inches from the floor. I watched her fingers trace the lines in the wood. I knew she could be close to great reveal.

A few weeks before, I had convinced Jackie to cancel her class just minutes after I had canceled mine. We left campus in almost a run, before any students could catch us. We settled at a bar only a few blocks away and asked the host for a patio table, despite the dropping temperature. The sun was still out. Jackie didn't want to eat. She let me order our drinks.

There was perceived danger that day, in the way that danger presents itself at this point in my life—with one beer after the next, with me and Jackie exchanging stories that boasted how bold we once were or could be again if given the chance.

She said, "Tell me the worst thing you've done."

I said, "It's so much worse than you think." The sun formed a long square of light on our tall dark table. I said, "What about you?" and I waited for her to answer.

On Michelle's couch, with her feet and eyes toward the ceiling, Jackie finally said the poet's name, mumbled some of her best lines. Before this night, when I imagined what I could do with Jackie, I always had her against a wall, with her arms raised in submission: there, down a dark hall, with little light, we are quick. We are greedy. There's no time for tenderness. She leans back into me. She gives me control and I take it, take her, harder each time.

"Some music might save us," Lucy said. She never did well with long

pauses.

“Yes, music,” Michelle said. “I don’t want you to go. Michael will be home soon. Not that that’s bad. But still. He’ll ask me stupid questions. I’ll give him stupid answers. Then he’ll want to talk about the food we ate. And how much worse does it get than that?” Michelle stood up and began scrolling through the playlists on her computer. “When I was in grad school, I lived on two Quiznos subs a day. Every day for almost a year. Just Quiznos. No one had to know that, I didn’t have to report it. Michael’s a good guy, but.”

“But what?”

“Marriage,” Michelle said, as if the word were a ball she had just tossed to us, as if we were supposed to catch it and throw back our equally trivial, but unwavering complaints.

“I’ll stay,” I said.

“She stays and I stay,” Lucy said.

“What do you want to listen to?” Michelle said. She started some music before we gave requests. “The girls love these guys. They’re new. They’re local.”

“They’re terrible,” Lucy said.

“I know,” Michelle said. “But I was going for something less obvious.”

It didn’t take long to get used to the music. We didn’t need much. Crackling beats and long whiny melodies were enough to get our fingers tapping on the arm rests. We thought we could hear the hound in the kitchen, howling along.

“This sounds like that one band we saw,” Lucy said to me. “Remember? You know. When I had to hold you back from charging the stage. You loved them so much.”

“I loved everything when I was on Ecstasy,” I said.

“You never looked more beautiful,” Lucy said. “I fell in love with you that night.”

“Because you loved everything when you were on Ecstasy.”

Michelle stared into her grey bookcase, her grey armoire. She stared hard into the wall as if an unfamiliar image had just appeared before her. “What should we read next month?”

“Does it matter?” Jackie said.

“I have some recommendations,” Lucy said.

“I mean, what are we really doing?” Jackie said.

“We’re doing this,” Michelle said. “We’re doing something.”

“I know,” Jackie said. “But even here, it’s just noise. It’s the kind of noise my kids make. And Sam makes. It’s the kind I hear all day. There’s no substance or meaning. Just a constant grating static. Makes me feel like I’m going crazy.”

“We all feel that way,” I said, but that wasn’t true.

“There’s anxiety when I wake up and there’s anxiety when I go to sleep,” Jackie said. “My life’s become a tightness that I can’t shake.”

“That’s normal,” Michelle said. “Look at what’s happening around us.”

“I should go,” Jackie said.

We still didn’t go. Lucy fell asleep upright on a chair, and Michelle gave

in to the dishes. Jackie and I stayed on the couch. In Michelle's absence, my lap was Jackie's new place to rest her head. And I found my hand on the back of her neck and then in her hair. Without thinking, I did these things. Then I thought about holding Jackie. Just holding her.

"Is there anything to say?" Jackie said.

"No," I said. "Not really."

She pulled me from the couch and led me down the hall.

In the upstairs bathroom, which was not grey at all, but a worn and survived pink, there were affirmations taped to the mirror: *We will be grateful. We will not hurt each other. We will see one another, and we will see love.* Jill and I had tried this once too, per our therapist's suggestion, after we'd spent an entire session listing what we'd grown to despise about one another until insult after insult uncovered our anger and sadness and fears. And our therapist said, "Isn't the truth beautiful?" And I said no and Jill said yes and our therapist actually threw up her hands, a gesture cementing our fate.

"I can't be in here," I said.

"Me neither," Jackie said. "But I need something to happen. Right now."

We entered a bedroom where magic had never lived, where a bed had stayed unmade for days, maybe weeks. Laundry was scattered across the sheets—dirty or clean, I couldn't tell.

Jackie moved us from the doorway. We stood in front of the full-length mirror, and Jackie looked straight through. I wanted to know what she faced, but I didn't look up. I turned around and when I stepped toward

her, she stepped back. She pulled down her pants. She grabbed my wrist. “This is what you wanted,” Jackie said. She pushed my arm between her legs. “Isn’t this what you wanted?”

The answer is easy. The answer is automatic. Because this is habit forming, once again, and landing all over the page. And this is the space in which I choose to write about wanting, albeit a more confined space, with little room to understand what any of us means when we talk about desire.

My mouth moves across Jackie’s chest. My mouth sets teeth to bone.

Lucy, I think. My hand stays in place.