

To Do List

by Ben Jardine

“I eat only *grains*,” she says with a gleaming light in her eye. “Well, *and rice and* veggies, I suppose. But really only *grains*.”

“Crush up some barley seeds, some buckwheat...sprinkle, over a bed of very cooked brown rice mixed around in some peanuts... Next to,” and she says this while gesturing with her hands as if miming something, “an assortment of quinoa and kale. One big juicy tomato on top, oh oh oh!, the mouth is watering just thinking about it.”

She scratches at her nose. Her hands move quickly, but her fingers don't. It's as if they are weighed down by something heavy, something immovable.

“I'm just a firm believer in eating what you want to eat,” she says as she rubs her mouth. Her pink tongue extends momentarily, that wet gastronomical device, to lick where her upper and lower lips meet. She wipes a hand across a closed eye. “You know?”

This, said from blinking jewel-like eyes. They're bright, those eyes. Alluring—each one Amazonite, set in opaque ivory—look as if they are about to pop out of her skull. She has a slight protrusion in her forehead, a dip above her eyes—not the most geometric or symmetric of face structures but that just made her all the more alluring. Not that any of that matters.

Her hair, black and long and unkempt, lays strewn across a frowning forehead. One or two strands hung about her eyes almost always, and so she has to keep brushing hair aside in an animalistic way to keep them away. At his stage she had a single strand, dangling like an integral, along her delicate cheek. She talked as if no one was there.

But I was. We had been there for well close to an hour now, or thereabouts. Orange light cast about as the sun began to disappear behind the trees now, its lustrous heaving belly leaving its last tinges of color on the earth. Some light still remained though, creeping between towering buildings; an impressive amber glow, it is, illuminating the street, and reaching its fingers in expert directions. Those who were standing or walking had their figures silhouetted against the walnut walls of the buildings, without concession.

The bus stop is inanimate.

She was still talking.

“I think it’s important, is all I’m saying, to eat from the ground up—not the ground down. It’s what our ancestors did.”

I had finished eating my soup. By this point my spoon, which had been wiped clean by her tongue moments before, lay in my soup cup upturned. In it, I could see a reflection of a light above me, bright and oblique.

I pick the spoon from the cup, wipe it on a little corner of my scarf, and store it in the pocket of my coat. It falls down in there, into the depths of that pocket, colliding with keys to produce cacophonous metal-on-metal sounds.

I taste tomato. Peppery tomato taste, I think, with hints of oregano still in the teeth—bursts of gusto amongst dull and fading tang.

She had come up just moments before, casually sitting herself down beside me. I had just begun to feel that awfully nauseous feeling you get when you’ve had too much tomato soup. The scent begins to get to me, and with every spoonful I question the extra ladle-full I took at the convenience store.

Hot screeches can be heard on pavement, and my thoughts are suddenly interrupted. The soup cup is still in my hand and its contents have begun to dry, forming a caked surface of lifeless red around the edges. It looks unappealing. I get up to extend my legs as the bus opens its doors, but instead of queuing up like the other souls around me, I trudge over to the street corner's worn trashcan, with the unintelligible stains on the side, to toss my cup.

She raises a thumbs-up as she watches me from behind a thicket of head-hair. A delicate breeze floats, dances by, and blows up that same hair so that it gets in her eyes even more chaotically than it had been before.

The bus, whose side is painted with a deep red resembling the same hue as the long-lost soup, looks new and flashy. It has massive wheels, capable (we can safely assume) of crushing anything in their path, which terrify me. The mirrors are shiny, reflective, and make my face look distorted. About the wheels, she seems calm, collected, laid back. *That's how I want to be*, I think. *Her fears seem to be fears on a different level to my own.*

I board the bus slowly. Someone in front of me, ambiguous in form due to a large overcoat and drooping hat combination, holds up the driver. The creature is fishing around in a purse for exact change—enough to cover the \$1.50 charge. When it's my turn, I extend to him my immaculately kept bus pass. In scanning my pass, he happens to make eye contact with me the whole time—from obtaining the pass, to opening up to the page with the scannable chip in it, to the physical scanning, to the handing it back to me as I take it with a trembling hand. Following this frightful interaction, I safely scurry back and find a seat nearby the back-left window. She, of course, takes the seat next to mine.

The city is hot at this time of year. Hot garbage lines the streets like it belongs there. Asses hang out of shorts as if they're gasping for air. Everyone sweats, everyone reeks—the pooling odors make for interesting neighborhood walks.

The bus snakes around buildings with a mixture of rebellious aggression and pride. It's a worm-like machine, this, with a connecting piece between the first and second chambers. We are in the first bus, proper, and I can see the second trailing behind us, almost with an intelligence of its own.

We've gone ten minutes now without a word said between us. She's definitely tried a few times though: a few half-started words peppered into a conversation composed entirely of throat-clears and tapping feet. I've been watching the window most of the time but can manage to see her face in the reflection, a bored-looking twenty-something with some time to kill.

Finally, and this only *after* we pass through the tunnel on the way home, she goes, “I needed my time, but I hope you're well,” and I feel warm fingers on my suit-panted knee. “I shouldn't have taken off so abruptly. And it wasn't the right thing to do for anyone, and this certainly isn't the right way to approach you, and I know all of this already--”

“It's okay.”

“It's just that, Nef...well, I've had a transformation”

“You've taken time for yourself and now you want back in.”

A pause as she gathers herself.

“Well, yes actually. That's about it.”

She looks past me, out the window. Her eyes are brighter now, illuminated by the thrill of fleeting darkness from the tunnel.

She seems brighter too, says something like, “Wow, wasn’t that tunnel breathtaking! I could *not* have held my breath for that whole thing!”

She’s right. A memory I had forgotten suddenly reappears. We’d been there together, before, in tunnels just like this one. We used to hold our breath in them as we drove through. I never actually did hold mine, just pretended to and breathed my nose.

“One of the longest in the region,” I recite.

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The bus takes us around the city center rather than through it. Sometimes it does this, when the driver cannot be bothered with going into the thick of rush hour traffic or when there’s a parade. It does mean, though, that we would be on this metal carcass of anguish for another seven minutes. *Can I take another seven minutes?* I began to feel the scarf around my neck tighten up, a few drops of perspiration form on my forehead. *Eyes on the window. Eyes, window.*

At one stop, a woman wearing full exercise gear clambers on. Even through the reflection, I can see she has no visible signs of exhaustion—all she has to show of her physical undertaking is a pair of bright and red cheeks. They contrast her normal skin tone, these fitness cheeks. Rather than the saddle-tan complexion found on most of the corporal and somatic regions of her body, her cheeks got considerably carnation-colored.

She sits in one of those seats that face each other, in the abdomen of the bus, so I get a chance to watch her through the window reflection.

“How’s the job?”

Laura seems genuinely interested, as if she has had a change of heart.

“It’s fine,” I say. I undertake the difficult task of trying to sound distracted. I am not, in the slightest bit. “There’s a lot to do every day but I’m happy. How’s the transformation?”

She doesn’t answer immediately answer, instead brushes her hair from her forehead. I can feel her weight shift in her seat as she turns around and I catch a whiff of singed ginger and cannabis.

“So, so good! Meditation most mornings and blended smoothies every other day. I’ve been making these pieces of jewelry,” she says as she extends a hand into my visual sphere.

I glance down, moving my eyes but not my head, to see a few strips of dangling gold attached to a crudely cut length of leather. The leather, tied around her wrist, looks handcut and the gold shiny, gleaming as she shakes her hand around.

“I live in Montana now”, she says while pulling her hand away gingerly, as if she thinks I may want a secondary look at the jewelry. “I started my own baking business, called it The Bun Place. ‘All organic ingredients, all natural service, best smiles in town!’” She says this last sentence as if she was an adman announcer. “The snow is comforting.”

I give no response. At this point on the route, most people have cleared out and life onboard the bus is quiet. The seats, metal backed and soft foam upholstered, rattle in their loose positions as the vehicle makes its loop through town.

She begins to sniffle uncontrollably. A few noises, small, animal-like, slip from her lips. I turn to her, finally, unsure of what I’m hearing. She makes no eye contact, I

wasn't looking for that anyway, but instead reaches into her bag and conjures up an envelope from the bottoms of it. It is unopened, the envelope, and she rips it open with out any effort at all and she pulls out whatever it is she finds in the jacket of the envelope—bills or a letter from a friend, etcetera—and immediately puts the envelope to her nose and releases an eruption of a sneeze, so powerful that the exercise woman looks right at us. I immediately look back out the window as she blows her nose into the paper and puts it back into her bag.

A man walks through the middle-front doors of the bus and sits down looking at us. He winks, I can see it through the glass, and then immediately pulls his shirt up to his face so as to cover his eyes and sits there with his arms crossed. Laura doesn't see, but instead seems to be talking about some Ottoman sultan and how he looked similar to our governor. The man just sits there, probably staring at me through his stained Xanadu shirt, and I pay no attention to him really.

But he is an interesting character, isn't he? I start to think, a considerable amount, about his story, where that shirt came from, where he came from, where Laura just came from, if she had seen him too, what was the name of the Ottoman sultan who looks like our governor, etcetera, etcetera.

He doesn't move the whole time, just sits there as Laura talks and I stare at the trees and the apartment buildings going by and I suppose, indirectly, the face man in the green shirt. He's even still sitting there, covered face and all, when I tell Laura this is my stop and that I have to get off. She follows, solemnly, so maybe she has seen the man after all.

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Now we are walking under the towering and russet-red oaks that line my street, and she is talking about her favorite kinds of trees. I had no idea there were so many types. The trees here have browning leaves surrounding their ancient trunks, deciduous I think, but she likes Scots pine, which are evergreens. I couldn't give a shit, really.

“The Scots are from all over Europe,” she tells me. Her backpack straps have been pulled to their tightest setting and as we walk she holds them against her sides. “I saw one in Scotland, when I was on my last trans-continental journey. It was massive! And so ancient.. Imagine what that tree must have lived through, the hands that might have touched its trunk. It baffles me just thinking about it.”

She suddenly flings her backpack around so that it is perched, like a marsupial, on her chest. She unzips the lowest pocket, the pocket with the Buena Vista Social Club pin driven in it, and retrieves an old Polaroid photograph. Its corner is sadly bent, and a wrinkle forming in another corner, it depicts a very definitive figure standing against a trunk so full it appears unreal. The tree towers beside her smiling face, an intricate system of branches and needles looming above her messy hair.

“Bwhooooah!” she exclaims as she pulls it out of the pocket, slowly so as to accentuate every sound she can while she exhibits it to me. “Isn't it just ensorcelling?”

“Just captivating,” I say, and bend down to pick up a wilted leaf.

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“Can't you just talk to me for a second?”

She stops walking, forcibly abrupt as if she is being pulled back by some force. I keep on walking, aware that she has stopped but not wanting to stop myself until I got past a couple of joggers running by. One of them is in the bike lane, the fool, and the

other is looking me straight in the eye. They pass, miserably, and I turn around. She's standing there still but eventually walks to me. We sit at a park bench, her legs crossed to reveal a pair of glaucous-tinted Birkenstocks:

"I want you to listen to me, can you do that for just one second? Huh?" she says with wide and flaming eyes. "I have a story to tell too, you know. Will you hear me out?"

I reply, "yes", of course:

"I discovered myself out there, Nef. Saw the world, saw some terrible, awful things, but I *saw* the world. I *did* transform, I *did* change, and that's something you need to start to begin to acknowledge." I listen on, trying to ignore the overuse of synonyms staring into the distance and glancing at our solitary friend. "The point I'm trying to make is that you're still my brother, deep deep down. You're still my wee Neffen, my baby boy. All I ask is that you see me for who I am. Is it too much to accept change in someone, someone you love?"

I look her in the eyes. "I accept the change, but you must realize where I'm coming from. Who are you?"

She stiffens a little bit, looks her eyes up to the sky and blinks for a lengthy and sizeable amount of time before fishing around in the pocket of her coat. She pulls out a sheet of paper, crumpled up and frayed along the bottom edge. I can see some of the writing on the page as she flattens it on a corduroy pant-leg: two sets of columns, one seems to be a two-stanza poem, the other a list of names. A pen suddenly appears in her left hand. She clears her throat, goes:

"Between us now and here - Who see the scenes slide past,

Two thrown together The daytimes dimming fast,
Who are not wont to wear Let there be truth at last,
Life's flushest feather. Even if despair.”

After a slight pause as she lets the words sink in she looks down at the paper, scrawls something, and folds the paper up into eighths. She looks me straight in the eye, with warmth and admiration, and stands. She reaches down for my hand and I can feel her cold jewelry brush against my arm.

“Let’s get a coffee or something sometime,” she says, and walks away in the direction of the bus stop.

What just happened?, I ask myself. Was that Thomas Hardy? I sit on the bench and watch a squirrel biting into a nut on a bench opposite mine.

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The door to my apartment is open. Not unlocked, but ajar. Walking down the street from the park, Laura long-gone, I see nothing but the blaring emerald flush of it. The gate, weary from decades of clasping hands, sits closed but rattles as I swing it open. Something is off here, something wrong, but the path and the prospect of home lures me in through the threshold.

Inside, I throw keys down on the little table by the door. Removing my scarf and my overcoat (remembering to take out the spoon), I walk through to the living room. Arthur is sitting at the table, eyes buried in a newspaper.

I smell cake. Thick and buttery with vanilla, the scent hangs suspended in the air.
“Did you bake a cake?”

“No. I just got home. Decided to read your paper.”

On the bench is a coconut cream cake, with cerulean letters iced onto the top surface, a message reading something like, ‘Happy Birthday, Brother!’”

I slide the cake into the garbage can.