

CUTTING LIMERENCE

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1.

A little ways into the forest is a row of nipa huts. The huts overlook a river. Lining the riverbank are coconut trees, and at the foot of one tree, on a narrow wooden bench, is where she sits, staring at the green water.

Downriver, a short distance away, a boy in an ascot cap rises from a fallen log and walks over to her. He sits on the ground beside the bench and asks her for her name.

She points to the red welts dotting his legs and says, where did you get those?

He answers, mosquito bites.

She digs into her purse and hands him a bottle of citronella oil. Keeps off the bugs, she says, offering her markless forearm as evidence. Do you smell it?

He pours oil onto his palms and rubs them down his long, fair limbs. He tells her, now we taste the same.

She laughs at his misuse of the word, reaches out to take the bottle back. He catches her hand.

Between the unexpected touch and the slow exhalation, in the space of a moment paused, before sundown turns to nightfall, only the casual is admissible, only the careless safe.

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In the open-air dining hall, sitting at the table by the balustrade, they gaze at nothingness, the black mountain in front of them hiding any other view. The forest is alive with the chirping of crickets, and various animal calls.

In a corner of the balcony, across the hammocks, is a large bamboo bed, with a worn mattress, pillows, and quilted covers. With the plates cleared and the evening still young, she moves to recline on the bed, and opens the book she brought. He follows, as if tied to her wrist by a string, and lies back by her side, only their knees touching. From the bed they see patches of sky and tree boughs aglow with fireflies.

The innkeeper approaches them, asks if they would be staying in one of the double rooms. But we're not a couple, she laughs, In fact, I'm leaving tomorrow at noon. A few moments later and she is asleep, her head nestled on his shoulder.

Your skin is so beautiful, he tells her as her eyes flutter open, and your hands so small, as he presses his palm against hers. Yes, like caramel, she yawns, like a child's, she smiles.

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Under a makeshift shed in the mountain, they stop to take a rest. Shaded from the glare of the sun, she surveys the landscape. She has seen grander vistas, and closes her eyes. The wind is cool, the air dry and crisp and refreshing.

Hey, he calls her name, won't you give me a smile? Stop taking pictures of me, she tells him, even as she yields. She doesn't like striking a pose for the lens, arranging her features for a screen. But she doesn't mind smiling for him.

As they descend on muddy slopes, he offers her his hand. It's okay, I got it, she tells him, again and again, wondering that he doesn't tire of trying to help her anyway.

Back at the lodge, after the hike, he pauses at the threshold of the hut they shared with other travelers, expecting her to say goodbye. Instead, she kicks off her sandals, steps into the room, and asks him if he'd like to have lunch.

I'm glad you're staying another day, he tells her, laying his head on her shoulder. For an answer, she rests her head against his.

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The night before her departure, he asks for her email address and number, asks if he could visit her when he comes to the city. Maybe, she says, I'd like that. He moves to embrace her, and she looks up to meet his gaze.

In the balcony they bathe in warm lamplight. Beyond the balcony are shadows, unknown and unconsidered.

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She leaves at dawn. She does not wake him up. At the foot of his bed she places a calling card.

2.

Dear J,

The movie you said you'd watched and liked is still showing at the cinema in the mall I went to. I did not go to see it.

You know I revel in my solitariness and silence, but my habituation to your voice these past weeks and your exquisite conversation have spoiled me. In their absence, I feel deserted.

And so I turn to writing, as I have always done. Now that you are gone, I can read my books all night long, instead of discussing them with you as I sip coffee at my kitchen table until the early morning hours. But now that you are gone, I find you everywhere. I walk into a bookshop and take pictures of titles I'd like to share with you. I pick up a French novel, scan a few pages, and think, You'd probably like this book. I feel the urge to purchase it for you to read before you go backpacking from Paris to Provence. As I lose myself in the stacks and shelves, things I want to tell you come to mind. In your absence, I fill the pages of my journal; I write as though you and I were having one of our talks. When I have exhausted all words and you still have not returned, I know I must begin alienating myself from your traces.

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I believe that reading a novel about a fated love affair is almost as good as having one—maybe even better, because then there is no drama-shit to have to clean up after.

Today I started reading about two scholars—one of Jewish scripture, the other of Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*—who fall in love with each other in the course of a week, and what follows when the one flies to Israel, while the other stays in Canada. In the chapter where the characters explored each other's quarters (hers in an attic and his in a basement), I thought about the pictures you'd shown me of books stacked high on the floor of your studio apartment, the mess of blankets and pillows on the thin mattress where you sleep, the mug of cold black coffee and the crumpled pack of cigarettes beside it, your closet covered with the polaroids you took of your travels, the diagrammed sentences and pictograms drawn with chalk on your concrete walls. Your room is a library, lecture hall, and den. Your mind can roam the world without your body going out the door.

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For supper I went to a Japanese fastfood restaurant and ordered a bowl of miso ramen, which I did not like and could not finish. I remembered the last dinner we had several weeks ago, before you and I returned to our lives, before you took leave of my country. At the tail end of a long holiday, downtown seemed quieter than usual, the air warm and still. We stumbled upon the izakaya while looking for a Thai fusion bistro that didn't want to be found. Hungry and tired from a day of walking, the sight of agedashi tofu and vegetable teppanyaki for me portended nirvana. Equally excellent were the plate of gyoza that we shared, and your bowl of beef ramen that we did not. I remembered the look of abiding satisfaction on your face as you chewed the hand-pulled noodles and sipped the shoyu broth and saved the egg and the funny-looking narutomaki for last.

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Now that my Facebook account is out of use, I don't feel the compulsion to check your page every day for signs of life. I don't have to debate with myself about whether or not I should talk to you when a green dot pops by your name in the chat box. It is such a relief not to have to worry if I am crossing a line when I let you know without a doubt that I care.

I will talk to you when I need to. I will let you find me when you will. And if you don't, well. I choose to let go of all expectation and let events unfold in the open, until they are clear and I can confidently parse their reality. I shall not be one to dine on dreams, shit fiction, and take it for truth.

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If I tell you what I think I feel, we shall drift away from each other, into silence, into our own books, where the plots are varied and unpredictable, and therefore interesting, where the

pacing is measured and the language precise, and we tolerate no stale metaphors.

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I hope that in love you loosen like champagne streaming out of an emerald bottle to spill on my clean sheets.

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Don't worry. I will never tell you, Come back to me from your wandering soon; walk barefoot on deserted asphalt roads with me again and let's watch the dawn gently roll over the city.

3.

After the fairy tale comes a montage of familiar imagery, rose-tinted by sunrise in a strange city. How far would I travel to be where you are? Ten thousand kilometers by plane for him and eighty by bus for me, for these: half a day alone together, a meal shared, a long walk, a brush, a touch, a hand held, warm smile, lingering gaze, sweet words, soft embrace, promises and plans for the future, then—not goodbye but see you again.

When I sleep with butterflies fluttering in my head, I expect them to vanish with the dawn. But in the mornings after that morning, I would wake up to his words, transmitted over seas, setting the day on a lovelier note; in the evenings, too, his words would allay the cares delaying rest. His image figured in my daydreams and I allowed myself to ponder the possibility of satellite love.

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After the fairy tale and the rosy vignettes comes the fact: he lied. He was, indeed, not simply committed, but engaged to be married. (He did not reveal this to me; I found him out.) I

never thought such things happened in real life, and if they did, they weren't supposed to happen to me. And what had he to say about the whole affair upon my asking? Nothing. I got only his absence by way of confirmation of what has yet to be explained.

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After the fact comes the lesson: In life as in writing, development is key; beware the grand romantic narrative painted in precipitate strokes, beware clichés. Beware days that unfold too much like fiction.

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I tell myself it is no great matter—I am a girl who reads. Upon beginning a story, already I imagine its conclusion. For I know that every narrative ends, in clincher or question, abrupt silence or sentential goodbye. It's just that I did not expect *this* story to end so sharply. But I can handle neat closures, also the lack thereof. Schooled in the tenets of structuralism and beyond, I accept the death of the author and apply hermeneutics. I delve into the texts of his traces, his messages, and our conversations I noted, and remark on the grammar of his gestures, expressions, turns of phrase; I read and reread them, and try to reconstruct their meanings from memory. Was there, perhaps, some hint that I missed, a signifier I misread? He seemed such a genuine man. Perhaps he did not mean to deceive me.

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I do not doubt or dwell to hurt, to wither. I remember because it interests me to. I remember because I am trying to understand why—why he made me feel as if I had his heart when it already belonged to someone else, why I allowed him into mine so easily after walling it off all these years, why I still think of him when he simply disappeared without so much as an apology, why I even bother to write this.

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It's been ninety-two days since we met, sixteen since he broke my heart—or so I tend to put it, though my heart has never been broken (how do I escape this metaphor, this goddamned cliché?), just so I can justify all the lines I've been spewing out on account of him, like so:

Days after the break: soft sunlight peeking through rosy blinds, flushing whitewashed walls, linen, skin. A woman in bed, alone, undressed, bathing in depressing poetry.

And I said I'd had enough of clichés.

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Blindsided by the vanities and vagaries of life, I find refuge in literature and philosophy:

“The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it,” Jane Austen writes in *Pride and Prejudice*, “and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of merit or sense.”

“This whole business of being ‘in love’ is not an existential reality,” says David Lodge in *Small World*, “but a form of cultural production, an illusion produced by the mutual reflections of a million rose-tinted mirrors: love poems, pop songs, movie images, agony columns, shampoo ads, romantic novels.”

Talking about the justification of belief, Richard Foley states that “Deception does not preclude rationality.” Even so, wasn't I partly to blame? Have I been too trusting, too careless, too eager to buy into the discourse of romantic love? Have I been, in a word, stupid? And do I really have to damn anyone?

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I have decided that not everything needs to be dissected and pinned down. So I'll chalk it up to experience and leave it at that. No matter how many questions I ask and how much I ponder them, how often I trail his traces and refresh his Facebook page—as if I could find any answers there—would any of that undo anything? Would he steal back all his words and the hopes they birthed, hide them in his mouth and wash them down and smile, would we have remained friends? And is he, in the first place, worth lamenting? Is it even him I am keening about? I think I am grieving for myself and whatever illusions I may have held, and the dreams I can no longer harbor.

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I might meet the memory of him again, in a story, a poem, another's song—for I am a girl who writes and reads, who listens and sings. But for now I find it is finally no longer interesting to remember him, except as a lesson well-learned.

This is it, then. In release I take his silence and stopper my words. I am done trying to understand.
