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Avenue of the Body

You have to start at a point far from the heart, is what Gregory tells his classes. The arms or legs are good places, he says, and the first cut is the hardest. Gregory is the assistant in an anatomy class at the college where I'm a graduate student in art history. He comes to my apartment smelling like formaldehyde and takes long bubble baths to cover the smell. He is seeing other women.

Sometimes we borrow a car from Gregory's roommate and drive to Santa Rosa, the closest city, to watch prostitutes. In the beginning this was Gregory's idea. A few blocks from the strip mall, there is a long stretch of road, where after dusk women walk in high hobble heels, brightly colored dresses that barely or don't cover their flesh. Gregory and I call the street Avenue del Cuerpo, a cannibalism of the real name, a Spanish name, a name we can't pronounce. We act like we're on a mission, driving slowly, down this avenue of the body, even turning down the radio, watching the anonymous women flow toward the cars. We make up lives for the women. Most of them, we have decided, are putting themselves through medical school or law school.

Gregory tells me his mother used to take him for drives like this when he was a little kid. She laughed at the women, he says. I do not believe him, can't see the purpose of her doing such a thing with a child, but I don't tell him this.

I tell my shrink, who is actually a graduate student in the Psychology department at my college, and a peer counselor, about Gregory. I tell her about the way he still intimidates me, that although we have been sleeping together for seven months, he still sometimes makes me nervous. She knows about his refusal to stop seeing other women. She has never told me to leave him. The last time I saw her, she told me I should think about my self-esteem. "You mean pride?" I asked.

"If you will," she said, gesturing with her hands to show that it could also be something else. She tells me to take myself out on dates: to the movies or out to a restaurant. This seems sort of ridiculous to me, but I like talking to her.

At the library on campus where I am supposed to be studying, I flip through a dictionary; I look up the word Pride. Conceit, it says, and justifiable self-respect. The second meaning is the one I will try to grasp. I am not an item of food, is what I will tell Gregory, what I should have told him when he said his plate was full. But devoured like a meal is how I feel after a night with him. He keeps me up all night making me laugh, biting me all over in quick hard nips that I love. He also understands the workings of the inner body. The difference between the para-sympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems, something that for some reason impresses me.

The library is tunnelish and high and big and the wood is smooth. I feel like I am inside someone's body here. I am sitting at a back table. The heat is overwhelming. It makes me want to peel off my skin. The boy sitting next to me wears cut-off jeans, cut too high. He annoys me, because he's long and mopy, in the same way as Gregory. He is sweaty. I start to feel that I cannot stay in here. The windows are always open when it gets like this. It smells searing and sharp, and when I walk outside I am swimming through the heavy air and I feel like it is so hot that I can't see, and that no one else should be able to see me either.

I walk across campus to the studio arts building where it is cooler. In my drawing class there is a man named Franzen who is a gynecologist. He is taking a year off from his practice; his wife recently left him, and he needs, he says, to figure some things out. He draws the insides of women's bodies, saying the female organs are the most exquisite things he has ever seen. Some of the other women in the class are a little afraid of Franzen. Occasionally he and I have coffee together in the student union. I told Gregory about Franzen, and now he refers to Franzen as my "boyfriend," saying it in a high pitched whine. "You wish," I say back, though I don't really know why I say it.

When I first got to California, before I met Gregory or Franzen or my shrink, there were whole days that would go by without any human interaction besides ordering something in a coffee shop. On one of these solitary days I approached a stranger on the street to ask her the time, and I had grown so unaccustomed to human contact, it was as if I had forgotten normal social graces. I leaned in too close to the woman while she was looking at her watch, and my hand reached out toward her wrist. I could see her body stiffen, and when she told me the time, she walked away fast, before I could say sorry, or thank you.

Lately my head is a jumble of boys. A rowdy crowd, they come at me. When something is close to the end it always happens like this: he becomes all the boys I have ever dated, all the boys who have ever abruptly stopped calling after two or three weeks, all the boys I have ever stopped liking and talking to for a detail as pedestrian as the way they chewed their food. Gregory is now all of them and a part of me hates them all. But still another part of me loves to feel this sadness.

Gregory knows I want to leave him. This affair cannot continue, I have told him. I have told him this cannot continue between us twice in the last three weeks. But it does, and this is why he doesn't believe me, feels no panic at what he knows are empty threats.

In my old life my friends and I used to laugh, sometimes so much that we would stop breathing. We danced the Charleston, acting like movie star flapper girls. We went to parties and spoke to each other in fake Australian accents the whole night.

My student housing apartment is hippyish and always smells of incense in the open hallways that scale the building, making the whole thing look like an elaborate backyard clubhouse.

Gregory lives twenty minutes away from school and the building where I live, in a two bedroom house that he says used to be a chicken processing plant. He built a loft for his bed, high high up. When I stay over, after we have sex, we lie on our backs in his bed; as we talk we press our palms flat against his ceiling which is painted deep burgundy red. He tells me how happy he is to have me here, and how he loves sleeping with me because I am small and he can press me so tight against him.

There are things I want to tell Gregory. I want to tell Gregory about Joanna Ericsen, the pretty young girl whose picture I saw on the news, every night for two weeks, when I was seven years old. Every night I watched her picture in the corner of the television screen; I had hope, until her mutilated body was found in the woods. She was the first to teach me that the world is an evil place. I want to tell Gregory about the first person I slept with, Patrick, who used to grab my breasts and say, "These, are mine."

I want to tell Gregory these things because I want him to know me. But I tell Gregory nothing, of course. I can't.

One night Gregory brought me to his lab at school. He said he needed to pick something up, but when we got there, he walked to a table, supporting what was obviously a body under a white sheet, and said, "Are you ready?" I want all of the parcels of knowledge I can possibly grasp from Gregory, but I do not want to see a dead body. I do not want that image burned into my head, and I know it would always be there waiting, if I see it one time. He started to lift the sheet, and peripherally I could see curls of blond hair leaking out along the side of the table, and I said, "No," in a loud voice that surprised me as much as Gregory, and walked quickly to the door of the classroom.

I picture Gregory in the anatomy class. He would look sullen and thoughtful, sitting quietly next to the professor as the professor lectures about the human body. Then the class would split into groups of four or five, to work on the cadavers. This is when Gregory gets to teach. I know he likes this part best. He tells me most of the groups name their cadavers, filling in the details of their lives for them. Many of the cadavers are not whole; some of the women are missing breasts, some of the men have grotesque-looking gouged out scars. The students have their cadavers for the entire semester. They build a relationship, Gregory says. By the end most of the students have figured out how their cadaver died. They feel like failures if they haven't.

My shrink asked me once if I was being honest with myself about Gregory. I have told her that I am just killing time with him, but I have never told her my real fear: that I will die without ever having been in love. Sometimes I think I could be in love with Gregory. I tell myself this is why it has been so hard for me to leave him. But other times when my head is all jumbled up, his name gets confused with the one from before or the one before him, and I get scared that I am talking to someone else and calling him the wrong name.

Gregory has told me that the whites of my eyes are the whitest he has ever seen. He stared at me, dissecting my features, and told me that I look like no one else. He said I have the palest skin; obscenely pale, he called it. I am not sure if he means these things as a compliment or merely an observation.

Gregory keeps a suitcase full of bones in his room. It is a real human skeleton, in pieces, in a suitcase that looks like an old saxophone case. You would never guess there is a skeleton inside. Sometimes when he studies for his exams, he holds one of the bones: white, hard, brittle, but smoother than you would think, and he taps it against his thigh while I read a book high up on his bed. He told me that he likes his exams because they are practicals. He gets to lay his hands on his work, he says.

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I wonder if Gregory has ever made love with a prostitute. But I do not want to know about the other women he is seeing. Gregory asked me in the beginning if I was seeing anyone else. We had been walking down a tree-lined street at night. He dropped my hand when I answered no.

The smell of formaldehyde lingers in my apartment whenever Gregory has been there. He said his sense of touch has been lessened from so much of it.

I am supposed to see Gregory tonight after my drawing class; it will be the first time in ten days. Most likely he will entertain me, either by playing his guitar along with a record, or by gesturing with his hands while he speaks; later maybe we will kiss for a long time, and then have sex.

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Sometimes he acts like he is on a stage, under a spotlight. Sometimes he has the arrogant swagger of a lounge singer. This is one thing about Gregory that I used to love and now I hate: he is a chameleon. He can get along with anyone, in any situation, anytime. I even saw him act stupid and rednecky once, when he was buying a lawn mower at a yard sale. At first I thought it was a good skill, that it was his way of getting by, but now I think it just means that he is not true to himself.

I walk into my drawing class twenty minutes early. The room fills, but Franzen doesn't come in. We sketch a model. She stands in the front of the room. Her thick dark hair ropes down to the middle of her back. I can tell by the way she focuses her eyes straight ahead, that she is trying to not know where she is. I leave as soon as class is over, not hanging around like the others.

Afterward I take the bus to Gregory's house. The bus is full and fume-y and the roads are curvy. I think about other times I have left. I don't remember it ever being this difficult. I start thinking that when I get to Gregory's maybe we will order a pizza or make some kind of pasta like we usually do, and maybe I don't need to break up with him tonight.

When I open the door Gregory is strumming on his guitar, along with a Neil Young record. He asks about my class. I tell him it was fine, but Franzen wasn't there. Gregory says to me, "Do you realize that your only two friends here besides me are a fake shrink, and a gynecologist having a mid-life crisis?"

I am surprised Gregory considers himself one of my friends, and tell him this.

He says, "Isn't that really all we are?"

I ask him what he is talking about. He offers me a beer. I say yes, and he goes down the long hallway to the kitchen. But I know what he is trying to say and I know what he is going to say. The feeling of panic rises up in me and I look around for something to throw but really I just want something to grab on to. A breeze comes in through the open window. I see the suitcase of bones on the floor. Usually it is in Gregory's room. It is, what he calls, his most precious possession. I pick it up, and carry it over to the window, balancing it on the ledge. When I snap open the cover, I am surprised by what I see. The bones, instead of orderly, and precise, are piled together in a messy heap. When I push them around, it sounds like the grinding of teeth. A metatarsal, a small fringy bone from the foot, is a little more yellow than the rest. The edges of it are rough, as small as a tooth from a child. It fits perfectly into the front pocket of my jeans. I can hear Gregory in the kitchen digging through a drawer for a bottle opener. I quietly close the case and put it back the way it was on the floor. Gregory comes back into the room and hands me a beer.

"Listen," he says, "you're a great girl, but I don't see stars."

And then he tells me that he is not in love with me and doesn't think he ever will be, and that he is moving in with a woman from his anatomy class. He has more in common with her, he says, and thinks of me really as a sister or a friend. I set the beer down on a table and move to the front door.

Standing in the doorway, I look out toward the street. I haven't said a word because I cannot think of anything to say; I want somehow to exude righteousness from my back, want Gregory to feel stabbed like I do, but he probably isn't even watching me. I push out and let the door fall shut behind me. I can feel the prickliness of the metatarsal through the pocket of my jeans and I am glad it is there because now Gregory's skeleton is no longer whole.

A bus takes me to Santa Rosa. I walk by the strip mall and past some skateboarder kids and go into a coffee shop. Sitting at the counter I feel old, hunchy, haggard. The walls are covered with red and orange Crayon drawings. I drink a Coke and try to do a crossword puzzle, but end up scribbling obscenities in the margins of the newspaper. And I try to think of this as a date with myself, like my shrink suggested. But I cannot be with myself right now. It seems that there is some kind of flaw inside me; if I were opened up and dissected maybe Gregory or one of his students would find it, like the bit of embryo attached to the yoke inside an egg.

And then I am walking down the street, and something occurs to me: that Gregory never even saw me do the Charleston, and that maybe if he had he would have liked me better. I am on the street where Gregory and I have watched prostitutes, Avenue del Cuerpo. I know the cars that drive past probably think that I am a prostitute, and I don't care. I want to call my shrink, or Franzen, or one of my old friends from home, but most of all I want to call Gregory. I want Gregory to drive by and watch me walking on this street. The air is heavy, the sky pink dusk. I want to lift my shirt over my head, twirl in psychotic loopy circles in the street, expose myself, rip myself wide open.

My heart aches. It is an actual physical pain. I put my hand on my chest, pressing hard with the heel of my palm, and I remember some things I read in one of Gregory's anatomy books: That the heart, in an adult, is about the size of a man's closed fist. The book said the heart is placed obliquely in the chest. I remember thinking that the heart-clutching and constant and strong-is askew from the beginning.

One of the car drivers slows, keeping an even pace with me. It is a dark, older car, with some rust, and four doors, I note in my head, in case I need to identify it later to the police. I look straight into the driver's eyes.

"What?" I say. He pauses, perhaps not sure how to take my question, but then speeds up, looking and driving straight ahead. I watch until the car is out of sight, a piece of dirty crepe paper trailing out from behind his car, possibly the remnants of a wedding, or a parade.

I walk on, nodding a silent hello to the other women on the street. Some look back at me and say nothing, with something like hatred showing under their painted eyelids, some say "How you doing tonight, girl?"

I hear another car driving slowly, and I wait a minute before I turn my head. When I do, I see that it is Franzen. I'm surprised; it takes me a second to recognize him.

"What are you doing here?" he says, as I walk closer to his car.

"Why weren't you in class tonight?"

"I'll tell you some other time." He smiles. "Can I give you a ride somewhere?"

Franzen pats the passenger seat before I sit down. Maybe now, I think, not turning to look back, the prostitutes will be certain that I am one of them, maybe that other driver will see me getting into this nicer more expensive car, and think that I am discerning.

Franzen's clothes look new, and I wonder if he bought them for his new wifeless life. His eyes are a dark clear green that perfectly match his stiff T-shirt, his eyebrows so perfectly shaped they look plucked.

"Franzen," I say, "would you like to get a drink?"

He takes me to a clubby dance place a few blocks away. Pink and white lights fall from the ceiling to the dance floor, where they spin in wide circles. An obviously drunk, young professional looking man and woman swirl into each other near the center. They dance as if they're moving through wet concrete.

During our first drink, I tell Franzen about Gregory. I tell him just the skeletal details: Gregory slept with me for seven months, and then told me I was really more like a sister or a friend.

"I didn't know people slept with their sisters, or friends," I say, raising my glass to my mouth. I wanted this to sound funny and light, but I can tell it comes out sounding bitter.

"That guy's crazy," Franzen says, "if you were with me I would never act like that."

Another couple moves out to the dance floor. The young professionals kiss as they dance, the man's tongue shooting quickly in and out of the back of his woman's mouth, the pink skinkiness of it repulsive to me. As if in response, the man in the other couple plunges both of his hands down the back of his partner's pants. Through her jeans I can see his hands clasping and releasing her flesh.

I ask Franzen if he has noticed what is going on, on the dance floor.

"Noticed what?"

I hate that I think my next thought, but I think that if Gregory were here, he would have noticed, and we'd be able to laugh together. But Franzen does something next that I can like him for. He grabs my hand, and pulls me up and out onto the dance floor. Gregory would never do that. I like the feel of Franzen's arms over my shoulders. At first I start to do the Charleston, but it isn't right here. Franzen and I end up in a slow swaying move, which isn't really right here either.

After we sit down Franzen asks me if I believe that the world is like one collective cell, the parts, people, working unconsciously, autonomously, but in synch, toward the same larger goal: betterment, is the world he uses, of the species. I'm not sure what to say, so instead I ask him what he was doing on that street.

"Why were you there?" he asks.

"I was just walking."

"I was just driving."

I watch him as I stir my drink with a tiny straw and say nothing.

After we've watched couples move on and off the dance floor, Franzen asks me to come home with him. We stop at a store on the way to buy cigarettes and wine. At his house, we end up in his bedroom, where he slides his hands around my waist, and lays me gently down on his bed, his face close, his fingers threading through my hair. Franzen's body is strong, thick in places. Gregory's body was about angles and length. My hand moves over Franzen's chest, from his collarbones down to his waist, and because of Gregory I know exactly what lies underneath this skin.

In the morning, my eyes take in the empty wine bottle, the full ashtray by the bed, my clothes. A blanket lies heavily over me. Franzen's freckled back faces me; I can hear the rhythm of his breathing, the way it catches for a second each time he exhales.

I know that when I get outside, the sun will be almost see, the outline of the concrete will sparkle around my feet.

My jeans hang on the back of a chair. I can almost see the outline of the bone in the pocket. It was part of someone who was once alive. I consider leaving it for Franzen, but I know I won't. I count the beats of my heart. Soon I will lift this blanket, but not yet.