

## A Good Scrub Between the Ears

The thin white tube feels cold and innocent in her palm as it emerges from shiny crinkles of flimsy plastic bag.

She does not need to flick the tube over to read the label. Its subtle, chemical aroma, so familiar yet foreign, is already seeping through, pulling her in, pulling her back. She hadn't known that her nose housed such a memory.

Her nose had grown a lot that summer.

"Are you ready?" her mother calls from the stairs.

\*\*\*

It wasn't that Allie didn't want to go to her sister's wedding. It was just that she didn't believe in weddings, in the white dress and de-thorned hot house roses, and love defined and defiled by forever and ever, amen.

When she left for Dawson that spring, she knew that she would have to be back for the ceremony in the fall. She hadn't minded then. It had made sense then. That was when her job ended, the sun set on summer and the winter winds blew transient workers like her back down south.

She hadn't known then that she too would fall in love, a love made all the more precious by its transience. Or at least so she assumes.

\*\*\*

This is Allie's version of love: Love in the summer of Dawson.

She had been living at the campground across the river. It hadn't been very long. Days still distinguished themselves from night, if not by light and dark, then by hot and cold. She still enjoyed the inconvenient exotism of taking the ferry to work every day, the river running fast, frigid and threatening below as it sprinted mud-splattered from spring's gate.

Late one night, she had snubbed out her joint and marched gallantly forward to first and finally tread into the Yukon's chilly, dancing brown, her face set as if on a dare. Folded above her knees, her jeans had felt soft and buttery with a long day's work in the kitchen, while her tired calves turned taught in the frozen strength rushing past below.

She had pretended not to notice when the puffing and juttering sound of a jalopy cut above the river's hiss, a new neighbour pulling in to set up camp, to disturb her peace. Instead, she watched, as if transfixed, as sunlight danced on effervescent water, its astral heat dissipating upon contact.

Then came the splash.

She had looked over, astounded by the refreshing vision of fearless freedom before her, the vision she had come here to be.

“Fuck that feels nice,” a voice proclaimed as law. His hardened hands splashed and scrubbed the melted remains of snow across his bare chest, as if the Yukon River was some steaming Roman bath.

She got out of the water. She stripped down to nothing and jumped into the deep.

She could do this too. This is what she had come here for – to do – to be.

Her toes clutched into the gravel before she could be pulled too far away, her laugh jolting and jeering at the shock of cold.

That night, they had made love in her tent, their bodies breathing the scent of silt and salmon early in summertime’s rush.

This is how she ended up feeling him – seeing, hearing, and tasting him – all before she ever knew to smell him.

\*\*\*

Her mother hadn’t mentioned Allie’s untarnished odour when they came to pick her up at the airport the night before last. Allie knew it was there – in her armpits, in her hair, in the sweat dripping down the back of her neck, seeping between thighs. She had felt and smelt herself fermenting in her own juices from the first to the last leg of her travel, sour exhaustion pouring out pores, a scent that swirled, strong but fleeting, before being sucked up and out by the plane like so much unwanted exhaust.

Her father hadn’t mentioned it either. No surprise there.

And so neither did Allie. She had been prepared to, eager to, ready to defend any purported sensory offense, ready to justify the scent that proclaimed her as her own: It’s my smell, my odour, it’s me; this is how I smell, do you even know how you do; our scents are our hallmarks, ourselves, our calling cards; humans do not stink, we only think that we do, we are only trained, conditioned, lost from nature and shamed of ourselves...

Then again, Allie hadn’t mentioned it when his bodily aroma had first caught her off-guard. She had only flinched, just one fly short of imperceptibly, just like her mother had at the airport when she had hugged her youngest daughter back home in her arms.

Allie had not mentioned it to him, but she had not needed to. It was not for him to discover his stench; it was for her to discover her fragrance.

\*\*\*

“It’s so good to have you home!” her mother had gushed as they drove beneath the flickering lights of late-night planes and reflective signs flashing turnoffs across the city’s semi-darkness.

“It’s just too bad that you couldn’t have come earlier...” her mother had tossed back across her shoulder, as if nonchalant, as if she actually understood why Allie hadn’t come back earlier, hadn’t helped with the planning, hadn’t seemed to care. Her father drove serenely toward what remained of their country stars.

Allie probably should have been thinking about her sister at this point. About her sister's never-ending love story. About her role in making her sister's dream day come true.

She wasn't. She wasn't thinking about her sister. She was thinking about him. She was thinking about what he would think about all this.

She wasn't wishing he was here but instead wishing she was still back there. Or at least that she could be, that they could be, that somewhere, somehow there still existed a they.

\*\*\*

She hadn't mentioned his smell to him.

He had done the talking for her.

"You smell so good," he had told her the morning after they met, his voice hovering first from up above and later rising up from down below.

She had laughed her embarrassment at his praise, at his touch, her own nose twitching cautiously at this unfamiliar odour of sex and stranger.

Then, a few days later: "Why do you wear that stuff?" he had asked, scrunching his sunny nose as he watched her slather chemicals under her uniform shirt. Her deodorant had turned slimy at his query, as it seeped through the twisted defiance of her armpit hair to mask the acrid smell of sex and sweat, this evidence of sweet love.

She had shrugged, not even trying to remember.

"I love the way you smell," he had said.

"I love your taste," he had said.

So she had stopped using deodorant, patiently waiting for the day that her nose would catch up with her heart.

\*\*\*

"Here," her mom had said that morning, pressing two plastic folds into Allie's limp arm – the dress she expected dimpled by a seemingly insignificant bag. "Get dressed. We have the salon booked for nine." She had turned to dash promptly down the stairs to attend to her eldest daughter, the star of the show, who this was all for, so please let's all do this for her, behave.

"Coffee?" her father had offered in passing, his suddenly wrinkled hands passing her a mug steaming with poor taste and un-fair-trade love.

Allie had taken the items and turned to obey.

\*\*\*

So now, here she is, pulled between the expectations of old and new, borrowed and blue.

She pops off the clear plastic nub covering the odorant paste (the plastic protection within the plastic tube within the plastic bag she could not refuse).

Are single-use plastics still allowed here, she wonders, mind grasping for solid ground, while toying with the light weight both damning and inviting her.

Knock knock knock. It is time to go. The show must go on.

A single-use event of dresses, celebration, speeches and cake traded in for a lifetime of love.

Or so she hopes. She really does. She really does want her sister to be happy, to know love, to know and love herself. Whatever that means.

Her left arm raises expectantly, mechanically, the expensive cloth of bridesmaids whispering, the arm outstretched in sacrifice.

Betrayal never smelt so sweet.