

Brian Patrick Caswell

WHISPERS  
IN  
THE  
EAR

The hard soles of my shoes slap the hardwood floors of the restaurant, twirling between tables towards my empty seat. There is force in my step – do you believe that? I sit down and lock eyes with her without greeting anyone. A stupid, crooked smile lands on my face. This is charming to her.

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Legs forming a rigid ‘P’ – foot flat on the pole, somewhere between posing and contemplation, washed in the dingy orange glow of the streetlight. Looking at nothing in particular, exhale. I see the two of them coming up the sidewalk to me. I coolly look away.

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The door closes, click. My black boots are traceless against the tiled floor. Turn right then left past round tables. The restaurant is full. Clinking silverware and glasses, silent piano in corner. I sit down with them. Kate introduces me, but I already know everybody.

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Rectangular table, empty chair, the three of them turn, my eyes fix only to hers. Seated, she’s across from me – shoulder length rocky blond hair, hazed eyes – her sentences veer jaggedly into wild arches yet she has the decency to breezily place their capstones.

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She came over to me at the bar. The music is just loud enough to drown out the other conversations. We’re at leather padded stools spilling towards each other. She thinks my accent is like hers, because it is. She gives me a look that shocks us into somewhere else.

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Something like:

Hey Kate... / towards boyfriend: / forgive me if I don't remember your name but I do *know* who you are. / we shake hands, back towards Kate: / So Kate... / She says: / Will... / How'd you know to find me here? / Kate responds: / You're not exactly hard to find these days William / she laughs and then introduces Elise who says: / We didn't really know each other at school, do you remember me? / Vividly / I respond with a doubting smile.

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The envelope of cash is thick in the inside pocket of my sport coat. It's late at the wine bar near Kate's apartment. The rest of the band is doing the same thing as me, or their version of what I'm doing, or so I've decided.

Kate's in her room. Elise and me have switched to rye. Ninth story, corner of the room near the window, sitting around a low table. On the couch, on the floor, laugh-swaying, too loud, circling her waist.

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Long since the applause cut off my band, returning them and us into the normal flow, I see the two girls just off the stage. I knew they were there the whole time. I go down the stairs and say / Look, it would be a felony in some principalities for you two to leave here without catching up with me, but I gotta tear down first and I just wanna make sure the two of you remain on the right side of the law / half smile, they respond.

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We burn flash blind past God.  
After, we demand return,  
suckled to ourselves  
Vacuum teat which takes instead.  
Scattering offerings  
indulgent

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“yeah so it's tomorrow night”

-“oh your *big show?*”

“wellit'snotthatbig”

-“well I haven't seen you in like years and you just show up to my *f u c k i n g p a r t y*”

“Is that so *bad?*”

-“Will, *h o w* are you still like this?”

-“Who...”

“Look, wha, whadoyouwant from me?”

-“I mean, who like, who *are* you now? *W h y* are you so...”

“Rachel if *you* don’t fuckin’ know who I am”

-“well?”

“Like, wh, why are you *acting* like you don’t know me?”

-“Do you *think* that I do?”

“Jesus, *well a bit*”

-“Will, I knew you like 10 years ago, but here you fucking are and you just hit on my friends”

“What? That’s that’s called *conversation*”

-“Really, so that’s *normal conversation* for you?”

“Rachel, *you* invited me the fuck here”

-“yeah on facebook, didn’t think you’d *actually* show up”

“Well I did, *thought* we could reconnect, *maybe* you’d...”

-“Reconnect with what? All that *cryptic shit* you post?”

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Her father likes me.

Just left the piano, shakes my hand laughing, he’s bearded

can’t make out the words

The mother is softly clapping, beaming

Garlands in the rafters, filled with family

follow him to the basement

or next morning

on a hunt - he says to me,

he says

but can’t make out

the words

after dinner

we

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We’ve been talking for hours. Not the first call. She remembers the time she was following me up the stairs and down past the practice rooms. My maple leafs hoodie, fuck that was my look back then. Was too embarrassed to bring it up. I did because wasn’t sure if real or dream, real. She also had hated school, what the *fuck was I* supposed to do after *that*? Immediately we recognized each other. She’s brilliant and unpredictable in conversation. Floating feeling. Something about her mom, either too controlling or too distant, too distant. Being trapped in a small city, being lost in a big one. Same 10 people at everything. It’s like, am I just *settling* for this? Savage critiques at the habitually lauded, if everyone is just following their natural inspiration, why is it always shaking, arched back, and fucking baby hands? Making plans to collaborate.

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outside the airport  
leaning against my car  
sunglasses  
arms crossed  
looking away towards parking garage  
coolly look over to see her approaching

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ok so i'm playing, it goes like, dang dang da-dang, it's all so smooth, ka-chang poom, small room in brooklyn, french name, that old air conditioner smell, doing a mini thruway tour – already hit up buf/roch/cuse/utica somehow and albany and whatever dutch-sounding downstate pretentious bullshit town, me bass drums, gotta big van, sssu-ka-clang-ka, 'eskellkun parlfronsay dawnlefool?' – we say this to get the pretentious nyc crowd on our side – thinking we're from as prestigious a place as montreal, the two girls this is all for walk in the room, they see me and see how different i am now, shows over and i walk over to where they're standing, we're talking and talking, more talking, totally different than when i was living there, we pack up and they join us for a post-tour celebration, we're drinking and laughing, laughing, the two other guys give me the high sign and split, just me and the two of them, go to a wine bar near the one's apartment, two more drinks or so, some natural wine bullshit, yeah yeah, I read the fuckin' new yorker article about it I say, back at her apartment, the one's in bed and Elise and me stay up, talking quiet-intensely, build towards a kiss which shakes the room – stretches time – dilate pupils, we try not to make too much noise, she really does want me to spank her, i'm not gratuitous about it, mix of rough-tender, right amount of position changing-soft hair pulling, lay together while watching the headlights go across the ceiling and laughing about some college story

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Long table  
We're at the end  
Elise is across from me  
I say an undercutting remark, winning a smile  
She teases my leg a bit, and asks where have you been  
I say the center of the universe, syracuse new york, where else?  
she makes some comment about her own small city  
I say I had to accept it before it would let me leave  
She says oh so you think you left  
I say as in do I think my soul left  
She says well just play along  
I say

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Three of us standing at a party. Well, less of a party and more of a hang. Lets say there's tenish people there, it's like a party just for being Friday or, no more like a gallery opening afterparty otherwise known as a

vernissage. First floor of a parted-out house, the kitchen opens into the tight backyard, the whole block's houses and backyards in view – it's an open windows situation while inside. I'm in town on a tour or something, dropping in.

How do you know Lis again? / boyfriend, shortly.

Yeah how do you know me? / Elise with crooked half smile, said quickly after.

Jeez, come on guy keep up! I mean, weren't you listening? / Me, friendly ball breaking with tinge of fuck-you.

Seriously? *How* do you expect me to keep up in this conversation, I di...

We don't / Elise, annoyed, slow turn towards me.

*Look*, we all don't *get* to be in *every* conversation at *all* times / Me, I accent 'Look' with right hand gesture: a short, waist-level dice-throw & hold motion – thumb and two fingers out, the rest half-curved.

How about you get another drink / Elise dismisses.

Whatever / boyfriend walks towards the kitchen, eyes us down first, a don't-think-I-don't-know situation.

Sorry, he gets so jealous, like if my eyes even find another man / Elise leaning towards me in a half whisper.

And he thinks they found me? / Me said in double-time, cocking head towards hers, Elise juts her chin down while pulling her head back and up.

Elise smiles, sips her beer while aligning her stance – her eyes never leaving mine and says: / Who knows, but *I'm* not sure *what* I find you.

Try to play along / Me, taking a half-step back, arching my shoulders away from her and smiling, knowing I got her now.

Heeeeyyyy, that's my joke! / Elise, big smile, slaps her thigh after the sing-songy 'Heeeeyyyy'.

One of those near-laugh situations for me, lip curl gives way to beer sip and a serene gaze.

s h o r t   s i l e n c e

He *has* been annoying me lately / Elise, airily, nearly absentmindedly – performed well but with heavy intention / I mean, / stronger / there's this image of what I want in a relationship. Maybe I'm demanding too much from the Universe / me – *don't roll eyes* / or, actually I hate it when people say that, it's like that's just God you fucking moron, it's just God for cowards // I interject: That's right // so anyways, I have this clear image of a partner. Like, umm, a real partner, someone I can, who actually has opinions about what we see or what I make, who can actually critique and discuss something, umm, ideally we would probably collaborate with each other, well!, someone who *at least knows* who *Brecht* fucking is and doesn't call yoga 'milf-gazing'! / She's nearly yelling at the end, she stomps her left foot on '*Brecht*', and does air quotes with 'milf-gazing' with hard eye roll and sips her beer punishingly.

Well yeah, who *doesn't* want that! It's not like I have that either. I mean, just to give you an idea, I was talking to this girl in Syracuse, and I mentioned that I was listening to the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and this girl // Elise interjects airily: 'this girl' again, how feminist of you // what? / smiling / anyway, *this girl* was like, 'oh yeah, I know them! Does anybody know what time it is?' / Elise sings the line softly / And I was like, 'no, not Chicago Transit Authority', and *then* I had to explain to her that Chicago's original name was Chicago Transit Authority! // Elise interjects: HA! // Jesus! I mean I just feel like I just confuse people wherever I go. / Me, a little bit embarrassed that I revealed too much.

Yes, that sounds like Kingston. / Elise, takes a vacant taste of her beer and pauses / But Will we are *from* these cities aren't we? So how different can we really be from these people?

Well I don't know, ar, are we *doomed* you know, to be like the people we grew up with? I feel like, uh, well either way it's a reaction right? Like, you spend a chunk of your life reacting against where you grew up or, uh, maybe you're like gladly accepted by it and are ideally content or something. / Me, I can feel myself peppering the sentence to make it sound a bit less mannered / Look, uh, I definitely have gone back and forth on, on where I've grown up but I've uh more or less landed on pride or, uh, you know.

Yes, it's complicated though / Elise, pauses as she goes inward for a private memory, posing in a soft arch / Each time I moved away, to like find something, I just got the same feeling I got from our school, that kinda *I-don't-know-what-this-is-but-it's-not-it* feeling.

Wow, I, uh, totally, it's not like I *enjoyed* my time there either, I mean, I never *felt* like I *belonged* or whatever / Me again, hard 'b' and elongated 'long' on the sing-songy '*belonged*', larger sip on the lightened can / I mean, I feel like I only understood where I was, or like, what that was after the fact.

Yeah, that was, that was *not* a good time for me. / Elise says with a heaviness, seriousness, pointing towards the suffering she won't say. Her brow close to furrowed, nearly a wetness in the eyes.

My right hand goes to her shoulder for a gentle squeeze. Finger tips run down her arm briefly while I let them fall towards their aim – I hold her palm, my thumb over her wrist, her fingers spilling out under my fingers.

Boyfriend returns then its like something like he yells at her for flirting with me, she says we were just talking, which I can't even remember the last time we did that! Then it's like I say something he doesn't understand what I mean, then he pushes me, or no he just stares me down or something, then, uh, well.

The sounds return to the room, and I turn over in the bed.

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So I'll have to keep it since it's painted just for me  
Just for me it's painted but I thought you'd see it too  
I thought that you could see it too, a color you can't see  
So can't you see that color? No it's not a shade of blue

Blue or green a shade of that, yes, sometimes they come close  
They come close sometimes it's true, a guessing game at heart  
At heart this game is too high stakes to lose like this for most  
For most like this to lose would need a vision just to start

Just to start to play this game you'd need a color too  
Yes a color tormenting yourself for years to find  
To find another's vision which is sprinkled with this dew  
Just know this dew does not fall down on visions to be kind

Kindness, no, is not a gift unable to collect  
Able to connect, collect, that thing we call a group  
A group cannot be formed from those who hunt for the elect  
Electing those imagined few who never, no, will droop

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March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016

Things can't stay like this, that's for sure. That I know. I know that I can't have exclusively bad luck. I just have to figure out what the narrow path is. Don't forget the dream.

The narrow path, that's what I need to find. I know that what I'm doing now is fantasy and I need to be careful about Elise, you need to remember that you're turning her into a symbol, she is a fantasy of your own and this character that you are building is not her. Don't be literal with this shit, don't obsess over her posts – you don't know her really. You just know how Kate described her – that she would always bring Elise up with me, and respond to things I said with similar things in Elise - and I did overhear her say 'you'd really like him' on the phone, and I could feel the energy of her saying that, that it was about me, and to her.

Maybe I just need this to keep going right now while I'm so isolated, it's a fantasy that I can build for myself using her image, but that is dangerous, but maybe it's fine for now, but you can't let it stop you from forming real relationships. Yeah but what fucking relationships!

Elise is almost certainly not Elise. Elise is not the fantasy Elise that you've built. That's fantasy – but you will find some type of your Elise.

See, you did this in high school too with Ashley, but with her you weren't able to separate the fantasy version of her. I built her into this kinda perfect, untouchable, awe-inducing girl and I always blocked out the times Ashley clashed with my fantasy of her, which was basically whenever I actually interacted with her – I mean I didn't truly know Ashley either. Rachel was the one I was actually friends with, and she's pissed at me for showing up to her party drunk after I hadn't seen her since high school. But anyways I could kinda see myself turning Ashley into a fantasy but I couldn't stop myself and was definitely not able to accept and identify this. You did that then also because you were isolated and couldn't find her, your her – which was, like now, the most important thing to you really.

Can't you see that that's what all the music is for?

Funny though, with Ashley it was really just physical, well and the idea of it, the idea of her, that's what it was really, I didn't build a whole personality like with Elise. But I hadn't had serious relationships before Ashley – A lot of it is Syracuse, you're not going to find Elise in Syracuse, this is not your town. I mean I think I had to live here as an adult, but you can't find what you're looking for here, it's just not here. It's the same 10 people at everything, and there's no one there. And the one friend you do have is middle-aged and can't stop talking when he's drunk. But he's ok really. You just confuse everyone, or they misinterpret you somehow – I must just remind everyone of someone who looks like me, but isn't like me at all really, and then they think I'm that guy from their past, like some archetype they have or something, and they just fit me into the wrong archetype.

Fuck but I just don't know where I should go. I think I have to give up on this idea that there's some magical place that if I just go there then everything will be solved, I'll find all my friends and my band and my wife and live in harmony and bliss. But there are definitely places that don't have the things I need to be happy. That's true. Anyways, real Elise is from Kingston, Ontario and that shit must be exactly like Syracuse, or worse. Thinking Ontario would be better than here may be a type of insanity – I mean I have already discovered that shit.

Elise is not Elise, or if she is, she'd want to move out of Kingston. Jesus this is nuts. I mean if you did like reconnect with her, you'd have to deprogram all the insane fantasy shit surrounding her now. But I think she did post a couple of hinting winks on instagram that she was following my shit really. And she might have, I mean Kate definitely talked to her about me. And when we were at school together I know we had a couple like psychic connection moments.

Your luck will change

You will find the narrow path

Your luck will change

You will find the narrow path

Your luck will change

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-“Friday night in America man, why do ya think all these fuckers out there are runnin' around like that?, runnin' up and down, it's not fur their health buddy, it's casino America man, that's what I call it, casino America, everyone walks up and pulls the lever on the slot machine, puts it all on black, ya know, goin' fur that jackpot, if ya can't stand on yur own two feet out here buddy yur not gunna keep upright, and how do ya do that ya might wonder, it's luck piano man, casino America, there's nothin' out here ta help ya and that's why they're all runnin' around man, but it's just luck, that's right, seen all that shit dude, Friday night, so whadya up ta?, there's an old man skate up in Oswego, just got back from, yeah still doin' it, I'm the only old fuck who doesn't wear a helmet, I figure if I haven't brain damaged myself yet it ain't gunna happen now, hell yeah I skate out there still, come over ta the house sometime, I built a little bowl in my garage, a lot of young guys come over and skate on it, shit, ya should see it man, the ceiling is just about a yard and a half above the lip and no one has ever hit it, it's incredible, and then when I drop in those kids can't believe it, an old guy like me, but I'll never stop skating, yeah but ya can't stop dude, I went ta FDR skate park in Philly when I was out there ya know, ya know about that place?, those fuckers are serious buddy, the police had it fenced off and we're hopin' the fences, man you will learn how fast ya can run when ya hear those sirens, it's a crazy place, mothafucka jones, under the highways like that, but whadya doin' tonight, shit ya hear what Trump said about North Korea?, that Kim Jong fucker?, Jesus Christ that guy man, well I gotta buddy whose got some inside knowledge, he made it known that intelligence has it out for him, so we'll see dude, we'll see how his hand plays out in casino America, Jesus shit like that, there is not a truth that can be seen and heard and yet be believed, remember that buddy, I could use some air, ya smoke?, lets go out, the van's just out back, the carbar, wanna know why I call it that?, shit!, well look who it is, Chris you handsome fuck, ya know my new buddy Will here? Will's my piano teacher, he told me he'd come over and give me some lessons, so I gotta piano teacher now, I wanna keep my fingers limber, loosen them up, ya know, all fucked up from boxing, then if I get better at it than my son that should annoy him enough ta get back ta practicin', it drives me nuts that he quit, just bought him that new piano and now its just



sittin' there in the living room, ok, so let me ask ya this, Will are you listenin'?, tell me if this makes sense ta ya, my fireplace is in the living room, and I got a rack ta grill some stakes in the fireplace, open flame, and my wife is chewin' me out 'cause now the living room smells like steak, but what's the difference?, the room is right next ta the kitchen!, the smell is gunna be in the living room anyways if I cooked it on the stove top!, and I wanna eat steak grilled over a wood flame!, does that makes sense ta ya, I knew ya'd get it, listen Chris, come smoke with us out back in the carbar, I'm sure it will pair well with your wine, no I get it, sometimes ya get beer-ed out, gotta change pace from time ta time, Will wha'd'I tell ya before, ...that can be seen and heard and yet be believed, that's right, don't forget that buddy, Jesus Christ, fuckin' Friday night in America, lets go boys,"

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first it falls as grace  
pillow placed  
songs you need be true  
now rotted out

whose whispers  
in the ear?

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I sit up in bed, 4:37 says the clock. At least the windows are still black – when the sun starts to seep in I can't deny it anymore. I lay back down. My head is swirling. I can't spend all night fantasizing about Elise again. No, fuck that, I need this. Narrow path, the narrow path.

We just left the restaurant  
Piling in my car, Elise is next to me  
Kate in the back seat  
Windows down, deep summer  
Elise looks at me, sweetening the air  
Driving slowly down the avenue  
Laughing, headed towards

July 2022, Buffalo, NY