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ヤヌート・ジタン

GINKGO
Ionuț Gîtan



Lucian sat across from Henrik in a restaurant on Mott Street. Henrik suggested the place, though Lucian, too, visited the restaurant often. Lucian ordered the arugula salad and Henrik the tower of French-Moroccan couscous. They shared a bottle of Gamay. A brick wall stood opposite the restaurant, enclosing a church cemetery. The sinewy branches of a ginkgo tree arched over the wall, casting its canopy to the street. A Catholic basilica and Orthodox chapel occupied most of this quiet corridor of Mott Street. There were few shops and even fewer tourists. Lucian stared past Henrik through the window panes to the ginkgo leaves outside. A breeze swayed the tree, fanning its leaves back and forth against the august sky like a rip tide.

Lucian remembered two facts about ginkgo trees: first, they could withstand nuclear holocaust— as many did after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – and second, they stunk of putrid fruit in the fall. It was the kind of rotten fish smell that he associated with the market streets of Manhattan’s Chinatown. Ginkgo trees are an ecological marvel, he thought, that have already outlived the dinosaurs and would probably outlive humankind’s own self-destruction. Lucian winced at the thought of the spoiled fruit being birthed into eternity. Henrik looked at him disconcerted. Alert again of the date sitting before him, Lucian recomposed and returned Henrik’s gaze.

Henrik wore glasses with clear frames. His blonde hair was short with bangs cut into a crescent that underscored his lean, boyish look. Henrik was fifth-generation American, a Nordic mix of

Norwegian and Swedish. His family members were cabinet makers that left Scandinavia for the pine forests and glacial lakes of Michigan. The family's trade in furniture fostered his early interest in arts and crafts. After boarding school in a suburb of Detroit and art school in Chicago, Henrik moved east to New York City. There, he became a gallery assistant then a curator then a writer – and now a combination of the three. At twenty-nine, Henrik's seven years in the art industry gave him rank, or at least he felt so. Others from the industry had already moved on – to become teachers in Albuquerque, social workers in Ann Arbor, or, most frequently, copywriters in Los Angeles.

Each year Henrik lost an acquaintance to another city, but he remained in New York. He still enjoyed work: the curious sensitivity of artists that he studied with the conviction of an anthropologist, the monthly critic readings at the Ace Hotel, and the trips to art fairs in Basel and Miami. (He always took an extra holiday to admire the midcentury modern architecture that rekindled a Nordic nationalism in him). Henrik's ability to both communicate and leverage his connections brought him fortune in the art world. As a young gallery assistant, Henrik excelled at what his peers and even supervisors didn't – art sales. For Henrik, art was first and foremost decorative – no different than a rare rug you avoided soiling or a lounge chair you ritually dusted. Second, art – if it was good enough – was an investment. This outlook gave him a clear framework and seemed to present a confidence that collectors and their consultants trusted. While others looked for secreted meanings, Henrik accepted the world at its surface – this, a kind of clairvoyance in itself.

“Have you ever been to Bridgehampton?” Henrik asked.

“On Long Island? No,” Lucian lied, unnecessarily. Lucian went for the first time last fall to the Dan Flavin Institute. He basked in the sculptures of neon light, a sort of new age tanning or cleansing.

“I’m going next week for a studio visit,” Henrik said.

“What do they make?”

“Ceramic sculptures. The artist is working on a new project now. I guess he has plastic crates of ceramic forks and knives covered in a mildly poisonous lead glaze. All these useless utensils.”

“What are you going to write about?”

“I’m not sure. The exhibition doesn’t open until the fall, so I have time before the article will be published. But I want to ask about his sister – without really asking, you know. I think enough time has passed since she killed herself. But I don’t know.”

Lucian remembered that the incident was big news in the art press the summer before. The sister, an even more esteemed artist than the Bridgehampton brother, was found washed ashore a beach in Shikoku. It was the kind of story that was pulled from a seventeenth-century puppet theater drama or an Osamu Dazai novel. The act was a lover’s suicide pact where one had tragically survived.

“Do you think the forks and knives have something to do with the boyfriend?” Lucian asked.

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know. Wasn’t he a white guy?”

“Yeah, but I don’t see what—”

The waitress brought the arugula salad and couscous tower. Lucian and Henrik each politely thanked her as she poured the remainder of the Gamay into their glasses before spiriting the bottle away.

“What does that have to do with it?” Henrik continued.

“Some Japanese people are – particular about cutlery.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know. I mean, they are always praising white people for using chopsticks. Like it’s an achievement or something.”

“I’ve never experienced that before but–”

“I have,” Lucian interrupted as he impaled his fork’s tines with the salad. “Sorry. I’m not trying to be all Ruth Benedict and pathologize Japanese people or something. It’s just what I thought of.” He brought the fork to his mouth.

“No, it’s okay,” Henrik reassured him. “Maybe I’ll try to bring it up with him when I’m on Long Island. Cutlery hasn’t been a theme in his work until now. I guess it’s a little weird.”

“How long are you staying out there?” Lucian asked, to change the conversation.

“Just two nights. I’ll probably check the Flavin house on my way back to the city.”

“Oh, cool. I love it there,” Lucian confessed.

Henrik smiled and slid his fork into the side of the couscous tower, causing the structure to collapse.

After dinner, Lucian and Henrik stepped out of the restaurant to Mott Street. It was already nine, but the midsummer sun had yet to set.

“Where should we go,” Henrik asked, “Do you know a bar?”
“Yeah,” Lucian said as he led the way west to Rivington Street where they walked to a dive bar.

Drinking rye whiskey with ice at the bar, Lucian became more impatient with each sip of alcohol and each song from the old-fashioned jukebox. He cut off Henrik’s speech on the merits of the new editor-in-chief at T Magazine to stand up and dismiss himself for the dancing crowd. There wasn’t a proper dance floor, but this didn’t keep the drunks from bopping about to the music. Henrik watched Lucian go as he bounced his entire body to the disco beat. Henrik followed with both glasses of whiskey in hand.

“I LOVE THIS SONG,” Lucian yelled close to Henrik’s ear.

“I CAN TELL.”

“IT’S ARTHUR RUSSELL.”

“WHAT?”

“ARTHUR. RUSSELL.”

“YOU ARE SO CUTE, LUCIAN.” Henrik complimented.

“LUCY.”

“WHAT?”

“LUCY. MY FRIENDS CALL ME LUCY,” Lucian yelled again.

His mind soaked in whiskey, Lucian couldn’t move his eyes or body from Henrik. Tonight, they belonged to each other. Lucian brought his face forward to Henrik’s until their lips and tongues met. The hours before on Mott Street felt squandered. They could have been dancing, clacking teeth in excitement, and exchanging lover’s spit instead of quipping about this or that artist.

Lucian knew such haste was not actually possible for him. He needed conversation and the warm filter of alcohol to put him at ease.

Seeing Lucian tire as his swaying to the music slowed, Henrik suggested they close their tab and leave the bar for his place. On Rivington Street, Henrik raised one hand in the air to summon a taxi while the other hand gripped Lucian's. The two fell into the car together and crossed over the Williamsburg bridge for Henrik's one-bedroom apartment on Franklin Street in Greenpoint.

At the apartment, Henrik poured Lucian a glass of water from a pitcher at his walnut kitchen table.

"I like your apartment," Lucian said as he looked around the space, assessing each furniture piece that was more expensive than the last.

"Thanks. The furniture is all from my hometown in Michigan," Henrik replied with pride, the same response he always gave.

"And you have my favorite flowers," Lucian said as his fingers felt the petals of the flowers idling in the vase on the table.

"Chrysanthemums."

"Oh," Henrik replied, embarrassed he did not actually know the name of the flowers. He purchased them from the corner store while drunk the night before.

"I love them. They're beautiful," Lucian continued, genuinely enchanted by the Japanese flowers.

"Alright, let's go to my bedroom," Henrik then said, taking Lucian's water glass to lead him away into the other room.

During sex, Lucian's focus always drifted to the past, to another – usually anonymous – lover. It was a practice that removed him from the commitment of the present. It was no different tonight in Henrik's bed. As Lucian's body entered Henrik's, he looked past Henrik even as he kissed his collar bone and traced the ridges of his ribs. Instead, Lucian thought of a different man – maybe his name was André – and his small studio apartment on the Lower East Side.

It was a warm summer night three years ago. Before their rendezvous, Lucian met André at a coffee shop on the corner of Canal and Essex Streets that turned into a bar at night. They drank pale ales and bantered about popular drag queens and gay parties in Bushwick. André produced online video advertisements for an agency, but since high school his passion was film photography. He spoke excitedly about how the works of Diane Arbus and Peter Hujar that inspired his own portrait photography. As a hobby, André took photographs for a small but influential gay men's lifestyle magazine from Brooklyn. This surprised Lucian as he now recalled seeing some of André's work: a photograph of a man in a white t-shirt seated at a kitchen table with his gaze fixed at the camera lens. Lucian remembered the photograph filtered in a warm light that made the scene seem familiar, as if pulled from his own family's photo album.

After the perquisite of drinks and art talk at the bar, Lucian and André spilled onto Canal Street arm in arm. They walked the few steps over to André's apartment on Ludlow Street. Groping each other in the night, the two made an odd couple. Lucian towered

over André's five and half foot-tall stature. This was the summer Lucian found a fetish for small, muscular men – each more energetic than the last.

Collapsed in bed, Lucian pulled off André's shirt to reveal a meadow of chest hair. André was raised in Connecticut but third-generation Italian American. He sprawled his fingers through André's chest hair with one hand while the other unbuttoned his fly. Clothed entirely himself, Lucian removed André's blue jeans and white, lightly dampened underwear. He kissed the base of André's penis before pulling back the foreskin. Lucian made revolutions with his tongue around the gland's head and let it slip into his throat. Eyes closed, Lucian proceeded like this, increasing his pace with each shudder from André.

Lucian continued until a hair lingered on his tongue. He stopped, retrieved the hair from his mouth, and opened his eyes. It was a simple, black thread of hair – an eyelash. Lucian's eyes stayed fixed to the lash. He wondered whether finding an eyelash under André's foreskin was significant. It felt like a magnificent and rare episode. Or, at least, it was a rare and magnificent appreciation of a common episode.

It was a moment afforded, certainly.

A harsh moan from Henrik and a fresh wetness on his stomach brought Lucian back to the present moment's bedroom. Lucian removed himself from Henrik, careful not to make his partner wince. Henrik turned to his side and opened the bedside table.

He retrieved a checkered dish cloth – the kind sold in a bundle at the IKEA in Red Hook. He wiped his bottom, then the cum off his stomach, and finally offered the stained cloth to Lucian.

“Thanks,” Lucian said, taking it to wipe himself off.

“Don’t you want to cum?” Henrik asked.

“No, I’m okay tonight.” Lucian replied.

Lucian collapsed his body again on top of Henrik. He repositioned himself behind Henrik to press his chest against his partner’s shoulder blades. He kissed the back of Henrik’s neck.

“Lucy.” Henrik eventually said, interrupting the silence.

“Yes?” Lucian replied.

“What did he think after realizing he had survived?”

“What?”

“The boyfriend. The white guy.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

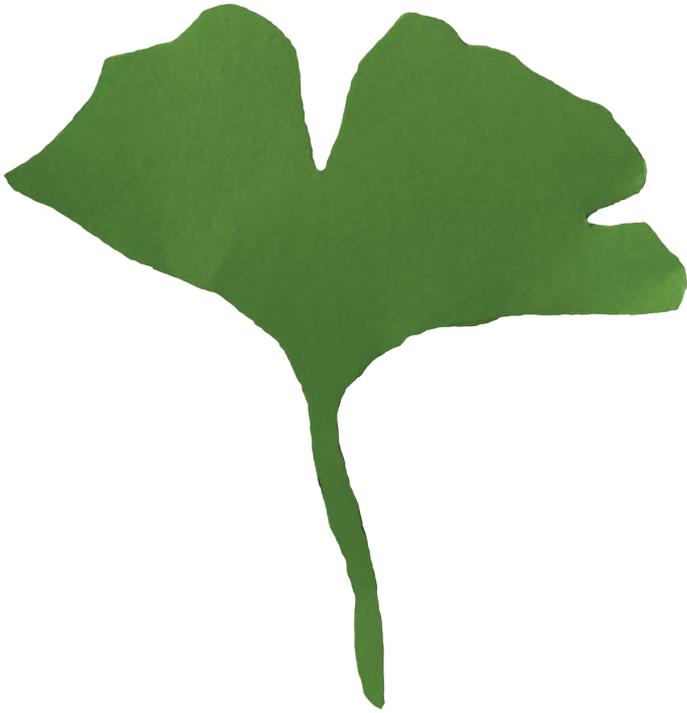
“But what do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Lucian paused, “But I guess – I guess guilt.”

“Why? Because he survived?”

“No. Because he let go.”

Ending with this, Lucian pulled Henrik closer. He thought of the two pressed together like a pair of ginkgo leaves over Mott Street, clinging tightly against the midsummer night’s breeze. With Henrik beside him, he fell asleep.



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