

Conversation Pieces
Volume 27

Through the Drowsy Dark

Short Fiction and Poetry

by

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To Michael Swirsky, worth waiting for
through dark and light.

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Those Who Wait through the Drowsy Dark

Caitlyn is making love to a man. She aims her fingernails to scratch his back at a forty-five degree angle, her fingertips skipping across the raised lines of the cypress tattoo that spans from his shoulders to his waist. He is taller than she, his heartbeat palpable near the pit of her throat. She tries to calculate its pace. What is his pulse? His blood pressure? Are they higher than normal with effort or lower with pleasure? Drops of sweat form a mist across his chest. His breath is humid. Should Caitlyn pant, or moan, or stay silent?

His face squeezes up like he's about to sneeze. Neurochemically, a sneeze is one eighth an orgasm. Does that mean he's one eighth of the way to his?

This is not the only thing Caitlyn is thinking about. Few circumstances allow her to follow a single mental trail: alcohol sometimes, or a high fever, or once in college, a joint. Otherwise, her thoughts are always headed in multiple directions, as if her consciousness is a map of diverging roads. Part of her mind is always narrating.

Caitlyn does this. Caitlyn does that. Caitlyn is introspective. Caitlyn is certainly not living in the moment.

Her thoughts circle back to the figures of her monthly budget. She worked it out yesterday afternoon while sitting hunched over her kitchen table, notebook perfectly centered between her stack of accounting books and her adding machine. Even compared to other accountants, Caitlyn is uniquely vigilant. When her account balance surprises her, it makes her feel disheveled and askew, as if she's gone out in public without showering. If she can control her pennies, she can control anything.

During Caitlyn's childhood, her mother would sit on the living room rug to scribble out the family accounts. Caitlyn's father was supposed to do the books, but he only did them when he was home, and so he never did them. Bills and receipts were forever lost in flurries of broken dishes, empty cans, half-eaten food—incomplete items which no one could remember having been whole.

Caitlyn remembers a charm bracelet she begged for at ten years old. Such a simple thing; she could buy a dozen now, a hundred even. It had been a trial for her parents to scrape together a few extra dollars. When they did, Caitlyn wore the bracelet for three days straight, sitting up in her room with her sister, jangling the tin charms to make them chime. Caitlyn didn't remove the bracelet until Friday evening when her mother insisted she take it off for dinner. Caitlyn laid it carefully on the counter by the sink. When she came downstairs Saturday morning, she discovered the

cracked chain lying in twin pieces, each glinting in the early morning sun.

(Caitlyn's father was home that night. When he arrived, the bracelet was whole. When he left, the bracelet was broken. These two facts are unrelated. Caitlyn is positive.)

Caitlyn writes and rewrites her financial futures whenever her hand is otherwise unoccupied—during long phone calls, at work meetings, on restaurant napkins. She doesn't want to rehash the same tired columns of fours and sixes now when her attention should be on this encounter, this man.

Sex is supposed to be all-consuming, but it's not. Penetration feels strange. Intrusive. Caitlyn wouldn't call it pleasurable, but it's not unpleasurable either. It's orthogonal to that axis of understanding. Penetration is like cold water on a hot day. The cold isn't cold exactly. It's a shock: overwhelming, incomprehensible.

Caitlyn tries to make sense of the sensations by quantifying them. She contemplates the variables of touch. How many pounds per square inch of pressure should she apply with her lips? For how many moments (M) should she lay her hand on his arm? If he thrusts at angle A , at what angle B should she hold herself, and does it vary by C , excitement, or D , depth, or E , none of the above? If she can solve enough variables, then she should be able to find the equation for perfection.

He lowers his lips to her ear and murmurs something. The only thing she can understand is her name. "...Caitlyn..." She knows she should reciprocate, but her tongue is tied. She feels herself going hot with a blush.

The truth is, Caitlyn can't remember his name. It's not that he hasn't told her. He has, repeatedly. But she can't keep hold of it; somehow, it keeps slipping away. She's managed to conceal her forgetfulness so far. On dates, she waits for him to identify himself to this waitress or that passing acquaintance. Each time, Caitlyn carefully writes his name in her mental notebook, underscored and bolded so she won't forget again. Each time it vanishes, as if her memories are written in invisible ink.

Some women would probably laugh at forgetting their partner's name during sex, eager to add the story to their trophy case of anecdotes. Caitlyn is not those women. A blush flames in her cheeks, spreading down to her chest. She does not bed men for fun or gossip or to write scandalous memoirs in her head. She beds men with the same precision with which she maintains her checkbook. She's analyzing men, trying them on like tailored business suits at an expensive boutique. She must find the right fit.

Luckily, he doesn't seem to notice her omission. He traces his finger along her reddened cheeks, his smile widening, seeming to think she's pink with arousal. She strokes his shoulders and lets him believe it.

Caitlyn remembers everything she's learned about this man except his name. She remembers that he plans to cover his entire body in tattoos. He has three so far; a cypress across his back, a sickle inside his thigh, and a portrait of Rosie the Riveter on his upper arm. He enjoys old movies about circus freaks where viewers can catch a glimpse of the mundane moments in those sensationalized lives. Sometimes he speculates

aloud about having a daughter with butterfly wings growing out of her back. He's sure they'll be able to do those kinds of grafts in the future. He imagines the world will be full of angel-winged toddlers and snake-skinned strippers and tiger-striped teenagers with implanted cat's claws.

His family is from Virginia near DC, and he loves his mother to distraction. Every summer he organizes an enormous party for her birthday, gathering all their relatives and loved ones for an annual trek to the family home in Pimmit Hills. He festoons the house with pink and blue crepe paper and fills the backyard with buffet tables. Humidity swarms around the party-goers in their pale-colored sun-dresses and wide hats, their chatter punctuated by mosquito buzz. His mother sits awkwardly in a white wicker chair on the lawn, an open parasol beside her. She nods at her children and grandchildren and nephews and cousins and neighbors. She samples the petit fours and pound cake and tells the bakers how talented they are. Her gratitude is humble and plentiful, but even as she thanks everyone for coming, she is always looking away—at the ground or the tablecloth or the brush of horizon where the birches touch the sky—never directly at her loved ones' faces.

He came to San Francisco five years ago to maintain communications equipment for the fire department and has since fallen in love with the city, its salt air and sloped streets and pale-colored homes dotting the golden-grassed hills. He enjoys the punks who stomp around in boots and leather, with their nose rings and their multi-colored hair and their foolish, disarming friendliness. He's like them in some ways—tattooed

and friendly to strangers—which makes him very different from the kind of men Caitlyn usually goes out with.

Ordinarily, Caitlyn dates gym-muscled professionals, the kind of men who treat women the way they treat business decisions. They create dating protocols and market them to each subsequent paramour with superficial redesigns. The clever ones create adaptable formulae they can alter for “if A, then B” statements. If the girl seems melancholy, whisk her off to the Ice Capades. If her chirpiness annoys, sober her up with a trip through the white-walled corridors of the Museum of Modern Art.

These men maintain a mental rolodex of restaurants indexed by average meal price. They adjust their spending up or down depending on their estimation of their date’s risk to reward ratio. Caitlyn sees the calculation in their eyes as they weigh benefits against investment: if she seems interested but inhibited then spring for the \$75 prix fixe and a bottle of expensive wine to keep her glass full, but if she’s frigid then may as well call it a bust and take her to an all-night Chinese buffet. Caitlyn approves of this logical detachment. It gives her a framework in which she can relate to them without becoming entangled.

But this man is different. He’s *him*, infectious and generous, and Caitlyn finds herself revising her rules where he’s concerned. He drives exceptions; he disproves statements; he erases previously known equations.

Only she can’t remember his name.

When they first met, she was convinced he must have the kind of name that would suit his tattoos and

long dark hair and subtle confidence. This is a Tristan, she decided, or a Byron, or a Ramon. And then he told her his name and it was perfectly ordinary and forgettable, and her subconscious rebelled, christening him with a series of exotic appellations. For instance: Valentino astonishes Caitlyn with his sincerity. Florian delights her with his spontaneity. And so on.

She first met him one afternoon when her office scheduled her for a late meeting across town. As she hastened across the city block, briefcase rapping against her knees, Blaise called out to her: “Hey, pretty.” She looked down and saw Marcello sitting on a bench at the foot of a skyscraper, the inscrutable scrawls of his tattoos emerging from his cuffs and collar. The sun caught the part in Giovanni’s black hair as he leaned toward her, his features cutting a sharp silhouette against the afternoon’s vivid blue. Caitlyn shrank in on herself, prepared to speed up and brush past him, when she saw the glint in his palm: a candy wrapped in shiny green paper. “Caramel?” Emilio asked, and Caitlyn surprised herself by reaching to take it.

Their fingers touched. Mikhail’s fingertip traced Caitlyn’s wrist. She pulled away, the sensation lingering on her skin. Beside Lucius sat a half-empty bag of candies, iridescent wrappers catching the sun.

“Do you do this often? Give candy to strangers?” she asked. Rowan grinned. “Every day at lunch. It makes people smile. I like to think of it as a random act of kindness.”

Gulls circled overhead. The noise of rushing commuters wafted around them like breeze. “Do you give

them to everyone or just pretty girls?” “Everyone. And pretty girls, too.”

(“How are my pretty girls?” Caitlyn’s father asked, a year after the charm bracelet broke, when he came home with a man from Jacksonville. “This is Jerry,” he said. “He’s going to help me patch the roof.” Caitlyn and her sister climbed the ladder with the men, and spent hours watching the world from this new height while listening to the men’s footsteps and hammering. “You can see the feathers on the duck’s stomachs!” Caitlyn exclaimed to her father. “That’s right, honey; they’re migrating,” he said, his hammer palmed in one hand, Jerry’s shoulder cupped in the other. Bright blue sky made them a statue in silhouette together, the end of one figure indistinguishable from the beginning of the other.)

During her cross-town meeting, Caitlyn found herself thinking of Jasper, hoping he’d still be there when she returned. She took the same route back to her office, watching the horizon in case she could make him out. Distracted, she collided with a man using a walker and immediately let out a shower of apologies and self-remonstrance, which left him looking more embarrassed than she was. Later, as she stood on a curb two blocks from where Ambrose had been before, Caitlyn missed two cycles of walk signals as she tried to decide whether a distant blur might or mightn’t be him. A woman in a hat, one hand weighed down with shopping bags and the other grasping the upstretched fingers of her toddler, paused to catch Caitlyn’s attention. “It’s our turn now,” she said, voice impatient. Caitlyn flushed as she stepped onto the asphalt.

Alaric sat in exactly the same place Caitlyn had seen him before, his arms stretched across the back of the same bench, his supply of candies dwindling. She wanted to move toward him, but she also wanted to flee. She hesitated, caught by indecision, watching from a short distance as he showered chocolates on a group of retired joggers in pink sweat suits, their grey hair flying loose from their ponytails. They left smiling and chattering, scarlet papers crinkling as they unwrapped their sweets.

Caitlyn tried to avert her gaze so Etienne wouldn't know she'd been watching, but he was already turning toward her. "I've got something for you," he said. "A peppermint." Yellow and purple paper shone in his palm: a candy dressed in motley like a jester. Caitlyn pressed it into the pocket of her suit jacket. With a brief wave, she fled.

When she returned to her office and unwrapped the candy, Caitlyn discovered a note written inside the wrapper. In the tidy block letters of an engineer's hand, it read, *A candy a day keeps the blues away*. Underneath, his phone number. Beside it, his name.

The problem is, Caitlyn knows what kind of man she's going to marry, and it isn't Stefan. She's worked out the math to describe her future mate. Beginning with the solution—her ideal family—she's worked backward, fumbling through calculations to derive his identity. He'll be from a city but long for small towns. Or the other way around. He'll work at a profession he finds tedious, but obsess over each monotonous task because he believes in duty. He'll be ambitious, but only in the ways prescribed by the American dream; he'll be estranged

from his family but treat them politely; he'll watch hours of cowboy movies, longing for a masculinity that never existed. He'll be a low-risk, low-return investment, the kind of man who doesn't understand the distinction between happiness and success. Caitlyn won't love him, but he'll mistake her mathematical love-making for genuine affection.

Caitlyn revels in the time she spends with Isidore, but she knows that the thrill of gambling on high-risk stocks is never worth the inevitable loss. It's all too easy to imagine the future she'd have with Anatoly. He'd be demanding, passionate, unpredictable. Janek would inscribe his patterns on her inner self like the tattoo needles do on his skin. Taurian would try to sweeten their lives by scattering candy in salted soil, and their children would grow to expect it, so that when, inevitably, it was gone, they would experience its absence with physical pain.

Caitlyn remembers hiking with her father near the lake past grandpa's property, hearing him name thirteen species of flies, trooping through the marsh to watch him sketch maps in the mud with fallen sticks. She remembers the desolate hours afterward that she and her sister spent waiting for their father to return home. The two girls sat together on the peeling linoleum, staring at the clouded window in the front door through which it was impossible to distinguish more than shadows. Periodically, one of them would speak a scrap of thought—"Was that an...?" "Maybe the road is out...?"—"...hear that?"—and the other would nod even if the phrase was inscrutable, because all musings

led down the same pitted dirt road by which their father had left them.

Caitlyn fears she's falling in love with Phoenix. She fears he's falling in love with her, too. She must find a way to make him understand their bodies are incompatible. Like decimals and fractions, they cannot be combined without fundamental change in their expression. She struggles to assemble statements into a proof that will convince him. She adds words and subtracts clichés and divides them by emotional truths. She needs syllogisms to cancel out the smiles of old ladies in pink sweat suits. She must find the multiplicative inverse of candy wrappers sparkling in the sun. The calculations spiral into more and more chains of irrational numbers. She comes up with divide by zero errors. There is no solution.

Sergio pulls away. Caitlyn feels the absence where his weight was. It's a long moment before she can make sense of it.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

Caitlyn has no verbal translation for her deep physical desire for him to return his weight onto her body. "It's nothing. I have a headache." She reaches for Honoré's shoulder. "Please?"

Dominic taps her nose. "I don't make love to unhappy women," he says, teasing. "Especially not our first time."

"I'm not unhappy."

"It happens to everyone," he says. "We'll try again when you're in a better mood."

Caitlyn doesn't know it, but it was a scene like this one that inspired him to care so deeply for his mother.

It happened seven years ago, shortly before he came to San Francisco. He was excited to tell her about the job offer, but when he entered her house, there was only unused furniture in empty rooms, everything scrubbed and polished and put away. He unlocked the back door and discovered his mother in the newly planted herb garden, weeping over an uprooted tomato plant. Dirt smeared her cheeks and blouse, clotted her hair. She smelled of salt and soil. He asked her what had happened, but she said nothing, only stared at him blankly. Finally, he picked her up and carried her inside, putting her into the bath as if she were an infant. She didn't react to the tepid water or to the touch of the sponge as he scrubbed her skin. It was only when her face was clean that she began to move on her own again.

He began organizing the Pimmit Hills reunions on his mother's birthday that year. Each year since, he's convinced himself that this gathering will be different. This will be the one that forces his mother to realize how many people love her. This will be the one that breaks through her depression. So far it hasn't worked. But it will. It must. He knows it to be true.

Caitlyn reaches out to Bastien. His skin is warm. She moves her hand down his chest. He's a man; he must want to continue. She knows she shouldn't want him to, since Beau's the wrong man, and she plans to break up with Adair tomorrow—but his smell is chocolate melting in the sun and she craves him. For tonight, at least. She tries to tug Johann back toward her. Titus pushes her hand away. Gideon won't move.

Caitlyn doesn't know this either, but in the deep layers of his mind, those he won't allow to reach his con-

scious thoughts, he's beginning to suspect that some people's griefs flow from deep underwater sources, subterranean springs no one can dam. And underneath even that suspicion lies another half-formed thought: that sometimes it's the sufferer herself who stands at the floodgates, dedicated to keeping them open.

"Maybe I should go," he says, pulling away.

Caitlyn's voice is small. "Maybe."

"I don't know why you won't forget it and come to bed," said Caitlyn's mother, worried, as she watched her two girls staring out the front door. Shadows weighted their eyes and they slumped with exhaustion. "In an hour, mom," said Caitlyn. Her mother didn't argue further—she'd never been sure how to contradict her daughter's steely certainty—but she paused in the hallway to watch her girls waiting through the drowsy dark. It wasn't long before the younger drifted to sleep. Caitlyn pinched her arm. "Pretend we're in the army and we're on night watch," Caitlyn said, chastening. "We've got to stay awake. It's our duty." Caitlyn's mother heard the hardness in her little girl's voice and felt unshakably sad, knowing then without being able to articulate it that her child had endured damage that was beyond her capacity to repair. Things were always broken in that house, and Caitlyn's mother was never able to fix them, but she went on and did the best she could. What else was there to do?)

It takes awhile for him to gather his clothing. He lingers a moment, fully-dressed and watchful. There's an instant in which Caitlyn knows she can change everything by speaking. She can tell him why she's sad; she can confess how she feels about candy and tattoos

and imaginary children with butterfly wings. At least, she could, if she knew how to say such things.

The moment passes. He leaves quietly, finding his own way back through the shadows of her house. The front door barely sounds a click as it closes.

Caitlyn has no idea why she cannot remember his name. It was written on the candy wrapper, beneath his number. Caitlyn's memory is usually photographic. Indeed, when she thinks back, she can picture the gold patterning inside the wrapper, the ten precise digits, the swoop of his parentheses. His name is gone, though, as if it had never been written there at all.