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Abondone Coercitus

Cady Vishniac

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ABONDONE COERCITUS

Of course, the whole school was upset about what happened to me, each person for his or her own reasons. My instructors were pretending publicly that the entire thing had never happened. They had begun to grade me on an absurd curve, handing out As for all the assignments I never wrote and assuming I would snap out of it by the end of the semester, a week away. (Each essay read “tktktktktktk” ad infinitum, until I had taken up the required three or four pages.) The editor-in-chief of the school paper, a pretty and ambitious woman, was at her wits’ end working to get an interview with me, frantically attempting twice every method from empathetic indignation to a seduction. The Dean of Students, a too-thin, too-young administrator in a cheap suit, had tried to have a heart-to-heart about it all but was not successful in broaching my silence. I sat still on his couch and breathed inwardly, letting Dean Kearsy’s babble wash over my head. It was a meditation. I was almost sad when it ended. The Chief of Campus Safety was staying away on the orders of the school’s lawyer.

Given the quiet panic with which the institution reacted to my continued presence, I was not surprised when Chancellor Diggs, shrewd behind his joviality, called me into the office with the wood panels, where an administrative assistant brought me water in a paper cup. Nor did it entirely shock me when the Chancellor pawed at my shoulder with his giant hand and opened up about how hard it was: “You and I,” he told me, pointing at my delicate features then at the blunt brown expanse of his own forehead, “are too damn clever for certain people.” The Chancellor paused and stared intently out a window at a group of white kids playing with a frisbee. “It makes them jealous.”

I didn’t know then that anybody would be jealous of me, certainly not the version of myself that sat in that office. The Chancellor’s words buzzed and buzzed and made my ears burn.

I stood up while the big faker was mid-sentence. “You’re right,” I said. “But I’ve got to go to class. You’re right.” That seemed to be enough for Diggs, who nodded.

“I know it, my man,” he said.

I endured one last hearty clap, this one on my back, without even flinching, and then I was free. I dashed back out into the halls of the Administrative Building, where I kept on dashing, letting my eyes rest on nobody and nothing.

I remember that back then I believed my fellow students were of two types. They either knew nothing, not being important enough to stay informed regarding such matters, or they were the involved ones who frequented the student centers. One of the latter had recorded the whole thing on his phone as the officers electrified me over and over, and the rest huddled around laptops watching the video on repeat and whispering: “Oh my God!”

Before the incident, which to this day I recall with both terror and a certain vagueness, a series of screams and tongue-biting and blood, I had been well-liked by the ones in the student centers, especially the Haitian American Student Union and certain sympathetic members of the Queer Student Center. Indeed, it was after some long talks in the Q that I had decided to take my first course in something other than the sciences: Asian-American Women and Gender with Professor Fulan, who later became my adviser. I am neither Asian nor a woman, but something about the frank discussions in that classroom, many of them with people I knew from the Q, felt like a defense of my truest self. (It was around this time that I began to hide my transcript from my grandmother, who was a little old-fashioned.)

So I had taken many courses with the members of the Queer Stu-

dent Center before I decided to avoid my old classmates, the entire Administrative Building, and anybody who might ask me how I felt. To fill my time, I usually stayed indoors with my grandmother, speaking with her in French, which she insisted on instead of Kreyòl and which I had, every evening and weekend throughout my undergraduate career, helped teach in one of Daltona University's Language Institutes. Fredeline and I would read together, when we were not talking, as Fredeline did not own a television. She would cook for me, and I would put her to bed every night, tucking her under the soft quilt in her yellow room, which always smelled—as she did—gently sweet.

She had not manifested an interest in my tragic misadventure and was, if such a thing were possible, even more wary of discussing the issue than I. She spoke on my behalf over the phone to aunts and uncles and cousins, and as I would, pretended not to hear their questions. One aunt, a woman who had lived in Brooklyn during the time of Abner Louima (having since been priced out by the Jews and the fashionable young people), was not so easily deterred. Tantin Mahalia asked in Kreyòl, and then French. “Mais qu'est-ce qu'ils lui ont fait?!” Finally, and forcibly, she switched to English, yelling into the phone about plunger handles, so Fredeline, her lip quivering, hung up.

I was present throughout the conversation—although in her defense Mahalia could not have known—contemplating my next move in our third warri game of that rainy day, and I heard my aunt's yelling through the phone's speakers. When it was all over I crossed the room to my grandmother, patted her on the shoulder, and told her in very few words that truly, I had not been sodomized, and that it was her turn. I found this worked best, distracting her before she could ask me yet again if I could not try for the sake of my soul to have lunch with a young woman

she knew from church.

Of course, one can't be sure. I have retained so little of the day that it's perfectly possible those men bulled me and I just don't know it. But that's not the point. The point in those days was always Fredeline. The movement in her lip upset me even more than the idea of being pinned down by dough-faced men in uniform, and I knew that I could calm her, guide her through this catastrophe. I wanted to honor what seemed to me our mutually agreed-upon position: Never talk about the things that happen.

I have mentioned that Fredeline was old-fashioned. Indeed, she was by that time aware—I had received a prestigious award from the Women's Studies Department the month before and had felt I must disclose—that I occasionally wrote on the topic of homosexuality. She had not taken this revelation well, had even, like the more awful among my French students, accused me of being a vodou practitioner! (She was an active member of the *Assemblées de Dieu* herself, and it made her unusually intolerant of other religious practices.) I want to believe, you see, that Fredeline hung up on Mahalia because she could not bear to think of my being violated, but it's just as likely she was upset by the idea of any sexual contact between me and another man, regardless of that paltry matter of consent. It's been a long time, but I still feel keenly the unfairness of such a sweet woman being so quick to anger regarding our only sticking point.

As for school, well, I did all right in school despite my newfound inability to turn in anything but *tktktktktktk*—more than all right, as I had always done, making up for my lack of homework with what was for me a surfeit of in-class participation. The departments had once fought for me

as if I were a prize, and those two that had kept me, Women's Studies and Computer Science, were appropriately grateful for my ability to explain intersectionality to my fellow students (who ought to have taken the prerequisites but did not) in a manner they found accessible, along with my firm grasp of and enthusiasm for Scheme.

I had my job teaching French and a separate internship, both within the same building—the internship, writing code for one of the startups in the Capital Center was my internship, paid much better. James Ungerve, the Director of the Capital Center, had taken a special interest in me early on, noting something just a little serious in my demeanor that he thought might be malleable. He intuited that I was capable of becoming a harder worker than the others, and by finessing his connections, Ungerve had performed the singular feat of getting me another and rather more exclusive internship for the summer after my graduation—something that might become a career if I played my cards right.

I was blindsided when Ungerve mentioned to me, casually, on the last day of classes, that he and Professor Fulan had spoken about the tkktkktkktkktkktk. I hadn't even been aware they knew each other.

"It doesn't matter to me," Ungerve said. "These people don't deserve you. Just pass. Just take your exams, get up at Convocation and give a little speech about how much you like it here, go work your internship, and maybe in a few years you could even go for a PhD. You're good enough. A lot of disadvantaged students in computing fields could use a mentor."

Ungerve let it sink in. He was an unabashed corporatist, an individual whose paycheck was justified by his ability to help the university get a stake in the right company before said company had technically even formed. He believed quite frankly that it was my duty to evangelize startup culture throughout the homes of Little Haiti, even the ones as broken

as my own, just in case there were more young men like myself to be found there. His views were in their own context admirable. And so I let him say whatever he wanted to me that day but I did not hate him at all. I tried to use my eyes to transmit whatever it was he most wanted to hear directly into his brain: *That is not panic on my face, Sir, because it could not be, ever.* Ungerve grasped my fingers tight, squeezing my joints almost violently with his handshake before letting me get back to work. I was helping a particularly petulant engineer assemble his robot that day; funny enough, I forget what the robot was supposed to do.

My talk with Professor Fulan went worse, or possibly better. She called me into her office to clear up a misunderstanding over something that had never happened before at Daltona: I had the highest grades within the College of Liberal Arts, as well as within the College of Science and Math. After the main graduation ceremony, the two different schools usually had two different, smaller Convocations across campus from each other. I had been invited to speak at both, but Fredeline had grown too fat and too acclimated to the mild Mid-Atlantic weather to be much good at running between places, even to see me honored twice. I had to pick just one ceremony then.

Professor Fulan, who knew that my allegiance to her field, to the social sciences in general, was real, and who believed incorrectly that I drew no joy at all from any work done with machines, assumed I would speak to the other members of her college. She had even asked the Dean for the privilege of introducing me, had all but forgotten the troubling line of tktktktktktktk where each end-of-semester assignment should have been. She was wounded indeed when I revealed that I would give my speech to

the computer scientists and mathematicians instead.

“Why Jean?” she asked. “I know you’d rather be talking to us.”

“Not really,” I said, and I grabbed this much older woman’s hands, held them, didn’t speak a word. Professor Fulan started, but then she shrugged, and gave my knuckles a squeeze in return.

She dropped her guard, her face loosened in some indescribable way, and she told me, “I wish you were leaving under better circumstances.”

“I don’t care. It’s fine.” I smiled at her, a smile of appeal. “People keep expecting me to care, you know? I do care, but it’s not easy like that.”

“And what, Jean? You’re not bothered? I don’t think that’s possible.”

“I am. I’m bothered,” I said. My eyes had gone wide with the smile still pasted onto my face, and Professor Fulan seemed to find the effect alarming. I gripped her hands tighter.

“It’s not like you can fix it,” I said. “You think you can go chat up the Chancellor and make life fair? I’m just trying to keep my head down.”

My face was hot and wet. By way of apology for my outburst, I bowed a little, bringing my professor’s hands to my lips and kissing the fingers lightly, a supplicant. I’m sure I put her in an impossible position, one only slightly mitigated by the open secret of my actual romantic proclivities. How do you comfort a student when he is distressed? She might have been sued. To her credit, she put the legalities out of mind, placing her hand on the back of my head and stroking the place where my neck met my hairline. I focused on the nearest object to my left eye, her ring, a Beijing enamel piece she’d worn every day for the three years I’d known her.

The main Convocation took place out front of the campus on a hot day,

and I sweltered in my black robe at the very front of the crowd. A parade of men for whom I cared nothing walked across the stage in garb far more ridiculous than my own: the Chairman of the Board of Directors, the President, the Provost, and the Deans of every school in reds and purples and blues, with accents in white and yellow, pins and medals in green and black and all other colors.

Fredeline was comfortably installed in a chair in the shade, enjoying some tablet cocoye she'd purchased at People's Tropical on Ritchie Street. She'd braided her hair for the occasion, and it looked perfect. At the same time I was worried about her dress, which, while it was as dignified as Fredeline preferred (a pastel purple and entirely closed over the stomach), still somehow resembled something from a textbook about the islands, a *karabela*, in a way that left me feeling glaringly ethnic, overformal, embarrassed.

"I'm not getting married," I'd quipped when she first stepped out into the kitchen, but she glared at me and boxed my ears. In retrospect, mentioning marriage at all was a mistake, given the source of our tension.

She'd told me, "Je vais m'habiller comme je veux. C'est tout," before muttering several profanities under her breath. I'd left her alone after that.

In any case, the ceremony itself really was almost as profoundly boring as a wedding. I was practically asleep by the time the Chancellor, from whom I had not heard once since our brief interlude in the swank office, came to the podium. I listened to Diggs's speech, which was typical of Diggs: a basso profundo booming out of a series of buzzwords aligned into near-poetry with great care, then spiced with a few intentionally placed colloquialisms.

"All y'all know my main man, my good friend, Jean-Louis Rou-

main—”

And at this, Diggs interrupted himself and looked straight at me. My stomach dropped all the way to the ground, as low as Fredeline’s bunions in her best orthopedic sandals.

“Did I say that right, man?”

I nodded. The crowd laughed. Diggs’s pronunciation had been exaggeratedly perfect.

“Well, don’t be shy, dude! Stand on up!”

I stood.

“This young man has a 4.0 GPA.”

A smattering of applause. Fredeline’s delicate clap.

“Not only that, but he speaks three languages! Haitian Creole, French, and English. Not only that, but he tutors his fellow students in French. Not only that, not only that! Not. Only. That. Not only that.” Diggs was really warming up, or perhaps he had forgotten the next line of his speech.

“This guy right here, he works at Daltona’s startup incubator, the Capital Center, writing code for TextUp Inc., a biotech company founded by his fellow students that’s going to revolutionize the way people do laboratory research. Revolutionize it!

“He’s a double major in computer science and women’s and gender studies, and did I mention that Daltona has the oldest Women’s Studies Department in the country? Everybody give a shout out to Women’s Studies!”

Screaming from a dozen or so of my classmates, and a pronounced, serious silence from Professor Fulan, who sat frowning on the left-hand side of the stage near the back, whose courses had been cancelled at an alarming rate for the past several years due to what the Chancellor’s Office

deemed her failure to attract enough students to the major.

“But not only that, not only that, not only that, not only that—Jean has won the Timothy Grenade Scholarship for Students of Caribbean Descent and the Antoinette Bellin Award for Excellence in Queer Studies.” (I did not have to look at my grandmother to know that she was hissing, sucking in her breath, but the Chancellor kept speaking as if Fredeline didn’t matter.) “He won Governor O’Malley’s Award for STEM—he’s won a bunch of them. I don’t remember them all. He’s won just about every award there is, I think!

“But not only that, not only that, not only. Not only that. Jean-Louis is...” And in a stage whisper: “Modest.” Diggs waggled his eyebrows.

“He’s modest folks!”

Laughter.

“So modest! He is! He’s a quiet kid!” Diggs put on a look of genuine shock.

“Not only that, I took him up into my office two weeks ago, and he didn’t say much of anything at all! I don’t even know what he’s going to say today!

“You’re going to tell them something good about us, right Jean?” Diggs asked, pleadingly, and the audience laughed some more. And on the side of the stage, Professor Fulan frowned more deeply.

“Of course you will! Okay, Jean, my man, get up here! But first, everybody give him the loudest round of applause you can!”

I floated forward. The applause sounded muted, and I wondered if I might not have had some sort of ear infection. When it died out, I was at the podium, and when the many watchers in their fold-out chairs began to look around and at each other, confused, I still did not speak. My tongue was lead.

made my mouth round and small and prepared to speak the first word of an improvised speech: “Thanks.”

I’ll never know if I would have been able. I was interrupted before I could get it out, when a middle-aged man sitting with the anthropology majors, a returning student, yelled, “Is that you in the video going around?”

“Yes.” I spoke into the microphone, so that they could all hear, and “yes” felt better than “thanks” by miles.

A short teenage girl: “They tazed you for like an hour! You didn’t even do anything!”

“Jean,” Diggs said, as the students started to yell all at once, even strangers and the ones whom I had thought knew nothing of the incident.

“He didn’t even do anything.”

“They were punching him in the face!”

“He just didn’t want to show his ID!”

“You don’t even need ID in the library!”

“I heard them call him the n-word!”

Diggs began to speak. “I appreciate your input everybody, and I hear your concern, but today is a beautiful day. Beautiful beautiful. And I think that’s something, that’s something, that’s something, that’s something to be grateful for, that we can talk these things out here at Daltona, Daltona! Daltona University—”

And so on.

Campus Safety came running up from their posts at the entrance to the tent where Fredeline was worrying maniacally at her braids, and the officers stood by the gathered graduates, just stood until the students got nervous. “Daaaallltoooooooonnnnaaaa!” Diggs rumbled, once everybody else had stopped talking.

“Give him a hand, ladies and gentlemen!”

I walked stiffly off the stage and into Fredeline’s car. I did not attend the College of Science and Math’s Convocation, and I was not missed. During the ride home, Fredeline glared at me as only the elderly can, which I was aware, in some part of myself, was nothing more than I deserved. It was one thing to be the wrong sort of grandson in the privacy of our home, and another entirely to be the wrong sort of grandson in public. When we got out of the vehicle, she threw her shoe at me and called me a masisi, a faggot. I went inside to the kitchen, but she followed me. It was a slow chase, a weird dance that involved my trying to maneuver her toward the hallway. Finally, she loomed in the corner between me and the bathroom, framed by a harsh light, and I was able to bound past her and up the stairs. She was crying and taking lame swipes at my face with a wooden soup spoon, and then I wasn’t there. She must have felt so dejected.

I went into to my room and shut the door, then locked it. Ignoring Fredeline’s huffs as she climbed the stairs, then her frantic pounding when she reached my entryway, I rolled my robe into a ball, threw it out a window—my aim perfect—and watched the lump of cheap material sail through the air into a dumpster in the courtyard of my grandmother’s landlord. Then I went to my closet and stroked the tailored suit inside with the very tips of my fingers. My internship would begin that next Monday, and in the meantime, I felt I had earned some rest. I waited for Fredeline to wear herself out, and when I heard her run away wailing, then I slept for a spell.