

The Telluride Suites

By Kathryn Criston

For Ed, with gratitude.

I

My Neighbor was of average height with average hair. Her thick eyeliner rimmed two judges of an unruly world. Whenever she heard a noise from any direction, she took a broomstick to my floor, BAM, BAM BAM, from one end of my apartment to the other.

At first I thought she was nailing cloths to her ceiling, as I once saw them green and elegant from the sidewalk beneath our windows, but the thumps came whenever something fell from my hands: when a case was set on the ground, when I stepped on a squeaky section of floor, or when a snap or creak came from another side of the building.

Despite her righteousness, she did not respond when I went down a flight, knocked on her door, and said, " I don't know what your deal is, but it's 2am. Quit banging on my floor." This silenced her for a few weeks, then the broom was back again.

Unknown to her, I taped x's over the creaking spots in my floor so I would not step on them. She once left a note in bubbled handwriting asking me to stop dropping things, signed "Neighbor downstairs :)"

One day at 12:30 pm, there was a different thud, sharp and hollow. I reckoned it was her door. It came only once, followed by stumbling footsteps. Within a few seconds she sobbed in the center of the room, where the carpet turned to wood. It was the best place to cry: far from the window and walls, invisible day or night when the lights were off.

When the semester ended, my Neighbor left and TV shows streamed better on my laptop. I never like my apartment: it was a heavy, barren space full of lazy things watchful memories I did not care to handle.

I slept there, but little else. At least it was quiet.

Every afternoon, I prayed in the chapel like my cousin Regina, who at 94 still went to her knees at the appointed time. I wore black formal pants and a black blouse, and replaced sneakers with cheap shiny shoes when I arrived. My red case was scuffed down the center with a rope handle and one errant latch, but it was the best on the market, both then and now. I seemed to know what I was doing, dragging my cello case past scrunched houses and barred shops to the Downtown.

Minneapolis is young and relatively clean. The Mall where I played was red and brown with flashes of lavender. It was pleasant from a restaurant window, but gum crusted tiles, unwanted daily courtship, and deadened looks from businessmen make a crude workplace.

Downtown at 3:30 was wet, then dry, then wet again with people. When I stopped walking and set my case upright, those seated on the stone-rimmed garden wondered at me. It was a dual bus stop in front of a coffee shop and a jewelry store. The sidewalk gardens made a cozy passage through which all passed, and when they did my open case was a short toss away.

A short black man with a crinkled nose and what once were freckles played a plastic blue guitar to my left. He sang, "sweet love, sweet love...mmm with you in the blankets of sweet love." There were two dollars in his case and a few quarters.

"How long you been out here?" he nods at me, as if we have for years been comrades.

"This is my first time."

"First time!...first time!" he sang and slap-strummed his guitar. It was not tuned properly, and his clunk became a tangle of notes.

"Let me be the first to give you a dollar." His nose rumped further, as he set one gummy bill in my open case.

"Thank you."

I sat and played Bach. Only Bach. Eye-contact and right, easy notes brought money. Wrong notes kept hands in pockets and cheeks pressed to cellphones.

In the first hour, there were Sheriff's men. The foremost was a buzz-cut blonde with over sized legs, the second a ghost, and the third shorter and dark haired. He flitted his attention toward my case and my prelude, then quickly turned when I discovered him.

At the rear of my island a man in red slept, unaware until the blonde man shook him,
"Come on."

"What?" He was groggy.

What did he do to deserve such treatment? I wondered.

"Let's go." the lawman was bored.

The man in red was mystified, but once they were out of view, the street forgot them.

Here, the pews are dark and frail, unmoving.
They should be broken from what they endure.

Here, you touched, here I sat, here you sang,
I think my soul was born.

Others, strangers, lay their tune.
They bring new wood,
They make beautiful structures.

But still I hear you.

There was a hole in my stocking which could not be helped. I apologized but the man, Young Levin, did not mind. My little black dress was new; Molly picked it in spite of my fussing. I brought a baggy, unbecoming coat, and the man had none.

Young Levin told a story of the Outback:

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I sat on a bus with a dusty floor. The highways were maintained, I do not recall how well. The main aisle was rooted with bolts, crammed as fossils are with dust. The wind did not stop, nor the sputtering windows, nor the shamans' ancient voices or their shimmering rattles.

I woke to bright sun: too bright, too old. The windows still shook, the shamans had departed, but how?

We were crossing the void, and if they were gone, then where was I? I asked a noble, balding man in a side seat. "You're going the wrong way, mate," he told me.

I can do the accent, yes. Of course I can do the accent.

Desert is desert, void is void, especially now.

I see that in you, she seems to say: the soft slender blonde beside me wearing some sort of dress.

No matter where I walk, sand will brush my ankles, my shoes will be overtaken, and I can be with God.

*

"You remind me of my grandfather."

"Is that a good thing?" Young Levin's voice was too high when surprised.

"Yes. He was the finest of men. He was a stoic, true as they come."

My grandfather was stationed in Australia during the second world war. He worked with books: figures, not combat. 'Mister,' they called him. He was an officer, but did not demand or expect a title.

I have a picture of him, around 25, in front of an army transport car holding a large-browed baby koala. The desert stretches behind him, watching him as it must have watched Young Levin.

Four or five hours passed, then we departed to the street. It was too cold and grey for November. The young man's lip quivered at the gusty corner, and he did not look at me.

The arched windows are mostly blue with some red, more white, and a brown Christ figure I look to more often in prayer than the cross. His toes are straight and deliberate, oddly sedate.

The lights are off. When heavy vehicles pass on the street, the carved wood creaks and I cannot think of previous centuries.

Young Levin has an office in the other city: brown and well light with crème desks. The computer is abnormally large and cannot see anything. I know this place. I was here in a dream four years previous in the mountains, when I was afraid of storms.

My God, what have I done?

We renewed our baptism vows. The others bowed their heads, but he looked out to me.

The world around him became dark brown, deepened further, and vanished. His brows were flat, lips parted.

Do you turn from sin and promise to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord and only savior?

We do, he did not speak.

It was not like this in the office, where midday light pressed against our cheeks and bodies, our scattered clothing. His eyelashes were not as long as I hoped. In my mind they were longer, his brow less cold, his skin less weathered and burdened.

His smirk was warm, his touch was not: at least, at times, he was there.

"I wish I could have been more of a friend.

Less of a hindrance, more of a friend."

"What do you mean?" He said.

"You know what I mean."

His delicate lips parted and stiffened, "No, I don't."

"Never mind then."

His short eyelashes slanted to the floor and he quavered in the sunlight.

Three children, two boys and a girl, wandered with plastic bags and small voices, "Would you like to buy some candy?" they asked passing neighbors. They ran beneath the bridge to my case at the end of a minuet. The smaller boy with a shaved head questioned an unresponsive gentleman in a grey suit. The taller boy and the girl approached me.

"Would you like to buy some candy?" said the boy.

"How much is it?"

"Two dollars. It's her birthday in two days."

He had oddly delicate eyebrows and a shaved head like the smaller boy. The girl was slightly younger with her black hair in tight little braids. They were focused children, and did not pick at themselves or look to the clouds.

"How old you gonna be?" I asked her.

"Six." she said.

"That's a good age."

She smiled without thought.

"She's shy," the boy told me, "we're trying to raise money for her party."

His speech was polished.

I had to preserve my standing. The Street allowed me to be there and draw money as long as I returned some to its keepers. "That's nice of you. What's your name?"

"Chester."

"And yours?"

"Daria."

"What kind of candy you got?"

Chester held the bag open. I peered inside. There were four large boxes of common candies, crinkled at the corners with dented bodies. The children watched me as hunters, unmoving.

"Milk Duds," I took them in my hand, "I used to eat these at movies. Here." I grabbed two dollars from my case. They watched my hand and did not hear my words.

"Thank you!" said Chester, and they rapidly departed.

At the street corner by the jewelry store, all three children took the side of a watchful man in his 40s who mumbled something to Chester. Together but not touching, they crossed the street. A few days later, the same man waited at the corner as other children ran around, veering from me, asking people to buy candy.

In my apartment, I opened the box and found the chocolates dry. I did not eat them.

At the end of my shift, it rained. The homeless folk around my garden were quick to leave and Kenny the Trumpeter, who read simple jazz from books, withdrew from his space beneath the bridge.

As a concert hall, the bridge was not favorable. The echo made soup of my rapid notes, so I played slow, minor works. This suited the woman and her elderly mother who shuffled beneath an umbrella on the opposite side of the street, and the young woman with wide rimmed glasses, bleached hair, and a grey tweed business suit. She dashed uncomfortably in front of me, black heels shedding water.

The rain slanted and endangered my instrument, so I went further under the bridge.

Where the young woman passed, a man with waist length black hair shuffled in the opposite direction. He was silent and obvious; I thought little of him.

There was a sparse audience and it was almost 6:00. I did not care to be walking after dusk.

The shuffling man was closer; he had a broad nose and a pockmarked face, and may have been around 40.

He suddenly flapped his right arm against his chest and mumbled at me. His head drooped to one side.

"Excuse me?" I did not understand him.

His wrist snapped sharply, "Wassup?" (I believe he said.) "Wassup?!" He spoke like a baritone baby.

"I'm sorry?"

"I got money.....I got money. Dope." His gestures were forceful to the point of flailing.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand what you're saying."

"Dope, dope." he continued.

I held up my hands to indicate empty, "Sorry man, I've got nothing."

The flailing stopped, his fixed eyes deepened, his face reddened.

"Fuck you." he spat at my feet and shuffled on.

I wore a new blue shirt with ruffles instead of grease and tatters. Molly found it. Its sleeves were short and light on my shoulders, which were chiseled from daily use.

I moved from the plane through the boarding tunnel. Outside, wind rattled. It did not touch me, except a brief scanning moment where two panels of the tunnel did not align.

A pilot approached on my right, young and bent with a busy gait, unlike the plump man with thick eyebrows who passed on the same carpet in the same uniform 4 years earlier, or was it 5?

To the right was an empty inlet. No, it should be red with skinny chairs and a freshly waxed floor exposing them.

The hall bent left to the moving walkway. The motor moved me at a steady, inhuman pace beneath clouded skylights and blue arches. I thought I heard a woman's voice in a chippy foreign tongue, and the shoulder of Young Levin's draping coat, but no.

No, no. I must think of other things.

In the tan and auburn of a Mexican restaurant, came the tap of plastic serving spoons and cheap carryout trays. Everyone wanted a burrito. What would the staff think if they didn't?

In an alcove, an off duty cop watching the world as he likely had for 13 years. He did not appear to taste his food. That was the best spot, I thought.

I could not tell whether the person who put the large quantity of vegetables on my burrito was male or female. They had a strong jaw, long silken eyelashes, and black hair sleeked and held with a net. Their hands were sturdy and large, with nails vibrant red. Their lips were outlined firmly in red, but were never used. I could not see a name tag.

When I reached the line's end, the cop was leaving. I quickly took his seat. It was a little red world where I could not feel the airport. This was a place to stay, for a little while at least. To my left was hung a flat sun sculpture. I smelled copper and rock, though that was likely just my mind.

I suppose I played here as a child.

People lean bicycles on fences or trees without locks.

Two men play tennis, flanked by a quiet building with a slanting wavelike roof.
Another sits like me, backward on the five-step bleachers facing the rising hill, pines
on sand colored rock, aspens.

I can call it a hill, can't I? Here, we rest on mountains, and that is a lump on a
mountain. It must be a hill.

Other hills beyond are sheathed in dusty blue.

Breeze tickles aspen leaves. I do not understand them when they speak: their tongue is
complicated and strange. I hear only pulsing and rustling.

That man has the better view. Dammit. I should have come sooner.

It is now 10:00am. The wild air is forgotten. There are all colors here, muted in
structures, by God or by us. Even the rocks are blue. Isn't that strange, to have blue
rocks?

This is most musical of places.

Letter to Young Levin

I am sorry to show you the wrong things. There have been four years of wrong things, which I could hold from others but not from you.

There are things you see that I cannot.

I wish you to share them with me, in friendship.

I was aware of him from others: glancing, moving as if being watched, hoping they were being watched, expecting euphoria.

It was a full, slow moving auditorium. My friend and I waited as the majority filed out comforted by something I could not see. We approached a short dark-haired man in a short leather coat.

His hands were soft. My God his hands were soft, I almost exclaimed. His eyes, deeper and darker than expected, waited to receive something I did not have. I could only smile as if I knew some secret, hopefully the one he wanted from me.

He spoke an odd language to my friend. I could not think of anything pertinent, so I said nothing. They talked of life's largest machines, and their poetry was extraordinary but it was not mine.

We followed him through the utilitarian exit into a florescent-lit lobby, where an unknown man asked to take his picture. His smile was a cascade, the same every time, from his sternum through his neck on both sides, lifting his cheeks as his eyes dimmed and flattened. His soft, well-kept lips seemed to say, "I'm fun and this is a rare intermediary moment between phrases." When the shutter had finished, he resumed his dimensional self and said farewell to my friend, in earnest.

He will be one of the Next, said my friend as we exited to the night.

There is a film that does not exist anymore. When I was 20, I spent 8,000 to make it, now it is gone. I deleted it. It does not exist.

There were mornings grey with a sickly yellow which does not exist. I made it in moments where I stood silently and said to the love-seat swing, "I cannot take this anymore."

The colors traveled with me, to the second level of a white house with horizontal siding, where a man lived.

He sat on the floor, one leg curled under, like a young child unaware of himself. His legs were emaciated, neglected, far too small. They were not meant to be photographed, he had said, though not with such eloquence.

He watched this movie over and over again, looking at himself, creasing his fattening face with unholy smiles.

There, his stubbled jaw by contour becomes luscious, statuesque.

Yes, I made it this way in spite of his heart-creased lips and budding jowls.

His character was lean, muscled in the right places.

True, he had some muscles in his arms and chest, the ones he could see from a mirror.

I am sure you know many like him, as do the industries and the silent girls in grocery stores with numb faces.

This is why I had to leave, you see.

IV

Three boys play basketball, making and missing, though mostly missing their target hoop. Perhaps it is because they always shoot from the same place, off to the left.

This is a set where I do not know the people, besides two of my own. Each one has a smooth face, and probably loves movies, else why would they be here? I see Darin, whom I have worked with. He does not recognize me though I recall when he spat and laughed in the light-parched bar and told me I could drive trucks.

It is a confusing non-season, neither summer nor fall. I sneeze after the take has ended. To keep my nose from weeping, I run to the park bathroom where I wait behind a young woman with black head-hugging hair and an over-sized white shirt that has never been washed. While entering the one stall that works, she peers around and up at an unattached piece of metal pointed at the ceiling. She does not flush when finished.

"It's a strange thing, to wait in line." she says with an edgy voice as she passes me on her way out. "Little bit," I reply.

There is no toilet paper, so I leave.

I heard the Nuggets lost to the Thunder and are out of the playoffs. Who should I root for now? You say the Celtics, who tonight lost to the Heat. All I know of the Heat is that a fuzzy blonde boy in my second grade class had a favourite pencil, red and white, with "Heat" stamped on the side. He used it through the year, even when it was smaller than his tiniest finger. When he wrote, he would clenched the lower part of his face and nudge the tip of his tongue out the side of his mouth. I often wondered if it was because of his Heat pencil, though after it was gone he continued the habit.

I actually write you many letters, then on the phone I tell you everything I mean to say, usually with better wording, and figure my job is done. Apologies.

I have three job interviews this week, then on Friday I will cook dinner for Roman. His preliminary oral exam is next Monday.

The other day, he held my hand at a jazz concert, which he hoped would be classical, and I looked for things to be wrong: shift in attention, grey interest, imprudent devotion. For about five minutes, I waited for it, but he was entirely turned to me, in body and mind. Now I cannot write about him.

I expected him to be taller.

That's it. I cannot come up with anything else. Why do exes, crushes, and habits inspire a passion that the genuine does not?

About Jonathan, I'm not surprised someone would peg him as a filmmaker. I would be interested to see something he directs. I think he would be less gritty than you, especially at this point in his education. Music videos: now that I have a hard time seeing. He'd make a hell of a documentary though.

And yes, I do believe that he laughed at you. I also believe it is your duty to prove him wrong.

I hope, by this time, you have watched your Dailies and are satisfied.

In sleep, I saw Young Levin beside a concrete channel at nighttime. The waters passed through the power plant, cooling, returning harmlessly to the sea.

It was too quick for diving, and by standing still the stream appeared faster, even the pale yellow light could not make sense of it.

What are you doing?

He was shirtless with lean muscle, his short hair tuffed with wind; a tattoo of a slithering house caressed his midsection. He had a stiff symbol on the back of his neck, yes, but what was this?

It was a new lover: yes. It curved from his lower ribs to his breast. Yes, yes.

From here, across the channel, his weariness was gone. The lines around his eyes that made them bulge were gone. Somehow I clearly saw the shy stubble on his face.

He watched the water knowingly as it passed, but what did he know? What could he possibly know?

There is no diving here.

It is a channel, not a lake, now GET OUT.

Good god, there are no signs, but it is certain,

You should not be here.

But turning, he smiled impishly and denied me, spread his arms with parted fingers, and bent his knees.

Without sound he dove to the water, and passed with curling muscles upstream, speeding deeper and deeper until I could no longer see him.

I watched him, but I was not with him.

During a gig, a Mexican man and large black man, both in white shirts, ventured out of the human stream. I could not read the tattoo on the Mexican man's neck. The black man had restless eyes, until they landed on my instrument. I had not endured the daily suitor, so I dreaded to end the song but they were unusually patient, so I finished.

The black man had a deep voice, "I just lost my brother. Did you know him? He used to be out here."

He scanned the gardenside, likely seeing ghosts. I was sympathetic, "I'll bet I've seen him around."

"Could you play amazing grace? It was his favourite."

I never played it on the cello.

"Sure."

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

The curious quick ones with other lives turned from me at the opening phrase. I faded from their world. Everybody plays Amazing Grace, and those who do are far from desirable and do not deserve money.

The black man closed his eyes.

That saved a wretch like me.

I could not find the note after "me." He did not seem to notice.

He sang with me, "I once was lost, but now am found."

The Hispanic man watched with no change of expression, but a deepening of his eyes.

The black man dropped his shaved head and did not sing,
Was blind but now I see.

Passers in the Stream swerved around me and moved more rapidly than usual. Those who accidentally looked at me were quick to dial cell phones.

A silent, marooned man by the jewelry store turned his eyes to me, unblinking.

"Thank you," said the black man.

They moved away.

V

Anthem

You showed me the world of giants in a place I love, at a time I could not.

You are my dear friend.

Seek love where it abides.

It was well after Christmas, but lights rimmed the window and the desk shelf. We left them glowing. He was already naked beneath our homemade sheets. Outside, snow fell in large white chunks: candy shavings, I thought. White chocolate?

I like it best when the sun is out and I can see. It is always cold at first then with pumping it is warmer, but only under the sheets. I do not need to see him with my eyes; I know him by his pulsing back, his hands, bracing.

He is a strong man. He knows nothing of controlling or robbing, and does not focus on one thing while he is doing another. This is why he makes a flower out of me.

I see old sunlit cathedral halls with careful ornaments, or the bright stone-sand of the Mojave and its woven trees.

Odd we should crave things penetrating out bodies, that we make these holes available.

When turned to me, his face is close. This was not always true: in the beginning I was loud and he made faces. Our bodies were more sated than our minds.

I pull his head beside mine. His fine brown hair is damp, his voice deeper: his breathing sharp.

There are no oceans, mountains, anything outside. If music is playing, I do not hear it. My eyes close and my body sees.

The lights were out.

He now looked more like my mother. His jaw, so thin.

His collarbone made quick thrusts upward, like my other grandfather. His hand, warm, sweaty. Through it, I felt my own heartbeat rather than his. I told him of Tehcumseh or the Devil's Pool, Opera. I would write opera.

He did not answer as in previous times. Awake or asleep, his energy was the same, except when he first saw me and felt my hand. I had never taken his hand before. He clutched it, as if a child. He was pure in spite of morphine and eighty eight years. "Strength" he seemed to say. He had it, yes, and he was surprised at mine.

Blunt energy leaned toward me sometimes. He was open, relinquishing, unrestricted by word or custom.

My hand stayed upon his, slowed, melded. My hand became part of his body; I could not move it. There came a long pulse like a wave of molasses, pumping and receding much slower than a heartbeat. I did not know what this was. Then I lost it and could not find it again.

A light out the window, yellowed, barely visible.

My mother leaned forward, "that must be the moonrise."

"It would be further west by now, and almost to its first quarter", said my father from the chair, seated with my grandmother in front of the window.

We waited, as in chapel, eyes on the candle or on ourselves. We feel, in silence, the movement of the universe.

My grandfather faded in and out of sleep speaking only to groan for water. With every swallow, there was a downward effort., which I felt through his hand.

He woke to ask, "Is she all set up?" My mother rushed over, "Yes. Mom went to see Dr Dahl and everything is very good."

Affirming warmth, an effort as he struggled to speak but could not.

My mother waited for a response.

"He is glad." I said. His energy returned to its resting state.

His eyes faded shut, and again we waited.

Then he woke again and for water. My mother put it to his mouth through a syringe. He groaned sharply. "I have to go faster," she said, "I'm sorry."

A sharp tenor cry. I was startled.

I started. "It's ok. This happens." said my mother.

Previously, Tess called, wanting to know when I would leave for her house. It resolved to be "soon."

As my mom gave him water for the last time that night, I muttered the Lord's Prayer, barely audible. My mother put her hand on his shoulder. I felt her heartbeat through his arm, as if my grandfather was no longer there.

I prayed, "You will have him, won't you?" Of course. Would the Lord not take back what He created?

My grandmother stopped at his side on the way out. Her gait sputtered a bit. She moved slower than in previous times. Backlit, she placed her hand near his collarbone, "We're all gonna go now." She smiled. There was more relief than sorrow.

The blanket is thick below. It is best to sit here, where the engines scream and the world is upside down. The cloudforms look like ground because our minds know it and accept it. The ones below are distant as when they were above.

The night before competing, I dreamed he was inappropriately warm to harsh topics, "No, I do not love you." he said, "It is practice, and I hope to get better. I will learn what is right and what is not, so I will choose to marry another, but you will make me wise." He moved evenly, perhaps floating, to the small wooden cabinets. "It is science," he said, blinking is unusually long eyelashes.

I am closer to the moon. Fluff breaks to canyons below.

The tension and aching is gone from my shoulders. It was beyond 1:00am beside a piano, with lively Welshmen and a crowd with bold, proud histories. The Land of my Fathers: I thought I did not know the words, and now that is true, but in that moment they were mine.

"You're welcome, dear" the attendant says, "Sweetie, what would you like? Sir, what can I get for you?" She is brown-haired with bold blue rims to her eyes.

This orange juice has pulp. The other did not.