

FRESH
FICTIONREADING
THE
SIGNS

SHE WASN'T THE PARANOID TYPE, NEVER HAD BEEN. SO WHY WAS THIS COSTAR OF DANNY'S, IN HIS SILLY SUMMER-STOCK PLAY, SENDING HER INTO A MENTAL TAILSPIN?

BY MARINA KEEGAN

THERE WERE SIX OF US. DANNY, THE bearded Noah, the delicate Eric, the old artistic director, Olivia, and me. Cape Cod was abandoned, but we were up in the artistic director's Provincetown shack for a post-cast-party party. Danny was doing summer stock again, and I'd driven up for the final performances. I actually ate a lobster by myself before I got to the theater, picking wet meat out of knuckles as I watched the summer's final families appear from a dune drop-off and bang boogie boards against the sides of their cars.

The show was terrible for two reasons: one, that the show was terrible, and two, that it involved a lot of kissing between Danny and Olivia. Danny smiling with his eyes inches from hers—pulling at her belt loop and touching her earlobe, which I'd taught him. There

was something about her I didn't like. It started the moment I saw them enter together onstage—holding hands—something disgusting growing in the back of my stomach.

At the party, she wore a T-shirt, not fitted or branded, and a flat-brimmed hat with the name of a New Orleans bait shop in neon orange. She drank beer and teased the boys, who didn't realize they stopped talking whenever she started to tell a story. I'd clicked through her pictures a few times that summer and imagined, on the

nights when Danny didn't text back, rehearsals that ended in beers and joints on beaches.

"Show her the one with the square penis!" Olivia laughed. "Ricky's partner is a painter," she explained. "And he has this painting of a square penis."

We all lunged up a banisterless staircase until we arrived at the painting, where everyone promptly knelt. I stood awkwardly, not sure whether or not I was involved. I felt an odd nostalgia for my high school friends and the days when everyone shared the same world of people. It was then that I noticed the print on Olivia's T-shirt for the first time. It was a dinosaur riding a bike below a REX'S FIX UPS AND MIX-UPS. It looked familiar: I remembered someone making a

joke about that dinosaur, laughing in some bar about its tiny hands holding the bike's handles. Eventually, Noah and Eric and the rest went downstairs to pack a bowl, and I slipped a hand in Danny's pocket, holding him back as the rest tumbled down.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi." He smiled. "I love you."

"I love you too. Come here."

I pulled him into a corner of the upstairs space, and we leaned against a bookcase, pressing our foreheads together. I hadn't seen

him since July, and being together in groups never felt like being together.

"I miss you," I said.

"I know," he said. "I love you." We kissed, but I could tell he wanted to go downstairs.

"You were good tonight."

"Thanks. I mean, the play is shit, but thank you."

"It's not."

"It is." We looked at each other and grinned. Danny rarely admitted this type of thing, and I was overcome with affection. I wanted to get out of this house and into the car and onto the freeway where we could zoom away from all the people I didn't know. Danny was looking at me, almost studying me.

"Argh, man," he said. "I missed

THE ENVY WAS TWOFOLD: JEALOUSY OF THE GIRL HE WAS SPENDING TIME WITH AND JEALOUSY OF HOW HE WAS SPENDING HIS TIME. PLAYING DUMB ACTING GAMES ALL DAY AND GETTING WASTED AT NIGHT AT THE BEACHCOMBER.

you. I really did miss you." His eyes were sad, and he kissed me on the nose. It was as if he'd just realized it. Just actualized the refrain of our phone calls.

"Good," I said.

"You know The Books are playing in Prospect Park next weekend," I said. "We should go."

"Yeah, for sure."

IT WASN'T UNTIL WE WERE WALKING back down the stairs that I realized I despised Olivia and her flat-brimmed hat with an unbearable and irrational intensity.

The next day, I watched the play again. It was a matinee, so the cast scraped out of Ricky's house at 11:00 with the pouty camaraderie of a communal hangover. Too tired and confused the night before, Danny and I had had sex that morning, emerging last into the kitchen, secretly superior.

I ordered another lobster to go on the way to the theater. I sat in the back and felt a strange sinking when the lights dimmed. Danny looked handsome in his costume; styled, slightly, and forced to wear jeans that fit him.

I don't think I'd ever had a violent impulse before that afternoon, sitting in a velvet chair in a dark theater. I had a boyfriend in high school who got into a fight at a party in someone's basement, and I remember driving him home in silence, fully incapable of understanding why he felt compelled to punch Joey Carlton in the face for the shit he said about Mike and AJ. But I understood now. Danny and Olivia were just so charming! The part where they first kissed, his hand on the small of her back and her fingers running through his hair. The part where they giggled and eye-smiled and confessed things and fought and made up and cried and kissed again. I wanted to take Olivia's face and hit it as hard as I could. Shove her to the ground and kick her in the side. Smash her against the wall, pull at her hair, punch her again right between the eyes. I imagined doing these things as the audience laughed. Imagined getting up onstage and beating her up. *Fuck you*, I would say. *Fuck you and your stupid clothing and your stupid attitude and the way you talk to everyone like they fucking love you. Stay the fuck away from Danny, and if you ever fucking talk to him again, I will kill you. I will literally kill you.*

During intermission, I went outside to sit in the car, because I didn't feel like talking to the lobby and its circles. I reminded myself of the particular ways in which I was better than Olivia: I was thinner, I had nicer eyes, I went to a better school.

I didn't know what my problem was. I'd seen Danny kiss girls onstage before. I guess the summer had been hard. The cell service in northern Cape Cod wasn't great, and I'd wonder about him all day as I sat in my office. The envy was twofold: jealousy of the



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girl he was spending time with and jealousy of how he was spending his time. Playing dumb acting games all day and getting wasted at night at the Beachcomber, the local bar he raved about whenever we talked on the phone.

We got dinner together after the show. Then Danny drove us to a spot on the side of Route Six, next to a beach pine marked with an orange plastic flag.

"This way," he said, leading me up a path through scratchy trunks growing sideways out of sand. "I'm telling you, this place is unreal."

It was. We emerged from the cropped forest into an expanse of craters, dune grass waving from the tops of their peaked edges.

I KNEW THE WAY DANNY THOUGHT, AND I KNEW THIS ONLY MADE HIM LIKE ME LESS AND LIKE HER MORE. FOR THE SECOND TIME THAT DAY, I WANTED TO HIT SOMETHING.

The sun hadn't quite set, but the crickets were chirping from the green patches with astonishing volume. It was windy, and strips of hair blew out of my ponytail and across my face. Danny stretched his arms up and leaned forward into the wind.

"Isn't it amazing?"

"Yeah," I said, pulling on a sweatshirt.

"We come here a lot at night." He jumped forward and down in massive leaps, sand sliding in chutes behind him. I leapt after, shrieking, and landed in a heap at the bottom next to him.

We had the idea at the same moment and kept our clothes on the whole time. When we were done, I lay down and looked up at the thin clouds. I thought about how we must look from above—lying in the center of a bowl-shaped hole in the world. I imagined what it would be like if every crater had a couple at its center, looking up.

"Do you ever come here with Olivia?" I asked, cupping sand in

my hands and letting it sift into a pile in front of me.

"We all come here," he said.

I knew my jealousy was unattractive, that Danny would think I was insecure, but I couldn't stop.

"Yeah, but do you come here with just her?"

He rolled over to face me.

"Olivia and I are friends," he said. "We do shit together."

"Like kiss every night."

"Onstage. In a play." I didn't say anything. He sat up. "You're not serious, are you?"

I pulled my head inside my sweatshirt in mock retreat.

"I hate her!" My voice came out muffled. I popped back out.

I smiled, and it worked: the intensity vanished as fast as I'd created it.

We lay there in silence for a while. I knew the way Danny thought and I knew this only made him like me less and like her more. For the second time that day, I wanted to hit something, but I still couldn't help myself.

I kissed at his neck.

"Remember that T-shirt she was wearing yesterday?"

"Who? Olivia?"

"Yeah." I paused. "Did you give it to her? I thought you had that shirt." He sat up again, cupping my hands in my lap.

"Listen," he said, his eyebrows raised. "I love you, okay?"

"I know."

"I don't want to convince you."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry." The crickets droned, and I stood up to shake sand off my back. "I just—love you."

He looked at me and tucked my loose hair behind my ears.

"I love you too," he said.

But I never got my answer. ■



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