

J.L. Moultrie

## Ruination

I admit it: I was jealous of Nadia. How could I not be? She had everything: the looks, the car, the hair, the family, the money and the boy toy. I had nothing; or, more precisely, too much of what I didn't want.

I returned home from school only to find my mother passed out on our dingy, carpeted floor. Again. Only this time she'd peed herself, too. I dropped my backpack, picked her up, stripped her and ran a bath; the feeling of hot water brought a semblance of lucidity.

Her medium-brown eyes opened, she laughed and began speaking gibberish. The familiar scent of brown liquor wafted into my face. I put on some coffee, sat on the couch and turned on the television.

My father used to say that everything we "forget" has only momentarily returned to our subconscious and that we have to be patient during the process of retrieval. In other words: knowledge is never lost, just temporarily inaccessible. He doesn't talk like that anymore. In fact, we haven't spoken in months. He's the one I came out to at fourteen. It was one of those early summer afternoons when the clouds are so grey and voluminous that it seems like it will rain, but it doesn't. My eyes were affixed to the sky when the words left my mouth. My muscles were tense and my heart throbbed as if my body was bracing for a violent collision.

"How long have you known, Michael? How do you know?"

It felt like he asked me how long I've had skin.

I told him I'd known since I was little, right before he and my mother moved on separate sides of the city. I told him I hadn't acted on it, but I knew it to be truer than anything.

My father looked forward steadily, holding the steering wheel. Silence permeated the blue Honda Accord that my mother gave him as a parting gift after they split. All that could be heard was the droning V6 engine, indistinct voices, the refrain of the blinker and the music from nearby cars.

We drove through the good neighborhood where he took me and my cousin's trick-or-treating when we were kids. This is where Nadia stayed. We ran in the same circles, but both of us were quiet, so we hardly spoke directly to one another. We often traded glances between the bodies of our friends. I turned my head and peered past the lush lawn, litter-free sidewalk, semi-circle driveway, weeping willow tree, Maserati Quattroporte and Porsche 911 at her bedroom window.

We stopped at a red light. I wanted to neatly fold the distance between us until we stood abreast.

He asked me who else I'd told.

"You're the first," I said, "I don't want anything to change between us. I can't take not having a father. I can't take being more alone than I already am."

"I'll never abandon you, Michael. Don't worry about that. If anything, I have to be there for you more."

My father had a history of promising things in the heat of the moment, but not following through when it really counted. This time would be no different.

Six months after my coming out, Nadia suddenly disappeared. Talk began to spread that she'd been sent to live with relatives back east. Some said she got pregnant by her boyfriend and was sent away; others said she ran away and joined a commune of artists in New York.

Her parents heard what was being said and tried to behave like nothing had changed, except they stopped going to church. This only made the town more suspicious and excited. It was said that Nadia's boyfriend was left in the dark like everyone else. He transferred to a different high school for senior year.

The years passed, but I never forgot about Nadia. I felt that an affinity, abbreviated and unspoken, persisted between us. I was seventeen, drifting further and further from the places I wanted to be. My mother got her second DUI and was forced to go to long-term rehab out west. I went to stay with dad. He worked nights at a local factory, which made the soft expanse of night seem infinite.

After graduating, I worked odd jobs throughout the city: at a tire shop, a potato chip factory, a produce market and an automotive plant. I then caved in further and began attending classes at a university in a different county. That's when it happened.

I was dragging myself to an early morning history class when I bumped into her. Nadia stepped onto the elevator; her long dark hair was in a ponytail, she wore a white, button-up blouse, denim blue jeans and carried what looked like a vintage, cross-body Chanel bag. Only her and I were on the elevator.

“Don't tell anyone you saw me, Michael. Please.”

“You have nothing to worry about. Trust me, Nadia. I'm just glad you're safe. You've been here the whole time?” “My folks have a cottage north of here; that's where I've been since I left. Trying to be. Trying to find out who I am. Something I couldn't do around cliques, the people who thought they knew me, my folks

and all the bullshit. It's a long story, but I'm an assistant English professor here. You were worried about me? How've you been?"

"I was - you just vanished. The town talked, but I wasn't hearing it. It wasn't anyone's business. I had enough problems of my own, anyway."

Later that day, I found myself wishing I had that luxury of anonymity; of being free from the confines of outside expectations and interpretations. The thought of divulging her secret crossed my mind but left as fast as it came.

I'd been hanging onto the edge of Earth; my mother returned from rehab and fell into the same routine and my father and I only spoke to one another over breakfast. My bonds were volatile and tenuous.

Nadia was the second person I told I was gay. How could it not have been? Some nights we managed to sneak away to one of her haunts: an innocuous-looking dive bar out in the sticks. Everything I felt in those months was brief and inundated by deep, chilly water. By the end of the semester, I'd gained a best friend and lost touch with my father, who, for the longest, was the only stable part of my life.

"You don't speak to me anymore," he began, "how am I supposed to continue to know my son if he acts this way? You used to tell me everything. Now, I'd be lucky to hear about your week. Today's your day off, right? Where're you going this early?"

I told him I was going to put in some extra study hours with some classmates at the library. It was a lie. The tension between he and I festered so much that I began spending nights at Nadia's cottage.

I went from being a boy riven by his own shyness to a young adult who, when confronted by the prospect of free-will and its implications, was perpetually on the verge of drowning. My nascent confidence coincided with my becoming aware of the latent, dull ennui that pervades every aspect of modern life.

Nadia had her entire life planned out, but unfortunately, so did her folks. I noticed she had a few too many one night and put her in the passenger seat of her Audi. A couple of shady guys were standing at the entrance eyeing us as we pulled off. She spoke softly while raindrops pattered on the windshield and thunder rolled in the distance. "I went away because I had an abortion. My parents wanted me to keep it. No, they demanded I keep it. What would you have done Michael? What's a girl to do?"

She tried to laugh, but tears glimmered in her sleepy, hazel eyes.

When I got her home, I wrapped her in a blanket and put her in bed. I laid on her couch and tried to sleep but it remained far out of reach. Instead, fresh dread burrowed under my skin like shrapnel.