

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 1997, Issue 16

1997

Article 17

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ROOM

Peter Orner

In the winter of '92 Frank and Kate were crumbling. They had been for months, so they decided to drive up to their old favorite place with its cheap squishy twin beds and view of the highway. The Ghilcrest Motel in Thorton, New Hampshire just north of West Campton off I-93. They stayed in their usual room. It felt even more pint-sized than last time, but it had heat and was relatively clean. On a clear morning you could see the rocky peaks of the Presidentials looming beyond Waterville Valley.

On Friday night they were awkward in bed. They held each other in the dark. Both of them sort of sobbing, asking in unison what went wrong. Why can't we get it together? After a while, after they couldn't possibly have squeezed each other any tighter, Kate reached over Frank's head and clicked on the light. Then she stood up, sat down heavily on the other bed, and stared at her hands. Frank squinted in the prison light. There is no in-between lighting, no mood lighting at the Ghilcrest Motel. It is either dark or very light. Frank sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. He raised his shoulders and hands to form questions: Why did you turn on the light? Why don't you come back to bed? Kate didn't answer, but Frank noticed now that she was doing something he'd never seen her do before. Something with her hand that was so familiar to him, but completely out of place in that mustard-colored plywood room. Kate was tugging on the bedspread with her left hand and kneading the course material with her fingers. Frank immediately recognized this as what his mother does when she is sitting on the edge of her bed and is burdened by a decision. An action that anyone who knows Frank's mother well—his brother, his stepfather, perhaps even his father—all know is a fundamental part of her being, this kneading she does when she is thinking. This catlike scrunching of the material that is mesmerizing if you're in the room and watching her. And here was Kate, staring down at her hand, doing his mother's thinking habit. Frank propped himself up against the wall and watched her.

"I wish this place had a TV," Kate said.

"Yeah," Frank said and punched a flimsy pillow. "Cheap damn place. Why didn't we go to the Ramada? TV, free HBO, a lounge act, screaming brats, Winnebagos in the parking lot, drunk pharmaceutical products salesmen watching dirty movies . . ." He paused because Kate wasn't laughing. "I could read."

"That would be good."

Frank pulled Chekov out of his pack and started to read the next story in a collection they'd been reading for a year and a half. This one was about a famous professor who, needing a break from the rigors of St. Petersburg, decides to spend some time at the country estate of an old friend whose wife he happens to love. As he neared the end of the first paragraph, Frank looked up and found Kate still kneading, her eyes focused on her hand as if somewhere in that motion was the solution to the mystery of why love sometimes vanishes without fanfare like the silent evaporation of a puddle. Frank read on. The Professor is extremely agitated as he follows his old friend through the estate's vast greenhouses, the whole time dreaming of being in the drawing room with the lovely Mayra. Cheeks the deep violet of a blooming hyacinth. The problem is that every time he's able to sneak a moment alone with Mayra she wonders out loud if he's bored with her and wouldn't he rather be with his friend.

"Your feet stink," Kate interrupted.

Frank stopped reading and looked horrified. He shook his bare feet at her. Outside it was a clenched-fist 13 below, minus 36 with the windchill, but inside it was thin and sweaty and felt like 94. It was impossible to turn down the heat which hissed out of the corner radiator like a permanently angry cat.

"Are you implying that I have halitosis of the feet?"

"Actually I am."

"Shall I wash them, Princess Leia?"

"No, go on. I'm waiting for the kiss. Then you can go and wash."

Frank continued. The Professor endures Dimitry's long-winded descriptions of his exotic flora and fauna. Dimitry has painstakingly catalogued each and every species and subspecies and has long clung to the belief that his friend the Professor is the only person in Russia who can appreciate his passion. When at last the tour is over, Dimitry, coincidentally, is called away to handle a crisis in the village. Some business with a drunken farmhand wreaking havoc with someone else's mule. Thus, the Professor is at last alone with the stunning Mayra. After the initial awkwardness (Mayra again protested, "Wouldn't you rather be with your friend?"), mutual confessions of undying love flood the drawing room. Mayra nearly faints and lands in the arms of the dazed Professor for whom the feel of her fleshy pink, naked arms against his withered and ink-stained hands was enough to——

"You can wash your feet now."

"But they haven't kissed yet," Frank protested.

"They're not going to."

“How do you know? Have you read this before? Have you been reading this behind my back?”

“No, but I know that Mayra’s going to be loyal to her husband even though he’s a lughead and what’s-his-name’s going to be loyal to his friend even though he hates him.”

“No way,” Frank said and skimmed the remaining pages, looking for sex or at the least an intimate caress.

“Wash your feet. I’m asphyxiating.”

Frank went to the bathroom and closed the door. He examined his face in the mirror. Deep blue saucers rounded his eyes even though lately he thought all he’d done was sleep. He unwrapped a little white bar of soap and stuck his left foot in the sink. The sink felt like Ajax, as if someone had just scrubbed it but forgot to wipe away the cleaning granules. The water cooled his feet and Frank leaned over and took a smell. Not all that bad. They’d been worse. It was at that moment, mid-sniff, that the first shriek of ecstasy ripped the stagnant air. A couple was fucking in the shower right beyond the tiled wall. The sink began to shake and the toilet handle jiggled. An earthquake in the White Mountains. Like a snowplow trying over and over to ram through the bathroom wall.

Frank washed his other foot quickly and without soap. The hump-fest was just getting started. The woman was roaring. Full mouth roars with the gurgle of water in her mouth. Yes! Oh my God! Yes! God Yes! Yes God! Yes! Yes! Yes! God! Oh my God! Yes! He towed off his feet and came out. Kate hadn’t moved.

“Care for a whiff?” he asked, presenting his foot in her lap. Kate leaned over and gave the top of his toes a tiny kiss.

“Sorry, doesn’t pass. Remnants of former odor remain. Isn’t there soap in there?”

Frank sat down next to her. “One man’s reek is another’s perfume,” he said and raised his eyebrows. “Nietzsche—*Human, All Too Human*.”

Kate bit her lip and pointed to the wall where a picture of a nun ringed by a group of children praying hung in an imitation bronze frame. “How are we going to endure this?”

“Shall we try to outdo them?”

“You’re not that good.”

“Neither are you. Want me to go on with the story?”

“Okay.”

Frank went on. Kate was wrong about the kiss but right about everything else. The Professor and Mayra’s lips met but only for a moment because right then the front door flew open and Dimitry, grinning, tromped into the drawing room in muddy boots. Frank stood up on the bed and shouted the last two pages, fighting next door’s bombastic carnality with classic restrained unrequited love. Kate laughed her croaking frog laugh and held her stomach. Frank waved his arms and jumped up and down as the Professor

departed in a noisy horse-and-buggy flourish in the final paragraph.

"Until next time, friend! Until next time!" Frank shouted on behalf of the fool Dimitry. "Do not forget your country friends!"

When it was all over and the Professor had headed back to the city, the neighbors, as if on cue in an effort to both maximize Kate and Frank's pain and insult Chekov, moved out of the shower and onto one of the squishy beds for a more traditional motel wall-slapping romp. But at this point her shouting about God had died down and was replaced by a high-pitched wail that sounded like an Irish keener, so joyful it had become utterly sad and mournful, as if now she could die.

Frank collapsed on the flat green carpet and rested his head on his elbow. Kate's eyes were on the water-stained ceiling, but her hand kept kneading. The last time they'd stayed in the room, the March before, Kate had said the stain looked like her home state of Indiana.

"My mom does that," Frank said.

"What? Your mom and Ralph A.? No way. You're lying."

"I mean what you're doing with your hands."

"Really?"

"Yeah, she does it when she can't make up her mind about something. When I was thirteen, before she dumped my dad, I used to find her in the bedroom when I got home from school doing that with her fingers. She used to sit quietly, her eyes off somewhere, her fingers going and going."

"I'm not deciding anything."

"So what are you thinking about?"

"This place." She stood up and went to the window. The baboons next door were quieter now, although you could still hear the muffled rat-a-tat tapping that signaled they were only slowing down, rounding a curve, gathering strength. Then Kate turned squarely around and faced Frank like a wrestler preparing to mangle an opponent.

"I'm thinking about how I'm going to drive by this place in some other life and point to it and tell somebody who will have no idea what happened here that I used to stay in that place, that place over there by the side of the road, the place with the blue roof. And that person—God knows who—will nod and say, 'really,' and then ask me if I'm hungry because at that moment he will be hungry and only asking me to make that point clear."

"Jesus, Kate. Do you have to?"

"Have to what, Frank?"

Frank didn't answer.

"Have to what, Frank?"

Ten minutes of silence sat between them like some invisible third guest that made the room feel even more cramped. Kate stood by the window and cupped her hand so that she could see into the dark past her own reflection. The fucking got louder again. The Yes Gods returned. Frank looked at Kate's back and wanted very much to be her at that moment, to see the dark and the snow and the highway as she was seeing it now. To feel the wet frost

that had formed around her hand as it rested against the window in the nerves of his own hand.

“I love you Kate,” Frank said.

“I love you.”

“So why?”

Kate continued to stare out through the tiny telescope she’d created with her hand. “Don’t ask. It’s bad to ask. Having to ask is part of the problem.”

“That’s a load of shit.”

“It isn’t. I read in a magazine—*Vogue* or somewhere—that love comes in degrees of difficulty like a math problem. It was a stupid article, but I’ve never forgotten it. Sometimes love is simple and easy to figure out. Other times it’s more like quantum mechanics. You never know. Think of what’s-his-name riding away to the city. That was an easy one. The Professor rode away because he was able to, because maybe the love was a 4 on a scale of 1 to 10. For it to be what I need it has to be the kind you can’t ride away from. That if you did, you’d die.”

“Kate—I’m not riding anywhere.”

Kate’s forehead creased and her eyes and face appeared to narrow and move inward toward her nose. And he could see now that her fighting stance masked her pity for him. It was then he knew he would be alone soon. Images of his old life flipped across his brain. Snapshots of himself in his previous life of easy misery, riding the subway alone with a novel, wandering bookstore aisles till he got a headache, jacking off to memories. He looked at her and he saw the retreat in her eyes, the protective shields lowering. He saw her lack of fear and her resolve. He saw her love for him hanging between them because it was now out in the world, distanced from her, something she could describe and talk about because it no longer gripped her.

And as he stared at her and she stared at him, he thought of the first time he saw her, scooting across Boston Common on a Thursday at ten in the morning, her legs racing, racing though he found out later, after he’d chased her and mustered up the courage to stop her, that she wasn’t even late to where she was going.