

Harvest

I am not a jerk although sometimes I act like one

Spearhead

1.5 HARVEST

Jake walks into the bar soon after getting a cavity filled that had been lingering for weeks. I had been on him to get it fixed. Jake gets involved in things he is doing and forgets to take care of himself. He is better at taking care of others.

Tonight I am out with graduate students and staff on my overseas university exchange program. Jake likes my friends. He and his group are older, kinder, and more confident. Less attached to formal education. Being overseas is nothing new to my friends, who can—proudly—recount experiences they have had with the world. Just now I hear Bo, completing his fourth masters degree, say to Gunth, a photographer in the journalism

program: “I am not in this country’s university to please my parents or further my career; I’m here to learn from people.”

Bo follows a sparse diet; one stein of beer gets him high. Now he is tipsy, but tomorrow morning he will be up early, doing nostril-cleansing exercises and sipping herbal tea.

Bo and Gunth sit at the end of our table. We are drinking beer and discussing Hindu mythology, focusing on the beloved figure, Ganesh, with his human body and elephant head; his taste for sweets; his ability to transcribe. Ganesh is a popular adornment. Several students—Bo, his girlfriend Frances, Gunth, Siri, me—wear his image at least once in a piece of jewelry, tattoo, T-shirt or toe ring. We discuss Ganesh’s origin. What it means that, according to some sources, his mother made him from the dirt of her body.

“It has got to be menstrual blood,” Siri, who speaks six languages, says, bobbing her bald head, “Ganesh’s mother made him out of the dirt of her body. Dirt, menstruation.” Siri has an encyclopedic memory. An image of Ganesh is tattooed on the back of her right wrist.

Jake enters the bar and moves to our table with someone who impresses all of my program friends: a well-known local businesswoman, not connected to the university. She is very pretty. For an American student, this—socializing with a non-university citizen—would be a total score, a move that would impress parents, peers and faculty advisers. But Jake is not in close touch with his parents, or connected to the university. He travels regularly but lives in this country, works as a reporter, covers wars, global human rights

issues, drug cartels and genocides. I know this contact with grisly events and so many forms of sadness gets to him but he rarely admits that it does.

Now he stands behind me, kisses my head, puts his hands on my shoulders, introduces his friend to our student crowd:

“Meet Sigrund. She designed Brett’s place and more recently my dentist’s new office where I just ran into her.” This said with slightly slurred speech. “Damn numb, still, from the drugs they shoot in your mouth.”

I know, like and respect Sigrund. She is a fine interior designer who did wonders with my studio apartment. Jake hired her to help me. When I moved in, over a year ago now, it was one empty, tiny, room. She suggested a loft bed with closet and storage space underneath, which makes the small place seem bizarrely roomy. Ask anyone who has been there. And the paint job and fabric touches she added made a tremendous difference. She knows how to put an interior together with an individual’s personality and budget.

Sigrund, who has a beautiful set of teeth, sits down at the table. Jake, hands kneading my shoulders, listens closely to the Ganesh discussion.

Watching Siri, as she brings up Siva, Ganesh’s supposed father, I totally understand why she shaves her head; her skull is a beautiful shape. “Ganesh’s father cuts his head off, but he finds some way to replace it, to put *a* head on even if it is an animal head, so he admits, even repairs, his mistake.

After awhile, the discussion switches over to spatial organization. Sigrund says that some people mistakenly believe design is just for the theater or museum or sprawling

home, but in fact it can economically enhance a dorm room, apartment, office or bungalow.

Jake leans down behind me, whispers, "Let's step out."

I know that Sigrund, a nimble marketer, will not mind us leaving her with this group.

Outside, we walk several blocks to my place. Jake's is much farther away. The street is quiet, the weather cool, and the sky nearly starless. We reach my address, climb the steps, open the door and walk inside. Jake says, "Sorry about last night and this morning, Brett."

"Why do you always have to do that? Hurt my feelings?"

"I know, Brett, I'm sorry, I can't help it. I just clam up. Clam and clench."

He leans his head back. I look up at his neck, shadowy in the streetlights coming through my bedroom window.

"Brett," he exhales.

He grips my waist; I take his face in my hands.

Jake owns two types of shirts, both white: long sleeve oxford and short sleeve tee. And he owns multiple pairs of khaki with deep side pockets: trousers and Bermuda shorts. When I first meet Jake, and see him always in the same clothes, I am interested in his closet: is it filled with multiples of the same shirt and pants, or does he just own a few of each and wash them carefully and frequently? It is the first case. Not an excessive amount of multiples, but enough to get him through a few weeks without going to the laundry, enough to last him on his trip. He rarely wears underwear. He is always very clean.

Tonight he wears a long sleeve oxford and Bermudas.

Jake can drink large quantities of alcohol but never seems to get out of control. He eats a lot too but remains fit and well toned. He is an excellent listener, and can be a talker but always interestingly and always about things he knows: fishing, politics, food, sports. His interests, so different from mine, are appealing. What is not appealing is his habit of going away. I do not mean for work assignments. This is what I mean:

Last night he comes over late with peeled shrimp and a cold bottle of wine. We eat, drink and talk on my balcony. Then go inside. It is very good. Later, I turn toward him; he is gone. No body. This has happened before; in fact happens a lot. At these times, I hate Jake, I really do. But he always comes back, shoulders hunched over, asking if I am alone or need money. This time I cry, punch his pillow, resist the urge to call him up screaming, "You asshole!"

The next morning I keep to my routine. I do not have a scheduled class, just blocks of studying to get through. I go out to get a coffee, stop in the drugstore to buy arch supports for my jogging shoes. Just after paying for them, my friend Gunth, camera dangling from his neck, approaches:

"Your pale skin, your messy hair, your long legs, I've got to shoot."

My first concern, stronger than wondering how I look at this time of day, especially after crying all night, is to conceal my new purchase. I do not want my arch supports in the photograph. Holding them is not like holding a perfume container or a flower or a pet, objects that people often pose with. And I wear a size-11 shoe, which I am slightly

embarrassed by. Even though size-11 when you are six feet tall, which I am, is proportionate. Luckily I bring the oversized tote bag, which I made myself out of bandanas, which I never normally bring out with me in the morning. But today I do, so have something to shove the arch supports inside. In fact, inside my tote bag they are hidden completely.

“So,” I ask, walking out of the shop and into the park with Gunth, “what do I do, what do we do?”

“Just walk. I’ll ask you some questions. By the way, this is all for my graduate thesis which, you might remember, looks at the difference between making documentaries about people I know as opposed to strangers. You, I know. But I am going to pretend I do not. So don’t act as if I know the answers to questions even if we both know I do. Ok?”

“Ok.”

We stroll in the park, Gunth asking me questions he knows the answers to, but we both pretend he does not. Gunth clicks his camera periodically.

“Where are you from in America; what do you teach and study? What do you find interesting about this country; are you homesick; do you have a lover?”

When we reach my place I tell him it is time for my morning run and he says I shouldn’t be surprised if I see him in the bushes, shooting that too. He adds that arch supports have helped his foot pain. I look at him with irritation. “Brett,” he says, “I take pictures, my eye sees everything. I didn’t photograph the arch supports, don’t worry, but I saw them. They will help your feet, they really, really will.”

He is decent, he really, really is.

We shake hands, I enter my building, thinking, *that* was a good diversion from asshole Jake.

I head out for a run. Someone waits for me. Not Jake, but another, much less sympathetic asshole.

Who squats at my door, shirtless, in bunchy sweatpants, pouting, gripping a tightly rolled yoga mat but Bo. He has a girlfriend, Frances, and knows Jake, knows about Jake and I, but nevertheless follows me around wanting to talk to me about himself.

“Hey,” I say. He does not stand up but stays squatting and pouting. I know this ploy for gaining attention, and refuse to bite.

“Brett” he says, finally standing up. I do not answer. Then he squats down again and bangs the back of his head against the wall, repeating “Brett, Brett, Brett.”

I bolt down the stairs and into the park, feeling guilty. I offset that, or try to, by telling myself I did a good job not enabling Bo’s passive-aggressive behavior, that responding to him likely would have led to a level and type of engagement destructive to us both. Bo gets into moods. When he is in them, any way you interact is going to be unfit. In these moods, Bo wants you to ask him to talk, to really, really, really ask him. To beg. And he is a guy who, once he starts talking, can talk till you go out. He starts off not talking then you ask him what is wrong and he still does not talk and then you ask him again and he starts to talk and then he talks and talks and talks until you are completely drained from his talking. You pray for him to stop. When he does not stop you have to learn to shut him out.

I get home, exhausted and elated from my run, and am relieved to find Bo gone. I shower, settle in for a good long session of study. After awhile the bell rings. I guess correctly: Jake. I hope he is here to apologize.

Jake says he would have been here earlier but he ran into Bo sitting cross-legged on a park bench with a hangdog face. Jake asks him what is wrong. Bo answers that his book did not get reviewed in the week's paper and he is feeling low about that. He also says he worried about me because I was not in yoga class this morning.

This is Jake, spending his time listening to a person complain rather than coming over and paying attention to me after his bad behavior toward...ME. I suggest we go outside. We walk downstairs, go to the corner café, and drink cups of coffee. Jake orders a slice of cake. I wait for Jake to apologize but instead he talks about how he especially wants cake because he has a dentist appointment this evening and eating something sweet seems the right thing to do just beforehand.

This is Jake, spinning irrelevantly. I start feeling irritation.

Later, we go back to my room and it is very good. Then, just when I expect my apology he turns silent, stays lying down, staring up at the ceiling, not responding to my questions about the rest of his day.

Something shifts in my self-control. "Can't you at least grunt out some answer, rather than lie there, gaping like a barn animal?" He stands up, looks down at the floor, and pulls on his Bermudas and leaves. I throw my hairbrush at the door.

Jake is a *vacater*, a mental *vacater*, a mental vacationer. His departures leave big,

black holes. He cannot help it. First he is here, then he is not, and then he comes back again. It must have something to do with his job.

Later that night, after his dentist appointment, he behaves well. Brings Sigrund, someone I like very much, to the bar, apologizes and stays warm and attentive well into the next morning. My mistake is expecting that side of his personality to last. But it is my form of hope and hope is not a bad habit to have.

“Well,” my therapist (more accurately a graduate student/psycho-therapist-in-training) says when I relate this during our bi-weekly session, pressing the palms of his hands together, tapping the two index fingers against his lips, in a practiced, expressionless tone, “Surely you were drawn less to Jake that night in the bar than to your decorator friend, Sigrund. You masked unacceptable sexual fantasies toward her.”

No, no and not.

This illustrates a big problem with my assigned graduate student/psycho-therapist-in-training (seeing him is a requirement for my university degree program). He leaps to his own opinions without listening to what I am saying, or how I am saying it.

A professional therapist, a good one, would probe Jake’s need to blot out his actions, my insistence upon acknowledgement, my attraction to this mental *vacater*, my choice of university study and friends. This graduate student fixates on an aspect missing from my entire story: unacknowledged sexual fantasies.

I *totally* acknowledge my sexual fantasies. Toward this graduate student, no fantasies. Toward Sigrund, no fantasies. Recent fantasy examples: all my university

professors and Jake.

I hear—we are a small community, and word gets around—that my graduate student/psycho-therapist-in-training has a thing for Sigrund. He is that unprofessional with me, his training client, that unable to recognize his own projections. I wish there was a way I could report him but anything I try to do could so easily implicate me in a web of transference neurosis, or at least make me seem vengeful. I admit, I can be vengeful but I do not want it documented on my student record.

There are two things with Jake and me. One, his tendency to slip away; two, our powerful connection.

I would talk to my graduate student/psycho-therapist in training about that. What draws me to and repels me from Jake with his deep-seated, need-to-exit quality. And how this personality trait works for him professionally—makes him such an excellent reporter of gruesome human behaviors—and against him emotionally—his relationship with me. And we could also examine why I once or twice sleep with Jake's friends, seedy behavior for sure, but also one strong way I can really express to Jake how much his disorder, and the big, black holes it leaves, derails me. Or at least, those liaisons seem to somehow balance out the power.

But my assigned graduate student is much more interested in manufacturing stories about me, or projecting his fantasies onto me, than listening to what I say or how I say it. Some of the students on my program are overly aware of breeding, and claim to know details of one another's lineage. Having met a selection of their parents and grandparents, I

do not see how they can be so sure. I know there is intermingling within that crowd. And I know that they sleep with one another, their fitness instructors and groundskeepers. In the end, how do you really know who fathers you? Unless you are Siri, and look exactly like your dad. Last week he was here, on business, and invited some of us to his hotel suite. He begins the evening by leading a brief group meditation, followed by a round of aperitifs, wine, and a several course dinner downstairs in the hotel's four-star vegetarian restaurant. At dinner he launches into a riff against aperitif glasses: "Why would someone invent a vessel that small?" He believes the reason is all about meanness. "Mean is a good word," he continues. "It can be defined as unkind and as cheap; two qualities that are one and the same. Jake just used that word, mean, in the same context, telling me about overhearing Bo in bed with Frances. "It is a mean thing I do sometimes, listen" Jake admits.

I remember hearing Frances in verbal action. She had had too many aperitifs, and was going on, to Bo, "Do not use the word 'amusing' when you mean stupid. Just say, 'How stupid.' Or, if you want to tone it down, say, 'I do not care for'... Do not say, 'Butter is amusing,' just say I do not care for butter, or I do not care for beer.' But I hate it, Bo, when you over generalize, use the term to refer to an entire city. Like when you said 'Paris is amusing.' What you meant was 'I do not care for Paris.' You and I know, anyway, what that means. What you *did not care for* was this: no one took you to famous restaurants, or stores. No one reviewed your book or came to your workshops. None of that is Paris, all of it is you. Do not confuse the two. You and Paris."

This directed toward Bo. It seems harsh even now, but who can really judge any relationship? Most of us like Frances, and Bo does seem attached to her, whatever attachment means to Bo.

Jake would never serve you an aperitif in an aperitif glass. He drinks from one if someone serves him. That is part of his job, fitting into social situations. It is important for him to observe. But when on his turf he serves everyone, including himself, drinks in a sizeable glass. I'm not saying he fills the glass up with more liquid than would be in an aperitif glass. He understands the logic behind the aperitif glass is that the aperitif should be a small amount of liquid. He does not quibble with the small amount of liquid. He quibbles with the meanness of a tiny glass.