

Conversation Pieces
Volume 26

*Slightly Behind
and to the Left*

Four Stories & Three Drabbles

by
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For Mom & Dad



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Vacation

The day all the men disappeared she went outside to see if it was true, if they were really all gone. The streets were quieter. You could hear more wind. Sometimes almost half a minute could go by without a car passing. The air smelled cleaner. More people were walking today, looking around. Some faces were in wonder. But in more of them, eyes were sweeping horizontal swaths, whites showing. And in the moments between the gusts of wind, when the wind died down and there were no cars passing, you could hear, for a moment, that the sound of walking was one of swishing and clopping, of cloth between thighs rubbed together, of wooden stacks, and of feet planted more forward than back.

Of course, the men had been disappearing for years, but on an individual basis and, she had thought, only out of her life. They leaked away with the metallic smell of injury, as if she had broken a promise she hadn't actually known she'd made, so that she felt as if their

broken promises were somehow less consequential than hers.

She was not surprised now. It seems sad, but when men leave, the more they leave, the less their leaving means. Some leave before they leave, and others absent themselves without ever leaving. Some were never there to begin with—markers of men who took up the space where a real man should be: Father, Uncle, Minister, Mentor, First Lover of Youthful Glory. Some would stand there and look at her with blank expressions, as if something in their minds had just switched off, and suddenly, the language she was speaking was permanently and irrevocably foreign. They would not sign up for language classes. They would pass on visiting that country, even with a guide. Go ahead, you may live in that country without me. You will have company. And still others would turn ugly, the lines of cheek next to their noses lifting, as if to draw their nostrils away from the smell of her.

But this is not the kind of thing that happened on this day. On this day, on the streets, a solidity was missing, a stubborn refusal. She could taste the acrid wall dissipating. On this day she even felt, in the moment she stood on the half-empty street and realized that they were actually all physically gone, as if she had known all along that it would come to this, that this was a trend that would not die out but rather rise to saturation.

For how could they do anything but leave when there were, or had been, so many men out there that she hadn't seen at all as men—male perhaps, by gender, but too narrow in the waist and ribcage, too soft-

voiced, slant-gestured, or afraid of women to feel like men, like men, not like male creatures who had nothing to do with her. What had these weak-chinned creatures ever had to do with her? And the streets were now filled with wandering women, many of whom half-hid their faces from the other women, as if they couldn't believe that this all wasn't their fault, as if they knew deep down that they had been overlooking so many of the men for so long that they deserved to have them all, all, all taken away.



The day after they disappeared, she saw a woman— young, pretty, stacked—walking down the middle of the sidewalk, completely naked. She was clearly not crazy because she was wearing sandals. For weeks there were naked women. Finally, she tried it too. It felt strange, and uncomfortable and wonderful. Feeling the sun touch her breasts was so familiar and yet shocking that she had to walk an entire block with her head tilted to the side, before she could identify the feeling. Breezes came past her skin like clouds of insect wings. She felt the fat on her stomach and hips and thighs and buttocks jiggling slightly, so slightly, with each step. She sucked in her gut, then let it out, then sucked it in again. When she got to the park, she took the sandals off so she could be entirely naked and realized that, often as she had walked here, she had never felt the grass of this particular park between her toes. It felt cool and prickly and refreshing. She worried about stepping in something. None of the dogs had disappeared with the

men, which was inconvenient. None of the children had either, and for a few days the older children stared at the naked women. They got used to it far more quickly than the women themselves did.



There were still boys among the children, but with the older ones, if you looked away sometimes, they wouldn't be there when you looked back. You never knew what it was that had taken them away: the fold in a woman's armpit, suddenly seen because she was the first to declare Spring with her sundress; or the moment his mother left him in the food court with the younger kids, telling him to watch them and he suddenly knew she was going off to the bathroom to cry; or the taste of raw onions on his tongue, the sensation of rolling something unbearable on his tongue, and the realization that it was *his* tongue; a deliberate punch to his sister's head. Actually, you could never know if any of these things had happened, because they were just gone, without leaving notes, and no one had seen a thing.



Sometimes she would stop in the middle of crossing the street and want to scream, but contain herself. She wouldn't scream. She had never wanted to scream before; when there were men around she couldn't have.

At first, at night, or even in the middle of the day, sometimes a scream rose from a building or a doorway somewhere, and everyone around her would go

look out the window to see if someone needed help, or even just turn their heads, even if they were clearly too far away to see what the matter was. Then they'd remember.

She developed a new sensitivity to gradations of screaming, the screams heard most frequently being of frustration or anger or despair, and not of fear. Over time, slowly, the meaning of a woman screaming changed. It became acceptable, soon, something everyone could and did try, acceptable and a little daring, like nakedness, or walking alone down dark alleyways. Then it became habitual, a pressure valve.

But she had never done it until, at her friend Lucy's house for dinner, she, carrying a stack of dirty plates to the kitchen, stopped suddenly and screamed. It was a long scream, and started out energetic and real, even lusty. Then she became conscious of where she was and the fact that she was screaming. Then she knew that she had screamed on purpose. She gasped at the moment of knowing herself, and the scream cut off. She was so embarrassed that she screamed again; this time, it was so false it came out like the scream of an old woman in the movies, trying to save her voice. She had closed her eyes and now peeked out between the lids at her friends. They were all waiting. She tried to explain: "It was just that I started to think about how none of my boyfriends would ever even think to get up and help clear the dishes," but the other women had already abandoned her. "Mine would," another guest said.

She tried screaming alone after that, but the time for her screaming was past, and her screams came out weak and silly. The children never screamed now, even

when playing. They only cried out in pain when they were hurt. And the boys whistled instead of shouting, when they won.



The last man she had spoken with had been her doctor, just a check-up, a late appointment the evening before the men all vanished. She secretly enjoyed being touched by him during examinations. His cold, wrinkled hands were purposeful, not how she knew most men. All she could remember from this talk was the term “adipose tissue,” which she had looked up on the web as soon as she got home. In a recurring dream, the faces of men came out of the air at her and all were saying “adipose tissue.”

Now everyone was going off their diets and the gym. On the other hand, there was much more walking, and much more walking around alone. She found it relentlessly sad not to see any jogging men around. Nothing made them quite so beautiful or strange as the sight of them running, their chests tight, their bodies telling you as they moved so swiftly past, sweating and smelling strongly, that this is what men were created to do: to run, their beautiful legs reaching and leaping so easily, gravity holding them, for their brief moments, so much less jealously to the ground.



As the weeks went by and the days remained empty of men, she began to feel overripe, as if the vine pickers were on strike. Her body felt swollen. She felt like

she was straining against her clothes, against her skin. It was hard to sit still in her chair. When her friend Francie came by, she looked up through her lashes. She began talking to Francie like a fox with a hound, doubling back, twirling random conversational grace notes that led nowhere. Francie finally stopped.

“Don’t talk to me like that,” Francie said.

“Like what?” she asked, opening her eyes wide.

Later, when Francie pointed out that she was contradicting herself, she said: “It’s a woman’s prerogative to change her mind.”

Still later, they went out for a drink with friends, that same hopeless excitement bringing hot pink to her cheeks, a pink it had taken more and more to coax up in these past few years. The three women waiting for them at the table were like a wake. She sat, barely, in her seat, looking around, bouncing a little, looking at all the people, who were all women still.



So she set her mind to get over her disgust with attraction towards children. This was easier than she had thought. She realized that boys, those elongating boys with their slip-up voices, were in their way, more crazy-making than men. They did not know what sex was and couldn’t ask for it, competently or incompetently, with their eyes and their gestures and their anxious, silly words. She had never learned how to pursue and was not certain she would like it. But who was there to say that what she did was wrong? Who could say she was a monster? It turned her on.

Once she began prowling for boys, she noticed that other women were doing it too. They hung around basketball courts in low-cut dresses, and as the weeks went by, and more and more women gathered around, the ones at the front, the aggressive ones, would open their dress fronts and hold a breast in each hand and squeeze them together or jiggle them up and down, or lift the hem of their skirts to show they weren't wearing underwear. All sorts of bodies were on display; this was no time for fashion. There was cheese-skin, and wrinkled skin, there were blue and yellow and red skin tones, and all levels of oiliness and dryness. There were large and crooked feet with corns on them, and slender hands and puffy fingers; there were very hairy women, one with a treasure trail starting above her belly button and a mustache.

Flesh became flesh. She could look at the display and see what used to be known as beauty sprinkled in with the overwhelming majority of just flesh. Beauty seemed to lose its distinction, or perhaps the aura of beauty, self- and community-willed in any case, had simply blown away like smoke. The displays of flesh frightened the boys. It wasn't beauty or wanting that made things happen, it was action. One of the most successful women was squarish, with no lips or waist, a square, cellulite ass, and long, torpedo-shaped breasts. Any boy that broke away from the pack to chase a ball or go to the bathroom, she would cut in, and grab his hand, and place it on her breast, holding it there with her strength. She would put her hand down his shorts and feel around until his face contorted and the front of his shorts became wet. They lost no boys this way,

with so many women watching, but then she'd take them home or simply into the ladies restroom of the park, and some of them would never come back.

She speculated that they didn't pull away or try to smack the woman's hand away—like the boys were increasingly doing with the increasingly aggressive women—because this woman looked so much like the mother you all would want to have, and what she did with them they trusted her to do. Perhaps, despite her heat, this woman was protecting and saving the boys for the rest of them. Perhaps the woman had a higher rate of retention than the younger women, whose girlish sexiness bounced comfort off itself like rubber.

Despite the fierce competition, all the gathered women gasped together in satisfaction when one of the boys lost his concentration, looked over at them, and got hard. It got both harder and easier to get the boys' attention as the consequences of going with one of the women became clearer to them. Their mothers talked to them, talked endlessly, without ceasing, telling them things about women that the mothers had never thought they would say about women to their sons, under any circumstances. Mothers began keeping boys home or accompanying them out and running interference on the fertile women. On the playgrounds and outside the restarted schools fertile women and mothers would face off, there being a rough, dividing line of age between them: the mothers of boys old enough to cruise being largely over 40, and the fertile women without children largely younger.

But the poor mothers stood no chance at all, for the mothers didn't stand together. Many of them, even

as they were clutching their boys' shoulders 'til their knuckles were white, whispering instructions, were letting their eyes wander over the other boys, wondering if they had it in them to replace the sweet boy they knew they were about to lose. The mothers who loved the most fiercely lost their boys the soonest.



She saw one day, as all the assembled women did, how a boy was lost—a very young one, no more than ten or eleven—when his older brother, overtaken by sports passion, ran the ball to the periphery, tripped and fell and was swooped down upon by a woman. (Other women fought over the ball, a bargaining tool.) The younger brother ran in and hit and yelled and kicked at the woman until she backed away, then hauled his brother to his feet and dragged him back to the safety of the pack at the courts. The small boy pushed his brother into the midst of the boys milling, frightened by the breach, then turned to face the rage-wall of women with his arms crossed, clearly believing, perhaps as his mother had told him, that he wasn't a target. The look on the women's faces must have convinced him otherwise, for his crossed arms faltered and went to his sides. Yet he stood there, looking frightened back, and the fear in his look, the fuel to fear of their looking, the fear in his look despite their looking, became a blaze that grew so hot, incredibly hot, that it burned the eyes of the women, all the women, and they were ashamed, and they all looked away. When they looked back, he was gone.



It occurred to her, after she had left off prowling and gone back to her usual routine, that there was probably a way that women could preserve the boys and take them at the same time. For if they abducted the boys, abused them, forced them, then the boys would retain their child-like helplessness throughout and be returned as boys to their mothers. In fact, perhaps abuse could render a boy permanently childlike, and enough abuse would return creatures to the world who grew ever more into men in body, but remained boys in mind. She was sure she couldn't be the only woman to whom this had occurred. Yet there were few, if any, tales of outright abduction or abuse. Most women who lost their sons could find out easily what had happened to them, who had taken them, who had touched them or turned them, at which moment—within a minute or two—they had disappeared. There were boy bulletins in public places: mothers posted photos of lost boys and strangers posted beneath them tales of their loss, when, and where, and with whom. Young women, too young to be mothers, prowled the boy walls, lips slightly parted, looking for boys they had seen other women take. Most of the predators preyed in the open, with a crowd of women and boys as witnesses. Most of the boys went with the women, willingly or unwillingly, without being physically coerced, but rather with eyes wide as if hypnotized, and disappeared publicly with eyes wide, as if realizing something important for the first time.



The lesbian from work, Adela, asked her out for a drink, and she went, thinking that she might as well give it a try, although she realized foggily that she was sabotaging her own effort even before it had begun, since, although she did find many women sexy, Adela was not one of them. She, as subtly as possible, fed Adela drinks until Adela would be drunk enough to make a pass at her. Instead, Adela grew maudlin and began to weep. When asked what was the matter, Adela could only sob, “I miss Renée.” Or maybe it was René. She could not say who René was.

She took Adela home with her and aimed her at the couch, where the woman fell and landed like a very drunk stone. Then she went back out. It was three o’clock in the morning, and she was not drunk enough. She walked widening circles around her apartment building as if in a search pattern for something missing. She was just drunk enough to admit to herself what, but not why.

She turned the corner into an alleyway and came up against someone who made her flinch away in an old, familiar feeling. She heard a hoarse gasp and looked up—up!—at his face. It was a man. He flung a palm out before his face as if she were going to strike him.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” she said, and it was strange that it was automatic.

“Please...please don’t hurt me!” the man said in a soft, hoarse voice, but on the last word, his pitch slipped up and “me” came out as a squeak. She looked at him more closely. The skin around his mouth was soft with

a blond fuzz that looked orange in the streetlight. His face was completely unlined, still half-soft, and marked here and there with pimples. His body was tall, but not broad; he looked as if he had just grown it, now that she took a good look. It was a boy, but a much older boy than she had seen in a long time. He lowered his arm slightly at her silence.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” she repeated, more softly. She let her eyelids fall halfway.

“I have to be home!” he said frantically, stretching his arm out in front of him a little, as if to push her away. She took his arm and his whole body jerked.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” she said again, firmly. She held his wrist so that his fingers brushed against her breast. He retracted his fingers into the claw of a spent fledgling. What was he doing out so late? She looked around, as if to ensure that no one was watching. She thought perhaps this was the problem before, that she could not work in public, in front of so many people. As she thought this, she knew it was true. She needed privacy.

She held his arm like pointing a rifle, one hand on his wrist, one on his elbow, and pushed. He backed away from her, and thus she pushed him halfway down the alley. She knew exactly what she was doing but did not know how she knew what to do. She had always been afraid of these boy/men, ever since she had grown breasts and been so relentlessly prodded in junior high and then found out, as she grew older, that her womanhood was no guarantee of respect.

He was so soft, she had not realized. His arm was strong and tense, and yet skinny and elongated, and

had a sort of softness she hadn't known to recognize as such before. Her eyes were slitted tight. She brought her tongue out and in once, deliberately, and was shocked at how erotic this felt. This was the other side of their bravado. She looked at him with such infinite care and respect, for she hadn't known before how much more terrifying it was to be a man than to be a woman. She pressed on his forearm and pressed and there was infinite give. She could squeeze through his arm until her fingers met and his arm disappeared, and he wouldn't resist.



Five thousand iterations of hands on her forearm, on her wrist, five thousand of them there were, like the forearms of an Aryan goddess, five-thousand-breasted, five-thousand-forearmed, one for each man who had need of her, who petitioned her with grabs.

In college she had been friends with a young man, the boyfriend of her best girlfriend, a beautiful, spineless, dark-haired creature her girlfriend yelled at ceaselessly. She allied with him, she allowed herself to talk to him the way she talked to her girlfriend, complaining of cramps, complaining of boys, craving ice cream. One day, the goddess in her choosing to grant him something, she complained of how fat she was, knowing that she wasn't fat, but knowing that this complaint would draw his eyes to her breasts, where his eyes would say that there was only one part of her that was fat, while he denied with his words that she was anything but desirable. Instead, he sighed like a martyr and grasped

her forearm with his long thumb and forefinger, encircling it. He shook her arm in the air next to his face. “Look at this. Look how skinny you are,” he said, looking right into her eyes. The one measuring hand on her arm, the one not-restraining, not-petitioning hand on her arm.



She pressed him behind a dumpster against the wall and ran her hand down his chest, all bone and taut softness, to his belt. She watched him carefully. He whimpered, but didn't resist when she unbuckled his belt with a few gentle jerks of one hand. She had time to wonder where she had learned this; unbuckling had always been so awkward before, no matter how often she did it. It was amazing, this boy, this alley, her place here. She knew exactly what she wanted to do, and exactly how to do it.

He was wearing white briefs, his penis half erect, half in fear. His shirt was a plaid cotton, lined with a white t-shirt. These she drew up his chest until she could see his cold nipples. He was probably neither popular nor athletic, but the soft promise of lines down his cheeks, the breadth of his shoulders—she could see the man he would have become, a man she might have in her youth—probably could not anymore have—drawn to her with just a smile, or maybe a baroque line of prattle confided as she passed his seat. Only the promise of a night of sex, not a man she could have had for longer, not a man who would have tolerated her for longer. One finger slid over his penis protected by the

soft cotton, the other pulled his pants down in the back, taking the underwear halfway down with it. Soft as a baby's bottom it was, but hard clenched beneath. She took him by the waist toward her, away from the wall, and pressed every outstanding point of her body against his, trapping his penis between the plank of his abdomen and her adipose tissue. It stood there, resisting being cradled against her. He was nearly flat, so young was he, so afraid and stiff.

"I want you to sit down," she said, and pushed him backwards, hard. He stumbled a few steps, his thighs restrained in his jeans, and sat down on the door stoop he had suddenly come up against. "I want you to lie back," she said, although the stoop, a perfect square, was stained with something. He lay part-way back, half-rebellious. She reached up her skirt and took her panties off, not trying to make it sexy. He watched her do it. This was the difference. He wasn't watching her in anticipation, astounded at his luck, hoping that she would take over now, hoping she would be that fantasy woman who wanted to be in charge. He was watching her like a rabbit would a snake.

She reveled in the dirtiness of the stoop, in the sticky stain that attached itself to one knee as she pressed it down on one side of him, then to the other knee as she pressed it to the other side. She pulled the elastic of his briefs down until it released his penis, then left it there under his penis to hoist it upward. He didn't object. She had a moment's desire to bring all of her weight down on the delicate thing, crushing it under the weight of her, of her breasts and stomach, viscera and pelvis, all

but her legs. As if he knew what she was thinking, he whimpered, calling her back to responsibility.

She held his penis just below the head with thumb and forefinger. “Poor baby,” she whispered. She spread her lips with the other hand, placing his head just inside them. “Sweet baby,” she said. She slid her fingers down the shaft, making sure all was straight. Then, gently, but firmly, she bore down.



It was amazing, this boy, this alleyway, what she was doing and what she had just done. She had never been so full of sex before, so full that every other thought was driven out. Afterward she sat next to him, her bare ass sticky with his come and whatever nocturnal city emissions had welcomed them on the stoop. Afterward she could still think of nothing but the boy as he had been a minute before, lying back on the dirty stoop, breathing hard as if in pain, no intimation of pleasure on his face when he came. She thought of that face and his gasp, over and over again as she sat on the stoop next to him, and she felt the wave coming, sitting alone on the cold stoop next to him, felt the wave crest and explode, seeing him over and over again as he had just been a few minutes before, she came finally, just sitting there. This was sex. *This* was sex.

He rolled away from her and sat up, then upward, to try to get away. She grabbed the bunched seat of his pants, still hanging to his thighs. He had tried to be punk and fashionable; his pants were loose in the seat but tight in the legs. They clashed stylistically with his

plaid shirt. This was unbearably endearing. He must be at least fourteen if his mother was letting him choose his own clothes.

She dragged him back toward her, laughing.

“I’m not done with you yet,” she said affectionately.

She was surprised when he reached around awkwardly and grabbed her wrist. He shook her wrist, harder than she would have thought, trying to disengage her fingers from his belt.

“Let me go,” he said. She smiled indulgently and held on. He squirmed and struggled and gave her an unintentional Indian burn. A puppy. His penis was still hanging over the waistband of his underpants and she could see its tip bobbing around the side of his hip with his struggles. It was adorable.

Then her wrist was wrenched painfully, and she let go. He stood now, facing her, breathing hard, his teeth bared like a rodent’s. She was surprised; she looked down at his penis and smiled. He tucked it in, pulled up his underwear, which got caught on the zipper, disentangled it, pulled up his pants, and fastened himself. His face grew agonized; it took too long until he was closed again. She giggled.

“I’m going home,” he said, punching his jeans pockets.

“Oh, are you?” she said, “That would be too bad. I have something to show you that I think you would like.” She drew the edge of her neckline with one finger.

“No!” he cried, shuddering. But he did not walk away.

“No what?” she said low, wondering if she could get away with making an actual purring sound.

“I’m going home!” he said, punching his pockets again. She stood up and approached him. The bridge of her nose nearly hooked his chin.

“No one’s stopping you,” she whispered. She moved her right hand slowly toward his chest until her third finger was nearly touching it. She knew how to move it in so it looked like it was moving infinitely, yet never quite touched.

He slapped her hand away. Startled, she looked up. She smiled.

He slapped her face. It felt like candy on her face. She looked, shocked. He slapped again, hard. She laughed. He hit her.

The strike knocked her head to the right and back on her neck and cut her gasp off in her throat. She choked for a moment. Her cheekbone flashed and burned, but she knew how not to put her hand to her face.

“Turn around,” he said.

She kept her face averted, feeling for injury in her neck, waiting on him.

“Turn...around,” he said, as if finding the words as he said them. He placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her. His hands disappeared.

“Go home,” he said, his hand appearing again briefly on the back of her shoulder in a weak push. His voice slipped up on the second word. She giggled and choked.

“Will you escort me home like a gentleman?”

“No,” he said. “Go home.”

“All alone?” she asked, and there was a little music in her voice.

“Yes, all alone. Go home,” he said, and his voice didn’t slip up. He placed his hand deliberately on her shoulder, no longer tensed to snatch it away again. He pushed her shoulder firmly away, rolling his palm against the flesh until just his fingertips were in contact, pushing her away and away, giving her movement, momentum, cradling her forward so that she could move forward again, finally.

She started back down the alley to the street, a smile now stretching her face, now stretching it wide. It had no amusement. It must have been a happy smile, one such as she hadn’t smiled in years, a smile of, perhaps, a smile of fulfillment.

Yes, fulfillment. She deserved this.

She did not look back, but listening, in an instant, she heard the alley behind her grow empty.