

Like Girls: A Story

A scrupulous memory is not a mere accessory, according to Lara Travers, Esq. A six-inch knife is irrevocably a six-inch knife. To squeamishly add almost, to prevaricate with five or maybe six, to stumble and say five or six or seven, is to lose credibility and control and possibly the trial. It is better to risk repetition than be false, even when the audience is simply at a law school.

Today, she has twenty minutes to talk about justice. She pulls her scarf closer to her neck, retying it so the border is prominent. It is from the Jaipur region of India, blockprinted in a design of a vibrant flowing vine around stylised images of the dhatura, a holy hallucinogenic flower.

The man sitting next to Lara picks up a metal fork with a fleur-de-lis pattern on its handle. His gesture has a flourish, an exaggerated appreciation for the silverware.

I'm quite honoured to be on a panel with you, he says.

His eyes are the kind of blue people describe as cold. She has almost the same shade herself, perhaps more speckled, so she prefers to think of the ocean, of the sky.

He has allowed his hair to appear gray. It is longer than her own, but thinner, so his pony tail looks as if it belongs on a toy for a child rather than some wild stallion. His tan glows in an effortless way, making his face seem less wrinkled than it would otherwise appear. He seems amused, somehow, as if he is enjoying life more than he expected to, or perhaps more than he had thought he was entitled to.

Likewise, she is saying.

He leans and then he is standing, and for a moment she assumes there is some sort of gallantry involved, but he turns away from her, his hand outstretched, his delight undisguised.

The approaching women return his smile. There are four of them, one more dowdy than the other. She would like to be more generous, but dowdy is the least offensive word that seems accurate.

What is it with the women here?

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At what passed as a reception last night, Lara had felt overdressed in a simple green shift printed with silhouettes of palm trees, while the hostess, Professor Georgette Patrick, had on sweat pants and a too-small blouse with a stain on the shoulder. Lara checked her watch to see if she was early; she wasn't.

It hadn't been difficult to find the house in Paradise Point, a winding development of small stucco houses near the law school. Perhaps she could have walked, she had thought as the cab driver pulled to the curb. She had assumed someone would have arranged for her transportation; but rather than ask, she had walked west to where she recalled a strip mall with a grocery store and phone booths. There were no outside phones anymore, but on a bulletin board inside the store were the phone numbers of car services. She used her cell phone to contact one.

She had worried that her chocolates were melting. They were expensive and allegedly hand-made and from San Francisco. She travelled with a few boxes across the country, not because she especially liked chocolate, but because she had thought they would make nice gifts. She had forgotten how hot and humid it was here.

Georgette Patrick, the hostess, accepted the package with a little sigh, then simply put the ribboned box away in the kitchen. Lara had hoped for a moment that Georgette was looking for a plate for the offering and would take the expensive chocolates back into the living room, where there were two or three other faculty members, all women. But Georgette had opened a cabinet door, revealing a blurred jumble into which the box was sequestered, and turned away.

Lara tried to think of a compliment or a comment about the laminated cabinets, imitation oak top and bottom. Never enough room in kitchen cabinets, no matter how many one had, she thought to say, but decided not to lie.

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Shonda had lined her cabinets with shelf-paper, patterned with little red teapots, a curlicue above the spout like steam, at least if gravity worked sideways. There was more than sufficient room in Shonda's white-painted cabinets. She did not have dishes or food in them, but she did have a set of ninety-four glasses. There had been ninety-six, twelve of each of eight different types of glasses, including champagne flutes, and special shapes for chardonnays, burgundies, martinis, margaritas, and brandies.

The glasses had been a housewarming gift, from Lara and some of the others, bestowed with the imprecise hope that Shonda would become the kind of woman who had dinner parties requiring several types of wine glasses and that they were the kind of women who would be invited. But they saw Shonda less and less, now that Shonda was in "management."

One late afternoon, after classes, Lara rode her bicycle over to Shonda's house in the new development. Paradise Point, it was called, and the streets had names like Sans Souci and

Siesta Way. Sweat soaked Lara's shorts and the back of her Indian-print cotton shirt, running in rivulets when she stood on Shonda's tiny porch. Lara pushed at the door buzzer, heard its bleating, and listened for the tap-tap-tap of footsteps. All she could hear was the howl of construction from somewhere she couldn't see; the shots of nail guns reverberating around the snaking streets.

Lara waited. The sunlight shimmered on the street and heat lightning zigzagged across the sky.

Maybe she should find out if Catherine and her crew were among the workers on the new houses, although Shonda did not seem to like Catherine, or the rest of the girls, that much these days.

It would have been nice to have a glass of water, she thought, or even a chocolate ice cream cone, but maybe some other time.

And then Shonda was found dead.

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Professor Georgette Patrick's wineglasses were plastic cups. There was no champagne, but several different bottles of wine jostled each other on a small table, although none of them appealed to Lara. She preferred a California Pinot Noir. She requested water, which tasted better than wine in a plastic glass. Professor Patrick went back to the kitchen and returned with a filled glass. Lara did not ask for ice.

Another professor – Lara thought her name was something like Arden – was confiding she did not have a stove in her house. It seemed to be a familiar story. She focused on Lara, an unseasoned audience, telling Lara she removed the stove more than a decade ago when it broke, or when the cat jumped on it and burned its front left paw, or when she was trying to make candy and it caught fire. The explanation changed within seconds.

The accurate explanation, Lara discerned, was connected to the husband. He had decided armed enemies would hide in the stove, perhaps accompanied by the ghosts of the people he had killed. He suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome from his soldiering days in Viet Nam, Arden proclaimed, seemingly with a bit of pride.

Arden announced she had to hurry home. Her husband did not like her to be out after dark. He worried about her. She could get hurt, although she was smart enough to always carry her Smith and Wesson in her purse.

The world was an unsafe place. Control was necessary.

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The four women are now sitting at the round table.

My daughters, he presents them. He does not say their names.

Lara introduces herself and shakes hands with each of the young women. She looks them in

the eyes, avoiding their acne and their tarnished earrings and the thin sweaters pulled across their chests. The hunched one seems oldest, but the least confident. Lara imagines it must be difficult to have Bo Marks for a father.

People always ask me whether I'd want one of my daughters to work for me, Bo says, as if guessing her thoughts. And I always say I want all my girls to be able to hold their heads high and walk around without shame. And that includes the girls who work for me. A few years ago I started having girls as managers.

Managers?

It's different now, Bo says.

She nods.

I am proud of all of my girls, he says.

We are women, she retorts.

We: such a dangerous uncontrollable concept.

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We can't call it feminist, the Academic Dean had told her. They were discussing her course, really a segment of a course, Contemporary Issues in Civil Rights. She was one of six guest speakers, a distinguished attorney-in-residence. She would teach two classes and give a public lecture on Justice.

It was popular now for law schools to bring actual attorneys into their lecture halls. She had done it before. But of course she had hesitated to come here.

We've a panel in mind for the public lecture, the Academic Dean informed her. You as the real-world lawyer. And a local gadfly, a plaintiff in hundreds of cases against the city and county.

How about Women's Issues, the Academic Dean suggested.

How about Sexual Freedoms, she parlayed.

He seemed a nice enough man.

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If the man who hired her and introduced himself as Chip had been less kind, perhaps she would have been able to act on her panic. Instead, she was soothed, like a skittish horse. The word broken would have been appropriate, and indeed Chip seemed to view himself as a bit of a bronco rider. But she believed, with her whole body, that she understood the consequences of her choice and that she chose freely, as only someone young can believe.

But she was old enough to know when to lie, or at least withhold the truth. When he asked her about her plans, she shrugged, raising her left shoulder higher than the other. When he asked her about her greatest desire, she knew a gesture would not be sufficient, so she simply said the first thing that occurred to her: motorcycle.

A BMW, she added, just to be specific.

Great, he said, just remember to bring proof of your age.

Shonda soon warned her to stay away from Chip.

He runs guns and women, Shonda said. He thinks he's still in Viet Nam.

Shonda called her kiddo, in a tone that was simultaneously casual and serious. The kiddo would have annoyed Lara, except she had already realised it was as much of a part of Shonda's style as her husky voice and expansive hand gestures. Shonda's speech sparkled with kiddo, referring not only to Lara, but also Jazzmine, Raylene, Priscilla, Carmen, and even Catherine who did not work with them and who did not seem describable by any of Shonda's terms.

Kiddo was absent only when she spoke to Chip, or Mr. Q., or the boys in the back like Bo or Xavier or Armand. She called all of them sir, with a sarcastic lilt, it seemed to Lara. It was the same way she spoke to the customers, who she called sweetie.

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The student who picked Lara up at the airport introduced herself as Madison. She told Lara she was a second-year law student and would be a second-generation attorney. She told Lara she was using one of the law school vehicles for the drive back to campus. She told Lara she did not have a very good grade point average, but she hoped to improve this semester.

The highway from the airport was wide and relatively uncrowded. Palm trees stretched like a row of long thin pencils with shredded green eraser tops. A bridge rose from the causeway, lifting them closer to the sunset-streaked sky.

Madison chattered.

Breast enhancements, Lara heard.

Excuse me?

I guess I am just wondering. I mean, like about feminist stuff. They said you were like a feminist. I guess you disapprove of me. It did improve my self-esteem. Which is really important to feminists and everything. Isn't it?

Yes, self-esteem is important, Lara agreed.

It was part of my coming out process, really. Like one last try to be attractive to men and everything. To get it all under control.

Did it hurt? Lara asked.

Coming out or the boob job?

Lara laughed. Either, she said.

Both were pretty painful. But I think the surgery was worst. Mainly because they lied. They said it wouldn't hurt. But it did.

When they arrived on campus, Madison escorted Lara to her room, a so-called suite named after some donor or another. Lara tried not to look at Madison's breasts, but did. They seemed over-large, and did not move with the rest of Madison's too scrawny body.

It's like, so good to have a homosexual woman here, Madison said.

Excuse me, Lara said.

Sorry, Madison apologised. It's just that Professor Patrick is a big closet case. And I thought they said that you, you know, that you like girls.

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Lara listens to the introduction of herself. First there is the indicia of celebrity, commonplace California experiences – movies, television, gossip – gained glimmer here. Then there are some numbers. The number of trials and wins, which are the same, indicating that she is a lawyer with choices. Then her clients, sometimes by name, but usually by moniker. The jailbait case involved a pair of young women who looked younger, like girls, and who were indicted for luring a man to his death simply because he wanted to have sex with them. The alleged murder turned out to be a heart attack. Lara had a former lover in the medical examiner's office to thank for that one.

The introducer skims over what the press called the crack-whore case. The defendant was just as young as the women in the jailbait case, but less sympathetic. A man had his throat slit with a six-inch knife; the knife was found between his body and the woman's. It had taken Lara longer than it should have to figure out the girl was left-handed and the slice was the work of a right-handed slasher. She had been pursuing justification defenses.

There is polite applause. Lara stands. She looks at Bo, his light blue eyes gleaming with a calm amusement.

I didn't realise you'd become so famous, he says.

She tries to deflect his words as she walks the short distance to the lectern.

Thank you for that lovely introduction. I'm honoured to be here and participate in this event, with my esteemed co-panelist, Bo Marks. I'm thrilled to return to this fine institution, where I was a law student myself.

I've been asked to speak about justice. So I want to talk about the future of young women, of all classes and colours and sexualities. How the law can bring about justice for all women. If we don't try to control them. If we are scrupulous about the truth.

Mostly they laugh in the right places. She charms; she is conscious of charming. She tells them about her less celebrated work.

Perhaps no one will ever know the best thing you have done, she says.

Perhaps you don't want people to know the best thing you have ever done, she does not say.

She addresses them as part of a civil rights community and as committed feminists.

These are hopes rather than lies, she tells herself.

Wild unsubstantiated hopes, but not lies.

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Lara asked the Academic Dean for the loan of a law school car, who asked the Dean of Finance, who asked the Dean, who said yes.

The sea had not moved, or not noticeably, although one of the bridges was gone and what had been a single island had been hewn in unequal halves by seasons of hurricanes. But an obstacle course had been erected between Gulf Boulevard and the actual Gulf, which consisted of cliffs of pastel condominiums, gated and guarded. When she finally found a public parking lot, there were sentries of parking meters, demanding their bribes. Lara had not brought quarters; she'd simply risk a parking ticket on behalf of the school.

She lifted her palm-tree printed shift over her head, placing it on the car floor over her sandals. Her bathing suit, bright magenta with a diminutive Indian print design of stylised flowers in iridescent yellow, was neither skimpy nor demure. She was glad for her California tan. She walked south, toward the long curve she recalled, now outlined by a jagged wall of stucco buildings. She followed the trajectory of pointing fingers and spied a smooth gray fin skimming the surface of the water, and then another. Dolphins. They were reassuring. And inviting.

She found an uncrowded spot, stepped into the water, took off her sunglasses, and dove under.

Lara expected to be assailed by memory, large hurricane-huge waves that would pull her out to sea, but there was barely an undulation in the tepid Gulf of Mexico. She surfaced easily and put the dripping sunglasses over her eyes. She adjusted her swimsuit, although no one was near.

When she turned back toward the shore, she did see what looked like people: large, swathed in dark, staggering gracelessly. Through her spotted sunglasses, they seemed like dreams, or apparitions, as ominous as the dolphin fins were congenial. Finally, she distinguished three figures. She could hear their high-pitched laughter, like girls.

They were girls. They wore long black skirts and high-collared long-sleeve blouses in the water. One carried something – a bonnet? – in her hand. Her other hand clasped the hand of one of her companions. Their skirts ballooned around them, sooty parachutes, gradually sinking as they absorbed the sea water. Lara was glad there were no waves to drag the young women – were they Mennonite? Amish? – under.

Lara saw them waving to bearded men on shore. The men wore bathing shorts, their white chests and bare legs glittering like bleached coral in the sun.

She did not want to walk out of the sea and past them. A desultory freestyle stroke, gentle enough not to dislodge her sunglasses, propelled Lara south, toward the point of Crescent Beach. There was something in Lara that wanted to rescue the young women, to take them back to the law school, and then to California.

But there was also something in Lara that made her swim away, without looking back.

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Lara sat on the beach with the others, in her favourite chair and sipping a Heineken, both taken from Raylene and Catherine's porch. She reached for her pack of cigarettes. She had come to favour the brand with a ring of flowers printed on the filter, thinner than usual cigarettes, and longer. She lit the feminine cigarette with a book of matches from the club. She practiced a sophisticated style, angling two fingers upward at the vivid sky. As the cigarette burned down, she clutched it between her thumb and forefinger, sucking at it like a joint.

Does anyone have a Tampax? Carmen asked.

Carmen swore that Tampax wrappers made the best rolling papers.

Lara wondered if she had time to spread oil on her legs before Carmen returned with a perfectly rolled joint.

A tan was an asset, but one had to be careful there were no lines. The costumes at the club were small; Lara's cotton Indian print bathing suit was smaller. It was odd. Men could just walk along Crescent Beach, past all the shacks like the one painted coral by Raylene and Catherine, and see the same amount of flesh they could see at the clubs, perhaps more. So the men must come to the clubs for something else. Power? Control?

There were girls who sold – who went into what they called management – but fewer than one might think. And they were not of the same calibre as themselves. It was definitely a slip, a demotion, an indication of desperation. It could be age or drugs or getting too tight with someone who did not have one's best interests at heart, which was just about everyone one knew.

Raylene tilted her face upward, sunning her acne. She had a boyish body that appealed to a certain type of customer. Her bathing suit was mostly strings.

Raylene and Catherine were a generous couple. Even when they weren't home, their friends were welcome to come by, raid the refrigerator they kept on their porch, take chairs and towels, and enjoy the beach. On weekends and for sunsets, the friends included Catherine's co-workers from her construction job. They were building towering edifices on the inlet and down the beach, even the most inexperienced among them developing specialties and work histories.

The construction workers had the best pot.

The rest of the women and men worked in entertainment: the clubs, mostly.

They had the best cocaine, the best heroin, the best speed, the best quaaludes. They could also dance the best.

When they sat on the beach, they told stories, traded gossip, and teased each other.

I cannot stand shaving every day, Raylene complained. Makes me want to do construction so I don't have to shave my legs.

You don't seem hairy, Priscilla said.

That's cause I shave. I have to shave my damn tits these days. I don't know what the hell is happening to me.

Too much ganja, one of the guys said. Same thing happening to me.

Fuck you, Raylene said. She was laughing.

There was talk of unions, in construction and in clubs.
But this is a right-to-work state, someone said. It was not Lara, who gave a wide berth to any conversation flecked with law.
Meaning what? Catherine asked.
Meaning no union shops. Meaning you can get fired if your boss hears you say the word union.
I'll get fired if Chip even sees a hair on me, Raylene said.
You stay away from Chip, Catherine said.
He ain't so bad, Shonda said.
You've certainly changed your tune since you got that house, Catherine said.
You should come over, Shonda said. Bring some wine.
You still got them wine glasses?
If we were paid union wages ... Raylene said.
Fuck unions, Priscilla said. More of a chance to find a bale washed up right here on Crescent Beach.
A suitcase full of cash would be simpler, someone suggested.
You could go into management, Carmen said. She looked at Shonda, who looked away.
I know what the fuck that means, someone said.
You know shit, Carmen said.
Let's get back to the suitcase full of money, Raylene said.
They smoked dope and schemed spending the phantom cash.
You have to think carefully about what you'd want most, Carmen said.
You sound like Chip.
I think I'd want silicone implants, Carmen said.
What's that? Raylene asked.
Like you'd just go to some surgeon and pay cash and open up your shirt? Catherine asked.
We're just talking, Carmen said.
You'd probably just smoke it all, one of the guys said.
I thought we were talking about finding cash? Shonda said.
Or at least a bale, Raylene said.
No one had ever anticipated finding a body.
Certainly not Raylene. Certainly not that Raylene would find Shonda, twisted and bloated on the floor of Shonda's dream house.
Raylene backed out of the kitchen. She drove over to the construction site for Paradise Point Estates. Catherine. Catherine. After a while, Raylene managed to tell Catherine what she'd seen.

Catherine recruited a bunch of her apprentice carpenters to ride in the bed of her truck over to Shonda's place. Inside the house, blood everywhere, the kitchen cabinet doors flung open. One of the guys vomited, right there on Shonda's floor.

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In the classroom, there were twenty-six students and distinguished attorney-in-residence Lara Travers. Lara had subdivided the students into five groups, with much consternation among the students as to which group would have the extra student. The simulation she had prepared was being greeted with similar uneasiness. They were supposed to be constructing policy statements about prostitution, advocating different regulatory schemes such as criminalisation, decriminalisation, legalisation, and regulation. She had outlined their roles and their possible arguments.

Was this in the readings?, one student asked.

Yes. Lara suggested that each group might want to first review the assignment and select a passage which might be helpful.

What if we get the wrong one?

Work as a group and I'll be coming around to make suggestions.

What if we disagree? Madison, the young woman who had picked Lara up from the airport, asked.

Lara wondered why these students were so insecure. They had done the reading; she could see their texts highlighted in pink and green and blue, studded with marginal notes.

It was a different kind of preparation that they lacked.

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The applause for her talk seems enthusiastic and genuine.

Lara flushes as she goes back to the round table, adjusting the scarf around her neck.

Bo stands.

Nice job, Bo says.

They listen to Bo's introduction. Gadfly is a recurring word. His adult businesses and strip clubs and lingerie shops and dancing clubs are mentioned, but it is difficult for Lara to tell how many there really are. Six? Seven? It seems the city has tried to close them all. Bo has fought back and he usually wins.

He walks to the space she had vacated, ready for his turn to entertain.

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The jacaranda bloomed lilac, its smell cloying. Blossoms fell onto the sidewalk, the perfume crushed by her footsteps, fermenting with unpleasant sweetness. It was humid and the smell of it stuck to her skin, an unchosen perfume.

She was walking to the grocery store, west of the campus.

They kept the school grounds like a showcase, the thick-bladed grass clipped and the tropical plants showered so that their leaves gleamed like oiled furniture. In the grocery store, she got a six-pack of water. She selected two bottles of red wine, a Pinot Noir and a Shiraz, and found a single wine glass and a corkscrew with handles shaped like sea shells.

The cashier did not ask her for proof of age.

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On Sunday afternoons, they would crowd in the bed of Catherine's truck, abandoning the beach for a wooden building on a rutted rural road. They were like girls then, happy and giggling, pushing and shoving each other, inhabiting a world in which ice cream made all troubles recede.

Butter pecan, Lara announced her choice.

You are not predictable, Carmen said.

Shonda always had peach, someone said.

What the hell was she doing? Messing with him? Cause she wanted a house? I'm so pissed at that girl. Raylene started crying.

Chip's not so bad, Carmen said.

Don't be stupid, Jazzmine said. I saw Shonda's cabinets filled with guns. I went over to her house. She seemed lonely. She showed me. Automatic weapons.

Lara wanted to ask about the wine glasses, but didn't.

I'm strictly a chocolate chip mint gal myself, Catherine said. She stroked Raylene's arm.

Raylene also had chocolate chip mint, like always. At least that had not changed, Lara thought.

Priscilla preferred vanilla.

How inappropriate. Just as Priscilla was not a suitable name for a stripper. Irony was not practiced at the club; it tilted too easily toward disappointment, resentment, hopelessness, and similar emotions that were not welcome among the girls. Especially with Shonda gone.

Priscilla always said stripper. Most of the women said exotic dancer. Only a few, like Lara and Raylene, said simply dancer. They didn't strip, after all. And there was nothing exotic about their dancing, unless one had only seen square dancing or the polka, which might actually be true for one customer in two thousand. Most of the men were repeaters. Except for the bachelor parties, which were embarrassingly obvious and not very much fun. The worst was a group of rowdy Mennonites who threw beer bottles. The dancers often had to rely on Chip to control that type of crowd.

After Carmen went missing, it was Priscilla who confronted Chip. Chip said he didn't know a thing. Maybe she had found a rich boyfriend now that she had gotten her implants.

Lara saw Bo and Xavier, like shadows, standing against the wall of the club.

They never saw Carmen again.

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Georgette Patrick invited her for coffee.

Sorry we didn't get a chance to talk at the reception. I'm afraid I'm not a very adept hostess. So I'm glad we could get together now; I wanted to get a chance to talk to you. Are you enjoying our weather?

Georgette was not the first professor to mention the weather. They spoke about it as if they themselves had worked hard and long to produce it, like a book or a lengthy article. Or then again, Lara rethought, perhaps not everything was about work. Maybe they were simply proud that they had been smart enough to choose this place to live. Among all the cold and war-torn and inhospitable places in the world, they had located some place pleasant and settled here. Or perhaps it was not pride at all; she might have misread that as well. Perhaps it was luck that inflected their voices. Which could, they must well know, change in an instant, with the strong sustained winds of a hurricane named Amy or Babette or Carmen or even Shonda.

Apparently Lara's nod had not been sufficient.

Lucky to come to paradise at this time of year, aren't you? Georgette was insistent.

I live in California, she reminded her.

That's so far, Georgette said. And there are earthquakes there.

Lara blanked her face, as if a witness or the judge had said something especially ludicrous. You had to trust the jury. Not say, far from what? Not throw up your hands and smirk and prance and gloat that you were obviously smarter. Not to compare and contrast hurricanes and earthquakes.

The weather is lovely, Lara finally replied.

I did want to mention something, though. Just don't think everyone can be as brave as you. You seem to have a charmed life. So I hope you don't slip and say something.

About what?

It's not that I'm not out, it's just that I don't like to advertise it.

To who?

Well, you saw what it's like here. I've got colleagues like Arden.

Arden?

Yes, the wife. The other night? At my place? You met her.

I'm not sure I remember ...

You do. She doesn't have a stove! Her husband still thinks he's in a bunker in the jungle.

Oh, yes.

Well, she is chair of my tenure committee. My scholarship is in Labour Law. She doesn't really believe there should be workers' protections, you know.

Not good, Lara said.

It's fine. No, it's fine. I mean, as long as what is private stays private. Sex is always private, don't you think?

Do you feel the same way about prostitution?

What are you saying?

I was trying to have a discussion in class ...

No, I'm just saying I hope you exercise some self-control and don't go talking about who is or isn't a you-know-what.

* * *

Bo is mumbling.

He is discussing cases by the United States Supreme Court without naming them or quoting them. Ballroom dancing is not protected speech, he says, but erotic dancing is different. The government often lies that it is not trying to prohibit the dancing itself, but its secondary effects.

Like prostitution and more serious crimes.

Murder and such. He laughs.

Adult entertainment, when conducted properly, when run as a business, is no more likely to engender prostitution or murder than an ice cream shop.

Perhaps less so.

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Lunch with Dennis Isher in the faculty dining room was dispiriting. He had asked her, he said, because he felt he should welcome back one of our own.

How does it feel to be home?, he asked.

Luckily he did not wait for an answer.

Let me see what I can tell you about some of your old professors, he said. Yours truly, well, I'm just about the same.

Actually, she had not had Isher for Corporations, but some professor who was just visiting. She quickly chose not to remind him, then soon regretted it. He was telling her about his memories of her. Always quick to answer. Always prepared. She sat with the other girls in the back row, didn't she? He must have confused her with another female student. There were not that many then.

Remember Gary Sebastian? You most likely had him for Criminal Law. He dropped dead on the morning of his exam. Died in his sleep. Wasn't even sick. Of course, we didn't tell the students until after they took the exam. The Dean graded it. Hal Brooks laughed and said that Sebastian figured out a sneaky way not to mark all his exams. Then the next semester, Hal did nearly the same thing. Only Hal died after he turned in his grades. Went home, had a martini or an iced tea or something, and his head just hit the table. Heart attack.

Lara shook her head. Easy lives and easy deaths, she thought.

So, I'm the only one left of the fearsome foursome.

Lara did not recall being afraid of any of her professors or who the other one might be.

She only remembered that none of them were women. Not one.

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In the small law library elevator, Lamar Buchanan, the Third, told his classmate Lara Travers that he would get her next time. It took her a minute to realise that next time meant next semester and get her referred only to grades. The bones of her chest stopped constricting. The elevator seemed less like a casket.

Although Professor Sebastian nailed you today. I almost felt sorry for you.

It wasn't so bad, Lara said.

She liked Criminal Law, if not the professor. He made the students stand when called upon. It was more uncomfortable than dancing, so Lara pretended it was only that. She moved to his ill-chosen music, responding to his questions, but not courting his approval. There were no points for class participation. He liked her or he did not. Fuck him.

And fuck little Lamar the third. Another puffy white boy, his hands doughy and smooth. He smelled like some cheap aftershave. Aqua Velva, she thought. It was a popular men's aftershave, with a clear tropical colour. Lara always imagined that if she sipped it, she would feel cool and hot simultaneously. It was like dancing that way. The sensation of embracing sensations.

She skipped out of the elevator into the brightness.

Lara was not surprised to see him. The first thing that she noticed was his boots, although that could not have been true. He was large and the motorcycle larger. He wore no helmet and his red hair seemed wild despite the slick ponytail. Chip's arms were thicker and more muscled than her thighs, and they were forested with hair like redwoods, as was the part of his chest visible around his black leathered vest.

Hop on, he said.

Lara just looked at him, calculating how much he must know, to find her outside law school, and how much he must not realise, to tempt her with a mere motorcycle.

It's a BMW. It could be yours. I'll teach you to ride.

She glanced behind her and saw Lamar standing near the front of the law library, squinting at her. Lara waved at him and got on the back of the motorcycle. Chip handed her a helmet,

and she put it on her head, trying to adjust the chin strap as he was already rolling down the street.

The rumour was that Bo Marks was the one who found Chip face down in his own bed with a six-inch knife embedded in his body. There was less blood than one might have thought, the rumours were consistent about that fact. But the reports disagreed about the knife's location. The back. The throat. The chest. Right through the liver.

Chip's real name turned out to be Wallace Mikolinski, or that's what it said in the newspapers.

An irate father, a vengeful girl, or an efficient mob eradication. The last explanation proved the most popular, although knives were not thought to be favoured by organised crime. No one was ever indicted.

The girls sat on the beach in front of Raylene and Catherine's small house, speculating and sunning themselves.

I still miss Shonda, Raylene said.

Kiddo, oh kiddo, Lara whispered.

* * *

Lara refused the label of insomnia. Tonight, like other nights, sleep evaded her, like an idea that hovered just beyond the reach of words. But this did not mean she suffered from some romantic condition with a scientific name. Perhaps it was hormonal, and therefore natural. Normal. Certainly not something to be treated by therapy or elaborate prescriptions. A glass, or two, of red wine should be balm enough.

The suite on the law school campus was stuffy. Lara tried one of the windows, but her arms lacked the strength to open it. For a moment, it seemed her room was like a room at the women's dormitory at a minimum security prison. The next moment, Lara was outside.

The crescent moon sliced a crooked white smile into the dark. She was barefoot and the thick grass scratched at her ankles. She wished she still smoked; something long and thin in her fingers would be a comfort. Or something stubby that she could pull into her lungs.

She had expected drama, perhaps.

Or revelation.

* * *

At the end of their speeches, Lara and Bo stood by their round table, talking to the members of the audience who came up to speak with them. The student with the fake breasts – that was how Lara thought of her now – called her talk “inspiring.”

A man she almost remembered approached her, his hand thrust forward.

Lamar Buchanan, the Third, he said. We were classmates.

I remember, Lara lied.
I teach here now, he said.
Do you enjoy it? she asked, conscious of trying to be polite.
I'm an adjunct teaching Construction Law.
Constitutional Law?
No. No. Construction Law! I have an exciting practice in the area. I do lots of construction arbitrations. They're amazingly fascinating.
I imagine they are.
Creepy, isn't he? Bo was now standing close to her, replacing the scent of Lamar Buchanan. Some sort of cheap aftershave?
I guess. I went to law school with him.
He's got lots of mob connections. Represents the big developers. Always suspected of being in a little too deep with them, if you know what I mean.
I guess, Lara repeated.
Can I ask you something?, one of Bo's girls said to Lara.
The girl was boyishly built and acned, and maybe the same age as Lara's client, the left-handed slasher, had been. The girl probably wanted to talk about that case or one of the others.
Raylene here just graduated law school, Bo told her proudly.
Raylene? Lara echoed.
The young woman put her hand up to her flat chest.
Anyway, your scarf? Where did you get it?
I don't recall, Lara lied, succumbing to pettiness.
Wouldn't be surprised if he had killed a few people, now and then, Bo said.
Who?
Your classmate Lamar.
People might say the same of you, Lara answered.
She did not look at him.
Or of anyone? Bo asked.
Lara decided he was not expecting her to answer.

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