

Originally published in CutBank, fall 2000

## Boys: A Narrative Compendium

Ruben could break burning boards with his head. He loved the fact that from her bed they could see the rockety red Safeway sign, but only the part that said Safe. The morning he left for the circus he said her address out loud ten times, and walked away with a hardness around his mouth that she took for sadness. He was the karate clown.

Ruben had shown up for their first date with photos of his paintings--castles and tumultuous seascapes--and a sliver of papery old skin from his ball python, Hermes. That night they drove over bridges, and ended up walking the Berkeley campus, passing a joint back and forth, her hand occasionally brushing the soft cuff of Ruben's jean jacket. It was where her parents had met twenty-six years before, where she, as a baby strapped to her mother's chest, was tear-gassed in an anti-war demonstration, her mother screaming at the police, "The world is watching!" while news cameras caught it all.

Other times, after that, they'd go down to the water in his pick-up and watch ragged houseboats float sluggishly past. When it started to get dark they'd go to a Mexican restaurant nearby and dance to the juke box, holding icy red margaritas away from their bodies.

When Ruben left for the circus, the way she missed him was sharp and gouging. Sometimes she'd suddenly get a taste of him in her mouth, a taste of his salty, sand-colored skin. When she found strands of his dark hair in her bed she left them there.

But when Ruben came back four weeks later, he told her, "You don't know what it's like, being on the road for that long, doing whatever you can to survive, never knowing what or how you're going to eat next."

She pictured a van full of emaciated clowns driving down the interstate, fighting over food. A satiny gang of orange and yellow lurking creepily; rushing a convenience store, puffy arms linked in a chain.

\* \* \*

The Drummer's lips were thin, but his front teeth had that gap she liked, which was still growing, he told her, thanks to a bad orthodontist. Across his eyelids lay a smattering of freckles like flung ash. He was in a band that played around. He talked about some obscure political party he belonged to. She barely heard the words: delegates, caucuses, canvassing. They kissed and kissed. His hands stayed flat along the sides of his body. She lifted one to her mouth; she slipped it under her shirt. She watched his tiny lips move.

They took special trips to health-food stores across town for herbs, and then made tea.

Sometimes she was irritated by things he said. Once he used the phrase homosocial relationship, and she snapped, "Wouldn't it be easier to just say 'friend?'"

When she caught a cold she stayed in the Drummer's bed for three days. He made her hot lemonade with honey. He kneaded lotion that smelled like Christmas trees into her back. When he finished, he lay down next to her and tapped out rhythms on her arms.

After she was well he sent her home with a tape of ambiguous love songs, and she played it over and over again, trying to figure him out.

\* \* \*

The Mesmerizer's eyes were pilot-light blue. She lived with him for one year and remembers nothing about him except the eyes, and the fact that his father carved chess pieces out of soap.

\* \* \*

Afternoon Delight, he called himself, having been born at 4:17 PM on a Thursday. He had the lanky gait of a model on a runway. He collected stylish old cars, perfect vintage clothes, and exotic-looking girls. She wasn't sure how she fit in. When he came over at night they drank beer from tall silver cans, and threw ivory dice against a wall. He read to her: Flannery O'Connor stories, his eyes teary at the end. But he was misinformed about indifference, thinking it somehow captivating, and as a result he answered her questions minutes later or never, which she found extremely uncaptivating.

\* \* \*

Chris had a soft, round belly like a newt. He was applying to graduate schools for biology, and studying for the GRE. She and Chris screamed songs on his motorcycle, racing down the hills, his hand reaching behind to squeeze her thigh. On Halloween they both wore sunglasses to a party and were the blind leading the blind.

They'd sit on her front porch at night and drink red wine out of thick coffee mugs. He'd point to things in the sky. He knew the names of the birds they heard, by sound alone. She wanted to teach him something, but there was nothing. He knew everything: how to dissect a frog without destroying any crucial organs; how to clean any stain from any carpet; how to take a picture without a camera. Once, he held her hand and looked at her, and asked if she believed the things he told her, and she nodded her head yes-yes, I believe-knowing he was talking about the times he'd said he really, really liked her.

\* \* \*

Bring out the Navajo, is what they would say, Steven told her, when they were shooting the jeans commercial in which he was to appear. He was half Navajo and half Hungarian. Strangers told him he looked exotic.

Steven painted fabulous freaks: brutal Arizona cowboys, sweaty televangelists, and chubby children dressed as movie stars. They swung around his living room to Girl from Ipanema eleven times. He told her she had the softest skin and asked if her other boyfriends had appreciated her. She could tell he'd said this many times. She left at seven the next morning, her head filled with him. He'd given her a blue, then yellow bruise on her breast. For days she could pull out her shirt and look down at the rainbow of colors, and when she pictured his mouth on her she felt swooning, and light.

\* \* \*

Darling--that was really his name--introduced himself at a streetlight. He was five years younger than she, barely legal to order a drink in a bar. He walked her home and waited outside while she went up and got her dog, a boxer named Emma. They walked some more, taking turns with the leash. Still, when she thinks about him, she smiles.

\* \* \*

They were in her bedroom. She was sitting on a milk crate across from her desk, which had a mirror over it. There was a candle burning on the window sill, the kind that is supposed to somehow magically absorb cigarette smoke, because that night she was prepared to smoke a lot.

Noah got mad when she said the part about just being friends.

"Oh please," he said. "As if we'll be friends."

She knew without looking that he was twisting a clump of dark hair around his fingers. She stared at her own hands and remembered two things: the time they were camping, and running through the woods came upon a swarming rush, both getting stung at the same time, which seemed actually funny then, still in the giddy first stages of knowing each other. They had kissed each other's small round wounds over and over, as if that would be enough. She also thought of how when he sang he made his voice sound too much like Tom Waits, and it seemed painful for him, and it was hard to listen to.

She told him something like please don't take it personally, although she knew he would.

His parting words were that she was "missing out."

"I know," she said, her hand fanned across his back, because she knew how it felt to tell someone that.

\* \* \*

Walter lectured on labor history at the community college, where she was taking a drawing class. In the cafeteria he flipped quickly through her stack of drawings, his blonde hair sticking out in horn-like curls around his ears.

"Good," he said after each one.

She agreed to go out with him anyway. He had a certain nervous energy she enjoyed, having grown up with her mother.

On their first date he laughed at something she said, an opinion she held, and told her she had some adorably puerile notions about the world.

Then on the second date he asked her for an index-a catalog, a list of the ones who'd mattered.

"A narrative compendium," he said, waving chopsticks in the air. "I need to know about your past, if we're to have a future." He stabbed at his sashimi. "Besides, how're you to know where you're going if you don't know where you've been?"

She said the idea made her feel strange.

He said, "If you don't acknowledge history, you're destined to repeat the same mistakes forever."

When she ended it he told her she was too hirsute for his taste anyway.

She compiled.