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Cleavage; or a Director's Notes

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Things that resemble breasts: teardrops; flower petals; melons; water balloons; the drooping, wrinkled cheek of the elderly woman who serves coffee at the shop down the way; the oversized bubble of foam floating in the cup; the white, unblemished, saucer; the letter “m”; the cleavage of an unruffled moon peeking out above dark clouds. It was Friday evening, and as Anna sat waiting for her lover, she tried to remember the day. But all she could think of were the breasts that polluted her life; they fell into her lap like pearls slipping off a string. She was an overwhelmed oyster, collecting an assortment of gems that were not her own. Anna sighed, realizing that the only thing not resembling a breast was the floppy, silicon pancake that she had tucked into her bra. The prosthetic knew its fallacy better than she did, and it had dropped out of her shirt when the bus made a sharp turn. Anna imagined it covered in dust, ripping open, huddled in a corner with candy wrappers and used travel tickets. She shuddered and pushed its ugly homelessness out of her mind.

It was her birthday, you know. Friends had called, inviting her over for dinner, or maybe a movie, or a coffee date at the very least. But Anna had plans with the mysterious lover who lived in the building across from her apartment. Not a lot of details were spoken; her love life was private, after all. She only mentioned that he was handsome, that he was rather younger, but very sexy, very sweet. And they were going to spend her birthday together. It would be a quiet, careful fifty-first. She would wear her billowy, dark red dress that hid the asymmetry of the abandoned right breast. And there would be wine, and candles, and a small chocolate cake.

But she was tired, always tired—an endless fatigue that made her dizzy, depressed, cold, and terribly absent. So on the evening of her birthday, Anna sat alone in the bathtub, doing her arm exercises with a heavy heart and aching armpits. A swollen bathing sponge was her lone companion, and she held it over the scar across the left side of her chest, keeping her otherwise naked heart warm and modest. Though, admittedly, it was something like relief to be unclothed. Her deformed sensuality was at the fore of every thought, every movement—all day she longed to caress her own limbs, to stroke the bare skin, stare at the full breast, brush fingers over the empty breast. A tiny variation of the body, and suddenly its vulnerable construction becomes unbearably clear. Such exposure was frightening, poignant, and strangely erotic. And so Anna spent her days with a small, glowing desire to undress, to unravel, to live naked.

She raised the left arm, slow and aching. She held it high for several moments, trembling, and then lowered it, steady and controlled, back into the bath's warm depths. The sound of the limb gently splashing into water reminded Anna of her presence; she was still there. Her body was rather separate from the self, but the ache of that gap was soothed by the body's private gaze—it bore witness to Anna and the struggles of troubled mind and longing heart.

She lengthened her body, and leaned back so that only head and toes were above water. Looking up at the dirty ceiling, she imagined a tiny, invisible camera peering down at her. The possibility was vaguely pleasing, and she curated the footage in her mind—long legs, wrinkled but sensually so, soft stomach, no longer flat but nonetheless inviting—like sweet pillow, and solitary breast, large, drooping, with the other scarred side winking like an overgrown eye. And the face: pale, sallow, poetic, lovely.

The doorbell rang, finally. She imagined the look of horror on her dear friends' faces if she told them the true story of her lover. That a twenty-one-year-old boy had watched from his window as she undressed for the first time following the mastectomy; that he stared as she wept; that although she had closed the blinds with fear and devastation when she caught him looking, during one horrible evening she had gone to the stranger's door and they had made love on his small bed—her crying all the while, him still staring, solemn and silent. The whole thing was unwise, a rather un-

seemly affair, but they spent many more nights in each other's homes, in each other's arms, breathing and washing, Anna's unevenness slightly more healed with each exchanged heartbeat.

The door was unlocked. She heard him open the door, and walk through her apartment hesitantly, in disbelief. Anna closed her eyes, and the soundtrack of his movements swept over her like the delight of childhood memories, like the redness of unspoken shame—an excitement, an elation, a disquiet that took no particular form, that shifted constantly, unexpectedly, with determination, with urgency, with a peculiar sense that the house of the body, the walls of the apartment, were all crumbling beyond fathomable repair.

“Anna?”

“Anton.”

Anna was deeply touched by the companionship of their names, by the tangible solace between their mothers. Anna's mother, an Iranian woman—teacher, writer, reader, baker, soft voice, flawless hair, olive skin—had been reading *Anna Karenina* when she was pregnant with her daughter. She appropriated the Russian name casually, carelessly, delighted, and unmoved by the story's tragic end. Anton was named after his father, Anton, who was named after the grandfather, Anton, and Anton's mother liked to insist that they had some vague, essential connection to Chekhov. Anna, former drama teacher, former actress, performing person, performing patient, felt even more deeply drawn to Anton when she learned about his imagined relation to the Russian playwright.

Of course, they rarely spoke of such things. They slept, touched, and Anna rehearsed lines with Anton, who was acting for his university's contemporary theatre company. The stars had come together in some dark way, for the school's play was *W;t*—a story about the brilliant Vivian Bearing, a scholar of metaphysical poetry who had ovarian cancer. Anna was no fool, and she often wondered whether Anton—steady, serious, motivated—was attracted to her because her physical condition aligned so utterly, so mystically, with the central character of *W;t*. She was the perfect research subject, the perfect teacher. Anna knew, acutely but still not resigned, that the affair would meet its inevitable end once the play was over. He would dispose of her the way ambitious youth always do, ruminating about the tragic brevity of their encounter, treasuring the ethereal memories, but moving on, invincible and ready to explore new territory, new lovers and teachers. Perhaps one day she would crop up in his lousy play, and her breast would symbolize something or other.

It must be said that she was not entirely opposed to being exploited thus. She was a charming lover, a spectacular muse—so magnetic that the spotlight shifted, always, in her direction, shining brightly through the space between her legs, the nook between torso and arm, through the curve of her neck, her shoulder. If he was using her, it was just a happy side effect. Anna was the main affair.

“Happy birthday.”

“Thank you, sweetheart. Now, quickly, tell me about the prettiest breasts you saw today.” She reached for his belt.

Anton laughed, and she enjoyed his exasperation.

“Is there nothing else about my day you’d like to know?” He stepped out of his jeans, pulled off his sweater and Anna looked at the boy, in his underwear, and her impulsive excitement faltered—he was as flesh and bones as she was. The delicate wholeness, the spiritual something that coloured her imaginative vision of Anton often tainted their time together. Anna was made entirely of highs and lows, elated then disgusted, content then disappointed, worried then carefree as a bird who’s lived its whole life in vast forests with no fringe in sight.

“Nothing at all.” Anna smiled.

“Well, there was my calc professor.” He stepped into the bath, and her desire for him returned like a balloon expanding from within.

“Oh? Dr. I’m-a-young-beautiful-mathematic-genius. Describe her tits to me again.”

“You’re better at this than I am. I can’t come up with that many adjectives.”

Anna handed him her sponge. “Well, repeat what you’ve got.”

“Round. Big. Full.”

“Lovely.” She closed her eyes as he turned her around, gently, to lather her back.

“So tell me what *you* saw today.”

“Well, there was a martini glass, and it had the most perfect figure! When I drank from it, I half expected the liquid to be a magical elixir that would transform my body.”

Anton pressed his lips against her shoulder. She had made him uncomfortable.

“Now, Anton, let’s go over your lines.”

He leaned back in the tub.

“Ok, the part where I take Vivian’s history.”

“Lovely.”

“How old are you?” How quickly he adopted Jason’s rough spirit.

Anna leaned against him.

“Fifty.” Well, Anna thought, I’m officially forever older than this poor woman.

“Are you married?”

“No.”

Anton breathed in, deep. “Are your parents living?”

Anna tilted her head and brought her ear closer to his heartbeat. “No.”

“How and when did they die?”

“My father, suddenly, when I—oh, I forget this line. Something.... My mother slowly. Forty-one, forty-two. Breast cancer?”

“Cancer?”

Anna giggled.

“You’re breaking character,” Anton said. “You told me never to break character so close to opening night.”

“Breast cancer.”

“I see. Any siblings?”

“No.”

“Do you have any questions?”

“Not so far.”

“Well, that’s about it for your life history.”

Anna kissed him, and parted her lips, wishing that the weight of hopelessness in her body could

be transferred, conveyed, and slightly alleviated by the sharing of inhales and exhales.

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W;t was a dark play. But it was not the darkness—of the subject matter, of the hospital room, of the nighttime death—that made Anna dread seeing it in the flesh. In fact, it was the glimmer of light at the end, when Vivian finally appears to repent, or regret, or become compassionate toward herself, or God, or whomever—when she walks into the spotlight, naked, “beautiful”—that filled Anna with great apprehension. Anna scoffed at this ending each time they read it. She dismissed the epiphany: it made her secretly anxious because she had found no such light; she had never stripped naked beneath a glowing, revelatory brightness. She had never experienced a spiritual awakening—no sacred wisdom had unraveled as a result of the cancer. And so the play, fictional though it was, made her doubt the unquestionable reality of her own life.

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But opening night arrived, prompt and indifferent, like most life events. It was snowing, and during that dark wintery depth of a night, Anna somehow remembered her performance in the spring scene of *Three Sisters*. She had been twenty years old, playing Masha Prozorov, the middle sister. There had been simulated bird sounds, a plastic park

bench, and a shadow of leaves covering the stage, implying fresh sunlight. As she walked now through the snow, Anna felt suddenly like she had just drawn back from her tearful goodbye kiss with Vershinin. And she remembered the wave of authentic, uncontrolled pain that overflowed from feigned devastation—as though an actress had inadvertently picked up a real gun rather than a fake gun, and the audience had offered the dying, bleeding woman a smiling, booming, standing ovation. *Encore!*

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Anna was wearing a long fur-trimmed coat, high leather boots, and that dark red dress. Her eyes were large, her lips were full and bright, and her black hair was stylishly short. Surely no one could tell that she had only one breast, that she was the guest of a very young lover, and that she knew every line of the play. People likely believed she was the attractive, worldly wife of a professor at the school (not the overage muse of the male lead, and not a poor pathetic cancer patient seeking solace from a story that was barely relevant to her own life). Anna especially despised assumptions when they were too true. When people learned she had cancer, they always assumed breast cancer, because she was a woman. Of course, something was displaced when they realized she had Middle Eastern ancestry. Somehow that fact required more thoughtfulness and was not immediately reconcilable with breast cancer.

She presented her ticket, followed signs to the theatre, and sat down near the front. There were five rows below, mostly unfilled, that were “reserved for medical students.” Anna’s curiosity and sociability got the better of her and she tapped the shoulder of a young woman sitting in the fifth row. She usually felt quite uncomfortable with health-care professionals and students, nervous that they could deduce her one-breastedness.

The girl explained that she and her classmates were to submit a review of the play for their S.A.D. class (social aspects of disease). Such a class would apparently teach them “empathy, compassion, bedside manner—things like that!” Anna all but rolled her eyes at the girl. As if any of them—any person—could ever truly see beyond their own bodies. As if we humans are able to surpass distance and difference, even slightly—such a fallacy is the real conceit. This is the true beauty, the true horror of living, dying, watching theatre.

And so began the play. Anton was excellent—almost unrecognizable, and more desirable than ever. Anna was disturbed and delighted by how skillfully he concealed his true demeanor behind Jason’s cruelty. She was thrilled—both envious and excited—that he could play another person so well. There was fear in her heart, but the fear grew small as the heart burst with breathless pride.

But the audience became increasingly distracting. She was annoyed by their laughter during moments of wit, and irritated by their sniffing sounds when Jason was particularly abusive towards Vivian. Anna soon needed air, but of course, ac-

according to Edson's obnoxious stage directions, the damn play had no intermissions. So what, she decided, so what! She could move as she pleased—impolitely, disruptively—so be it! Such was life. Just as she exited the theatre, she muttered, under her breath, with Vivian, "Are you going to be sorry when I—do you ever miss people?"

"Everybody asks that. Especially girls," Jason responded.

"What do you tell them?" Vivian continued on stage.

"I tell them yes."

Anna looked up at the stage, and observed Jason in his lab coat. She undressed him with her eyes and imagined Anton's slender chest and small frame. What if instead of a prosthetic breast she had another mastectomy? What if she shed her voluptuary concerns and adopted a boyish body? She would be as lithe, as lovely as Anton—a supple blank canvas, a sweet winter tree—firm as Anton, forever as Anton. Just touching his body was no longer enough—maybe relief would come if she internalized him, if she wore him, consumed him, absorbed him. She saw his body, imagined her head atop his shoulder, and the sensual longing that thus exploded inside her was suddenly frightening. These musings seemed reprehensible. What had gotten into her? The scar of lost breast was cursed—or was it the left-behind breast that had grown bitter, igniting such thoughts?

She was outside, finally, and she was shaking. She kneeled, and a hot tear escaped from her eye. A familiar, horrible heaviness returned, and an im-

penetrable, transparent blanket fell between Anna and the rest of the world.

“You okay?”

Anna turned to the deep voice and saw a young student standing nearby, leaning against the building. He rubbed his hands together, keeping them warm.

“Yes. I’m perfectly fine.” She stood up, wiping the tear. A human, a person, a full, complete being to suppress, to depress, to conceal her obsessive wonderings.

“Pretty shit play, huh?”

“Yes. Horrible.” She smiled, curious and social again. “Are you a student here?”

“Med student.”

“Ah. So why aren’t you seated somewhere in rows one to five? They were reserved for you, after all.”

“I just have to sign the sheet at the beginning and at the end. Fulfills the expectation.”

“Fulfills the expectation—to see a play about cancer. Lovely.”

“You said it was a shit play too.” He pulled a small flask out of his jacket and took a swig.

“I’ll forgive your crassness if you share.”

She noticed him observing her. She wasn’t bad looking. Old, but tall. A nice smile. Nice boots. He handed her the bottle. She put her lips on it, just as the hot alcohol finally flooded his cold, bored insides.

“So, no empathy for you, then?” Anna stepped closer to return the bottle.

“I’ve got enough empathy, don’t you worry.”

“Whatever you say, doctor.” He was taller than Anton, far more handsome, and he came bearing alcohol. Anton was dark and skinny, but the medical student was fair and thick. At that moment, returning to the theatre, returning to the audience, returning to stand before Anton (who was forgetful! who had surely already forgotten her!) was the worst hell possible. The med student smiled, took a drink, and brought the bottle to her lips. She took what was left.

“I have more in my car.” And so to the car they went, the snow falling relentlessly upon them.

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Anna returned to the theatre nearly an hour later, happy, drunk, and slightly more fulfilled. The play was just ending. She heard the final words—Anton’s, Jason’s, “Oh God”—and she watched Vivian, naked, beautiful, reaching for the light. Anna stared at Vivian’s breasts—the breasts of a young, healthy actress. They were not another “thing that looked like breasts,” they *were* breasts—round and robust as a bulging, floating bubble in the bath. How she ached to extend her arm and reach back, toward those breasts. But they were unattainable, and she was filled, suddenly, with a thick rage. And in the darkness of the crowd, Anna was hot and bright, and nefarious though it may be, she imagined herself entirely breastless—sliced, finally to nakedness. *Lights out.*

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