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My Mother Wears Yellow on Tuesdays

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My Mother Wears Yellow on Tuesdays

If I were to relay this observation to Michelle this late at night, she would roll away from me, and in that theatrically charming three-o'clock-in-the-morning voice of hers, tell me to Get-Off-It. If I were to tell her that for the past seven weeks my mother has worn seven different skirts of the same shade of lemon-yellow and accented these with three ivory-colored bracelets on her left wrist, she would light a cigarette, look at the ceiling and make reference to any number of popular complexes, including, of course, the Cinderella, the Electra and some version of the Oedipal. I am, Michelle tells me in no uncertain terms, Fucking-Up our relationship with my hang-ups. We have been this close for seven months. Sleeping together for the last two.

Fortunately, for both of us, she continues to sleep and I keep my observations to myself. Tonight was a good night, not only for Michelle, but me as well. Neither of us needs a neo-Freudian analysis of the others' thoughts to wake up to over coffee in the morning. Too often our morning words are like vinegar. Sweet and sour and more bitter than either of us expects them to be.

(what has done this?)

But I cannot remove myself from the yellow. Tomorrow morning Michelle and I will walk, touching slightly at the elbows, to my car. I will drop her off at the savings and loan where she has worked for eight years and climbed only three notches on the pay scale. Before exiting, she will squeeze my hand, tell me not to take any wooden nickels and ask for two dollars for cigarettes. I will watch her awkwardly enter that building. She is clumsy conforming to the dress code. But she looks beautiful. She knows this. They know this.

Since it will be Tuesday, I will, instead of returning to the apartment, make the drive to my mother's. My engagement for the week. The yellow will be stronger than ever. Driving, I will smoke and wish only for the meeting to be over.

It is late October and it has been raining unseasonably for days. The bright safety patrol rain slickers, stationed two and four to a corner, warn drivers of the children and seem to beckon me to my mother's house. I think of this suddenly and I am four-years-old watching from my parent's bedroom window. I stand on their bed and the bedspread is cool and comforting to my feet. I hear my mother sending Michael off to school and I watch until I see him reach the corner. He steps off

the curb, stops and turns and waves. I remember this. My mother tells me that when I am older, I too, will go to school. I can think of nothing better as Michael goes there and he is my older brother. Tonight, I think of that time and the memories are gentle. I know that if I know them tomorrow, they will be gentle and comforting then as well. But now, even in the late-night darkness, the orange patrol flags are becoming neon arrows that point me not to those times, nor to my mother's house, but back to Michelle and what has happened. And what exactly has happened? Soon, sometime soon, she will want to know this.

We meet first in a bar that shrieks in this neon — in blues and reds — that it is The Stone Cafe. She is between Marcus and William. I am with Tom. Tom likes me for my lack of decorum. He thinks I am a rebel, naturally. He says that this is "cute." We have listened to a young poet read of his memories with his grandfather and his father on his boat "Temptation." Tom and Marcus and William have fallen in-love with his words. Everyone in the bar seems to be in-love with his words. They have repeated key phrases for an hour. Twice, I think Tom is so touched that he is crying. But the entire scene reminds me of the vending section of a stadium at half-time. The smoke. I am tired.

"Such subtle passion," Tom says. "A little much," I say, "Temptation — ?" Tom laughs. He is nervous. He moves his glass in a circle on the table. Marcus and William are embarrassed and look at each other, raising their eyebrows. "Can you believe this shit?" Michelle mouths from across the table. We have just met and I cannot remember her name. But I think her question is wonderful. She is wearing beads that make her look like she has twenty-five eyes and this too is wonderful. Tom has not told me that she handles his accounts at the bank. I think she must be an artist.

I want to ask her about *The Color Purple*. I have read the book twice in the past two weeks and I know that she has read it. I call Tom "Harpo," when he orders another sandwich to see if she notices.

The jukebox at The Stone Cafe is full of Janis, Joni Mitchell, Dylan, Baez and Rickie Lee Jones. Tom likes Joni Mitchell as much as he likes this young poet. He sings "Help Me," to me in the morning from the shower. I love him for this. Rickie is singing to her loves-gone-bad again. The smoke hangs above us like cotton or clouds — whatever — something poetic — everything is reminding me of some strange poem this night.

"Fucking the mind is worse than minding the fuck," Michelle tells Marcus while Tom eats his sandwich. This startles everyone. She makes no comment on my comment. The evening is going stale. By the end I feel like I am all elbows. If she is not a painter, then she is a dancer, I think.

I do not want Tom to be with me tonight, but I cannot set myself free of him. He tells me I am his Cressida. He locks himself in his apartment for a month to work on his paper. He tells me that Hemingway is a magic man. He says his words make melodies. I think of the "Snows of Kilimanjaro" and the man with the gangrene in his leg. I feel the cold bravery and the harshness. I ask for Michelle's number and she comes for lunch.

We drink wine and it is easier than I thought it would be. She tells me that she loves to stare at sleeping people, but that she hates to invade privacy like that. I think I could love her, but am frightened. She is direct. It embarrasses me that she works in a bank. Tom calls to tell me that he has been typing "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" out on the typewriter and taping the sound. "Music man," he says. "Genius."

Tonight, I stare at Michelle while she sleeps and feel not that I am invading her, but that she is wearing her beads and all the eyes are looking at me, into me. She trembles when she sleeps.

(what has done this?)

Tomorrow, when I reach my mother's house, I will find her in a yellow skirt standing in the foyer. She will be happy to see me. Lately, our Tuesday mornings have taken a confessional turn and she will tell me shyly, "I had a drink last night." She is holding onto her life and has been ordered to stay away from the booze. Or, she will tell me, "Yellow is not my best color, especially at this time of year, but it's Margarette's favorite." And she will wait for a mini-confession from me. As I drive her to Margarette's — a final attempt on both of their parts to maintain the weekly garden, bridge and tennis meetings they had when both their husbands were alive — I will search again for the memory of Michael walking to school.

Yet now I hear and see my mother grabbing Margarette by the hands and sobbing that Michelle and I are pitiful. Truly pitiful. I am thinking too much tonight. This makes me sad. I look at the ceiling and exhale solemnly. I want Michelle to laugh with me at my solemnness.

(what has done this?)

It has begun to rain again. I listen to the rain and think of Tom at his typewriter typing out "A Clean Well-Lighted Place." Each drop of rain is another word. He is looking so very hard for brilliance. Michelle feels warm next to me. I concentrate on this warmth, but it will be sometime before I sleep.

Morning, and once again I am awake while Michelle sleeps. The rain has stopped and we are in a terrarium. Safe. At this time last month, I jogged. Robert Dubois of the apartment below us is preparing for work now. He leaves his bedroom curtains open and when I jogged past, I could see right in. His wife, Melinda, stays in bed while he prepares. She is young, in her early twenties, like me. He is ugly and works in a shoe store. This is alright, Michelle tells me. He is married and working things out. This is alright. I stopped jogging at this time of the morning because I could not stop myself from looking in that open window. Stability is the key to this life, Michelle says. At times I think I know this.

I fix my eyes on Michelle's seven plants in the darkness and concentrate on what I will do after my visit with my mother. She may want to give me more money. Tom wants me to be his assistant for his final Hemingway push and I think about taking a chance with it. We are still friends. Tom would look at the window of plants and find a line from Hemingway to ruin them. Michelle just stares at them and smiles.

The deejay on the radio sounds tired. He is making jokes that are not funny and playing a laugh track. He is asking for requests. I am tempted to call and request that he stop the Noah's Ark jokes. He says that two streets have flooded during the night.

Michelle wakes and smiles. "It's been a pleasure sleeping with you," she says. There is no vinegar smell in her words. I feel warm again and make coffee while she showers.

"You know what we should do," Michelle says as she enters the kitchen. I am at the refrigerator. My back is to her. "We should hang a spider plant from the rear-view mirror of your car to relax the people on the road." For some reason this is more funny than anything the deejay has said the entire week. I laugh so hard I get tears in my eyes.

"I like you," I say before I know it.

"Me too," Michelle says. "Me too."

I give her money for cigarettes, drop her off and she does stumble when she exits the car. The wet leaves clustered against the parking blocks look like leaf forts. My brother made the Alamo. I made an igloo for the Eskimos who live in the South. I could love her. But it is still so strange and so very personal. I do not like to answer questions about what I am doing. Michael, my brother, says he is worried about me and wants me to come to his house to rake leaves. He is an architect and is successful. I do not like his kind of people right now.

Since it is not raining, the safety patrols are not wearing their yellow slickers. Their bright sweaters stand apart from the wet leaves and I am

on my school's campus sneaking a cigarette. A single cigarette could make me fly for the day.

I pull into my mother's driveway. She has had Davy, the old traveling neighborhood gardener clear the yard of leaves. There are three trees in the front and their leaves fill seven or eight garbage bags each year. These are stacked neatly in front of the garage. They are a pile of stones. My father gave Davy a hot cider midway through the job. They sit in the den and talk about horses. For the next few days, my father does imitations of this old Black man. He dances around the kitchen, talks fast and wipes his forehead. Michael and I think this is the best.

At the front door, I know suddenly that my mother is remembering these times too since Davy raked Saturday. All of a sudden I am sad. My eyes are hot.

She is not in the foyer when I enter, but calls to me from the den. "Doesn't the lawn look wonderful, Stephanie?" Her voice is deeper than usual. It is more relaxed. She may have had a drink this morning.

"It looks great, everything's so manicured, so nice so lovely." I say this all too fast and my words enter the den before I do.

She is sitting at his desk looking at the pictures again. My father, her husband. We cannot leave for Margarette's until I see them. He is young in the pictures. Two of them. In one he is holding a dog. The other, he is in front of a church. He is smiling in both. He looks nothing like he did when he played with Michael and I in the leaves. Or when he danced around the kitchen. In the pictures, his eyebrows are not pulled together. He is not concentrating. I have never seen him smile like that before. My mother wants me to see him refinished. She is stripping away all the old varnish of those years.

(what has done this?)

"He was like Tom is for you now. Always looking after me. I knitted the sweater." As an afterthought, "You don't remember all of that, do you?"

"No. I didn't know him when you did." I see Michelle at her desk refusing to let the work control her. What we appreciate in our youth, we can appreciate forever, she tells me. At times I think I know this. "I didn't know him when he was young and things," I say. "I'm sorry. I just didn't."

She stands and she is wearing the yellow again. Her hair is gray and cut short. She is slim. She is wearing lipstick. She looks pretty. I would like to look like this when I am old. She lays the pictures on top of each other and then spreads them out. She looks behind me at the wall of his books.

"Tom is making all sorts of connections about Hemingway and the music. He's amazing. I think I'll help him finish up, bring it together." Again I speak too fast and my words seem to go through her.

She looks down at the pictures. I imagine her sitting in their room, reading the yellowed clippings. Moving her finger along the line of his name. Talking about him. Looking in the mirror. Smiling. "Margarette says he's a brilliant young man," she says. She wants so much to give me what she had. What she has given Michael. And I am not sure exactly what that was. Exactly what that is.

We drive to Margarette's and my mother is silent. She looks out the window at the stately homes, at the groomed lawns. I see her profile, her chin slightly raised and in her silence, in her calm I find some odd shards of comfort. For these few moments, I feel that it is okay that Michelle and I sleep curled together. It is okay that my breasts fit between Michelle's breasts like leggo blocks. It is okay that Michelle dreams of sleeping with a pregnant woman. For these few moments, it is all okay. We are and are not common.