

Permission

INGRID KEENAN

AFTER ALL OUR STRATEGIZING, it was a little disappointing how quickly my parents agree to the trip.

"We're going to Montreal for a weekend in October. To look at McGill. With Ms. Tilley. We're staying in the residence." I stick to statements, my jaw set, expecting resistance.

They looked at one another, raised eyebrows, shrugged. Dad said: "Sounds like a good idea, Kate." And that was it—no questions, no objections. It was so easy that I wondered if I should be hiding less from them. Maybe I suddenly had new privileges they forgot to tell me about.

Tanya's note that morning had given the whole thing a bit of a surreal flavour. "Do you think you'll be able to get persimmon?" she wrote to me in math class. "Persimmons? At this time of year?" I wrote back. Across the room, Tanya looked baffled, then snorted in her careless way. Tanya never needed to worry about getting permission for things; she called her mother Dinah and was embarrassingly frank with her about how she spent her time. That seems to be their deal. My parents were generally reasonable, but they weren't fools, and they must have seen what I was trying to pull: a very loosely supervised weekend out of town with my boyfriend. Sarah and Nicola had the same problem, and in the coffee shop at the end of the day, we decided that an unflagging focus on the educational aspect of the trip was the only way to go.

As my parents moved on to discussing the new garden shed they were building, I stared into my dinner. What were they thinking? Did they realize what the drinking age was in Montreal? Did they understand when I said we'd be gone all weekend? What were they thinking?

I called Peter right after dinner to tell him. His mother had said yes, too, and we were both a bit giddy. We had never spent a whole night together.

"I just want to wake up with you in the morning." Peter's words echoed my thoughts. Lying on one side with the phone tucked into my shoulder, I imagined reaching out to another sleeping body. I imagined the warmth, and the weight, of sharing a bed.

"I love you," I said. "I can't wait."

That was the fall that we were obsessed with the music teacher. Richard was new that year, and he was much younger than the other teachers at our small school. Notably, he had never worked as a teacher before. Sarah, for some reason, latched onto this fact and worried away at it during our weekly music elective.

"So, Richard, why did you decide to become a teacher?"

"For the sheer joy of spending time with you girls."

And the next week: "Do you find teaching to be a disappointment, after your dreams of fame?"

"I couldn't dream of a more fulfilling way to spend my days, Sarah. Let's continue."

Richard had been, still was, a professional musician, a violist. It was unfathomable to us that a person could look themselves in the eye if they failed to make a success of such a lofty career as music, and so we were embarrassed for Richard, embarrassed that he was teaching us when he clearly was above teaching.

Richard was fabulous-looking, really not handsome at all, but completely attractive. He was not tall, but very thin and rangy, with wide shoulders and lazy legs that just loped along, never in a hurry. He managed to appear both laconic and alert, his floppy, casual hair and laid-back stance in contrast with his bright eyes and teeth that were somehow a bit too long, wolf like. We hid it behind our gossip and inventions and speculations, but it is fairly clear to me now that we were all in love with Richard. Publicly, though, we had decided that he was a pervert, although it was unclear exactly what we meant by that.

It was Sarah, as usual, who heard the gossip before any of us.

"Did you know that Richard is the guys' chaperone? Have you ever heard anything so ludicrous?" She leaned across the donut shop table for one of Tanya's Dunhills, lit it with a match, and exhaled the woes of the world. "I mean, really! We'll just have to get him really, really drunk on cheap red wine and make him reveal all of his sordid past."

But Nicola and I were busy plotting. We had realized that as long as Antony and Peter shared a room, and she and I shared a room, with a bit of creative alarm-setting and sneaking around in the middle of the night, we would both be able to spend the night with our boyfriends. Antony and

Peter listened but didn't participate in the scheming, and when I looked up at Peter I was surprised to see that he looked wounded. I suddenly felt as if I had revealed all my secrets at the top of my voice in a crowded room, and I look down, ashamed.

As the bus pulled into the driveway of the dorm, our excitement rose. Most of us had been to Montreal before, but this was totally different. We were pretending to be grownups that weekend, and it had required careful packing, a tweaking of wardrobes, to suggest something more sophisticated, more complicated, but also, ideally, utterly natural looking. I was not the only one who was wearing a scarf I would never wear at home, carelessly and elegantly knotted. I look down, worried that mine had lost that insouciance. It hadn't.

I expected the guys to be oblivious to this kind of pressure, but as we got off the bus in front of the residence, I saw them moving differently. Something had loosened in their hips and shoulders, and they all had something that looked like it was supposed to be a swagger. I sincerely hoped our scarves didn't look that stupid.

That night at dinner, we ordered wine and conspicuously drank it in front of Richard and Ms. Tilley, and talked a bit too loudly, with a bit too much bravado. Nicola, Tanya, and I fantasized about sharing an apartment the next year, and eating at restaurants like that one every night.

At one in the morning, I snuck into Peter's room after sheepishly passing Antony in the stairwell. The lights were all on and Peter's suitcase was neatly arranged at the foot of his bed. Peter was brushing his teeth. He hugged me awkwardly, then put down his toothbrush. We kissed, then make our way to the bed, where we lay like two tin soldiers. Peter immediately jumped up to turn off the light, and although it was now too dark, at least we could talk.

"Hello."

"This is nice."

And gradually, the moment passed, and we found ourselves again, and we had sex without having to jump up and get dressed right after, and although falling asleep in Peter's arms was something I couldn't wait to do, at 3:30 I was still lying there, staring at the clock, wondering why I was feeling homesick.

The next day was our tour of McGill, but in the afternoon we were free

to explore the city. Peter and I wandered aimlessly, talking about what next year would be like. Peter saw a potential apartment for us on every quaint block. I was cranky, and pointed out that I might live with Nicola instead.

“Nicola? Do you really think that’s a good idea? You’ll just fight, and wind up hating each other.”

I stopped at a used bookstore almost on purpose because I knew it was the last thing Peter wanted to do that afternoon. I trailed along the table on the sidewalk, fixing on the spines.

“Ooh. I want this. And this.” I picked up one title after another. *Thus Spake Zarathustra. The Social Contract. Fear and Trembling.* I knew what he was going to say.

“You’ll never read those. You’ll think you’re going to read them, but they’ll sit on your desk until you move out.”

Of course it was true, it was true of him and would be true of me too, but that wasn’t the point. I shot him what I hoped was a withering look.

“Well, *you* might not read them, Peter.”

The insult hung there, waiting for Peter to swing it back. This wasn’t a new fight. Peter crossed the street without waiting for me. I left the books on the table, faces up.

Come back, come back, I thought. But I lengthened my stride, trying to hide the fact that I was struggling to keep up with him. Peter almost whispered the words, wouldn’t look at me as he spoke.

“You’ve been making a fool of yourself lately. You’re trying too hard. You just think you’re supposed to read those books.”

(But I *was* supposed to read them. They were on the reading list for the first-year Classics of Civilization course I was coveting. I had to read them).

“You’ve really changed, you know. Especially this weekend. You’re a different person, Kate.”

And then, luckily or not, there was Anthony and Nicola, swinging up the street towards us, holding hands and looking into store windows, giggling, stopping to kiss in front of a pastry shop like some cliché of young Gallic romance. I wanted the earth to open up, I just wasn’t sure if I wanted it to swallow them or us.

But they hadn’t seen us yet, so we had time for a searching glance, a silent “are we okay?” before we were dragged into the adolescent romance swirling towards us up the Main. Peter pulled me to him, whispered wetly into my ear, “I’m sorry.”

I kissed him by his ear as I whispered, "Me too." I wanted to cry. I wanted to stay there as long as I could.

"You guys!" Nicola was upon us, voice full of delight and amazement that we were all here and happy and in love. "Isn't this the best? I love this city! I cannot wait to move here!"

Anthony gazed at her adoringly, one arm snugly around her neat little shoulders, and kissed her on the cheek. Peter, unable ever to fake anything, just blurted out, "I don't think I'll be coming here," and took off down the street. Nicola looked puzzled, and so I smiled apologetically and shrugged.

"Yeah. It'll be great," I said.

That night Richard took a group of us out to a jazz club he knew. Most of our class went dancing, but Sarah, Tanya, and I were swayed by the unquestionable coolness of jazz, of a club that an adult, a cool adult, had already found for us. Peter came along.

The bar was small and smoky, just the sort of thing that I would have conjured up when I thought (which I did, often) about going to a jazz club in Montreal. It was even in a basement, and the walls were exposed brick. I enjoyed the band, but I could sense Peter's mass of disapproval next to me. When Tanya offered me a cigarette, he sighed, loudly, although he smoked just as often as I did. When I leaned forward and clapped after a drum solo, I swore I could feel his smirk over my shoulder. Sarah and Richard spent most of the night talking, and at one point they got up to dance and Peter's silent disapproval went over the edge.

"I'm going home," he announced, standing up.

Tanya saved me from the confrontation. "Me too, I'm exhausted."

And all of a sudden, Sarah and Richard were also with us. As we staggered up the steps to the street and the dark, fresh night, Sarah grabbed my arm, and pulled me back a few paces.

"Richard just said the most bizarre thing to me."

Part of me really didn't want to know what he said, but Sarah continued on anyway. "When we were dancing, he was at arm's length the whole time, like he had to be careful, you know? But then at the end of the song, he pulled me close and whispered, 'I could destroy all you girls.' Oh my God, Kate—I am so freaked out!"

Sarah kept talking about that strange statement for a few blocks, parsing the six words and weighing them like precious, toxic substances, like a poison. It was clear that Sarah knew exactly how to react, but I could not

decipher their meaning, although I felt that I must, and I ended up instead feeling menaced, vulnerable, tricked.

The argument started with a note I passed to Peter during the Q & A session at McGill the next day ("Let's go for sandwiches with Nicola after this"—"I thought we were going up the mountain TOGETHER"), and it kept up the tedious, bickering tone as we left the classroom ("You decide where your priorities are, then"), followed our friends down the stairs ("Don't be such a baby"), and made excuses to Nicola (sulky silence). As we wandered across the quad it was already getting away from us, a full-on fight with no turning back. This is going too fast, I thought too late, we'll never be able to stop it, but I couldn't resist the extra push. "Maybe we should see other people."

A few seconds more and it would be done; I could see it all but I couldn't stop it, in fact I needed to speed it up. I couldn't avoid the cruel true words, so when he said, "You'll find someone else," I spat out, "Well, of course I will. That's a given," and that was when it came to a sudden and nauseating stop. Peter lifted up his hand, and before I could believe it, he had sliced the air between us and slapped me hard across my left cheek.

What just happened? The ground spun nauseatingly around me. I threw up. My head would not stop spinning.

What just happened? He had slapped me. He had slapped me across the face in the middle of campus. People saw. Faces were shocked, were appalled, faces surrounded us, and I ran, I ran, across the quad and into a service alley next to the library. He caught up with me there, sitting on the loading dock and gasping, hiccoughing, as if I was in the aftermath of tears that I hadn't cried. He was crying for real, anguished, panicked sobs, and it was his tears that insulted me, that disgusted me as the slap had not. He was so, so sorry, he would never—

But you did. You just did.

I would never hurt you.

You did. He did.

And I did the only thing I could: I turned and walked away, back to the residence and the bus waiting to take us back to Toronto, and nothing, not his voice or my own tears, or my second thoughts over the next few weeks, would make me turn back.

Two more things I remember about that weekend: one was that Richard,

suddenly, left. Sarah, in tears, told me all about it on the bus back home. In the end, it hadn't been that he was a pervert (whatever we had meant by that). It was simply that he had lost his temper: the previous night, the boys had taken forever to settle down, and Richard, who was nominally supervising them, was neither able to turn a blind eye nor to bring them under control. Instead, at two in the morning, he had marched into a triple room which had held about a dozen guys. They were playing an idiotic game they called "*Flambé*" which involved throwing a water bottle around using only their feet—sort of a drunken hacky-sack—but whose main attraction seemed to be that whenever the bottle touched the ground, they would all yell "*Flambé!*" This game had been around since the year before, and it was pointless, but pretty innocent.

When the guys finally noticed Richard standing in the doorway, they all yelled "*Flambé!*" which I guess is the sort of thing you misinterpret if you have never heard it before. As Trevor Betts approached him (to pick him up? to hug him? we never learned) Richard grabbed him by his T-shirt and flung him, hard, against the bathroom door, yelled "Enough!" and stormed out.

Trevor might never have said anything, but the next morning while we were having breakfast, Ms. Tilley overheard another boy telling a group of girls about it. And while we were at the Q & A, she called back to the school and spoke to the principal, and by the time people were trickling back to pick up their suitcases and wait for the bus, Richard had left.

The other thing wasn't so much an event as a moment, a memory which, tellingly, I usually misplace, thinking that it was something that happened the following year, once I was already living in Montreal. But it happened right after Peter hit me, actually. I walked away from him, as I said, determined not to turn back, determined to capitalize on the pain of the moment, and make it part of the pain of leaving. I was so intent on putting one foot in front of the other, stretching the distance between us, that I didn't pay attention to where I was going, and before long I was semi-lost. I saw that I was on a quiet street, with no traffic and scrappy trees lining the sidewalk. I walked up the middle of a quiet residential road, trying to imagine a time in the future when I would live on a street like this, when all the complications and prohibitions of the present would be gone.

At one corner was a greengrocer's, with trays of fruit and vegetables wrapping around onto both sidewalks. Mid-autumn colours splashed in the

watery and bright late afternoon sun: melons, pumpkins, pomegranates. Deep reds of peppers and apples. Happy plashy reds of field tomatoes. Some of these were almost orange, with a funny sort of cap. Not a tomato, after all. I picked one up, sniffed it, looked for a little sticker that would name the fruit for me.

A young woman came out of the store. She was the sort of woman who would be spectacular anywhere except Montreal, where she just seemed normal. Long thin legs in blue jeans and tall black boots, long black hair and a scarf over her shoulders, thrown casually in a way I would never master.

She smiled at me. I smiled back, and, as if it were some sort of offering, held the fruit up to her, mutely.

"C'est un kaki," she said.

I smiled again, apologetically.

She smiled again, too. "A persimmon."

Then a man came out of the greengrocer's carrying a brown paper bag, and put his arm around her waist. She turned to kiss him on the cheek, happily, warmly. The woman said *"Ciao,"* and they were off down the street, holding hands and carrying their groceries.

I picked up the persimmon and went into the store to pay for it.