

LIFE

DRAWING

Meara Sharma

Sora is working a Christmas party in a dim wood-paneled room above *Coq d'Argent*. She shoots for a while, but then everyone's drunk, so she leaves her camera bag in the corner. The room smells like stale frying oil. The barman pours her some Prosecco, and she positions herself beside a circle of people. A redhead with heavy eyeliner looks over at her and smiles. Her teeth are a touch yellow, and she's leaning on the shoulder of the man next to her. His dark gelled hair is crusting by his sideburns. He pretends to take a picture with his hands and laughs. He's pressed into a shirt with a little alligator on it.

The voices in the circle flash like a strobe. I've been oiling my hair with prickly pear. Sex is like putting money in the bank. See the numbers. Coconut oil is good in coffee. It takes the edge off. We've got the North. When you take it out, the interest is gone. Isn't that what booze is for. We'll be quids in. Have you tried Monbazillac. There's a penalty for early withdrawal. Sora's nodding along to a sermon about the beauty of southern Spain when the lights come on. The crowd spills down the stairs and onto the sidewalk. It's raining, and the street is glinting and loud. The alligator man asks if she wants a ride back east.

Sora follows the couple to their white BMW. They start driving, and the man asks for her address. She realizes she can't remember it. Never mind, he says. You can direct me. She's trying to remember, but she can only think of all the other addresses, in all the other cities. Awful party, he smirks. I had to restrain myself from jumping off the roof. The car jerks past people darting across the cobblestones, blinded by their umbrellas. The objects behind the storefronts are pushing through the glass. A bouquet of clown-faced balloons. A giant, gleaming banana. Streets with heirloom names: Glasshouse, Great Windmill. A square called Cold Bath.

The radio is delivering the election results. Shut it off, the man snaps. We're winning. The woman's hand emerges from a pile of fur and slides across the dashboard, turns down the dial. The hand is so pale it seems to be lit from within. An emerald on it blinks cartoonishly. The streets are quieter now, blurred. The car scuds past the grand stone buildings and the manicured greens, the terraced houses with decorated facades, the toxic meadows along the canals. Up ahead, the road is about to divide, and Sora knows she has to tell the man to veer right, but she doesn't say it in time.

Soon, the area has the look of a place briefly and mistakenly infused with cash. Most of the buildings are the color of tea stains. One is bright yellow and looks like it's made of styrofoam. The bins are overflowing; bits of dead car litter the sidewalks. Occasionally, a florid structure rises from the detritus. A silver dome ridged with spikes. A thin tower strangled by a red helix, faintly swaying in the wind. They pull up to a squat building that's supposed to resemble a Mondrian. Bespoke Residences, declares a torn banner. The sky is the color of silt. Though it isn't raining anymore, Sora raises her palm into the air. The night has become warmer, and it smells sweet, like wet trash.

Inside the flat, everything is various shades of beige. There's a leather sectional and a shiny block of plastic for a coffee table. One of the walls is entirely windows that look out onto a dark courtyard, and another is exposed blonde brick. Three large, overlapping gold hoops hang from the ceiling. When the woman turns on the light fixture, it tints the space a dull yellow, like a sandbox, Sora thinks, the shapes rising and falling, collapsing and reconstituting. The man throws his keys down; they slide across the table and fall onto the furry rug. Sit, he says. Sora folds herself onto one end of the couch. The room could be an architectural rendering. She realizes the exposed brick is actually wallpaper.

The woman says she's going to bed. She looks at the man and thrusts her lips out, makes a kissing sound. The man turns to her and makes the same face, the same sound. Sora thinks of two swollen fish, one dark and one light, preserved on ice. Have fun, says the woman, her red hair disappearing up the staircase. The man brings a bottle of whiskey and two rounded glasses to the table. They're glossy black and curved inward at the base, the shape of ass cheeks. He fills his up and sinks heavily into the couch, as though he'll never move again. He's younger than his bulging body suggests, with thick eyelashes and caramel skin, taut and smooth over his cheekbones. Help yourself, he says.

The man downs his glass and seems newly alert. So, Sora, he says. Where are you from? Sora doesn't remember telling him her name. She can't remember his, either. I mean, obviously you've come here from the land of the free, he says. Traded one hellhole for another. But where are you really from? Actually, don't answer that. I know where. You're from the same place as me. That vast brown mass. Over there, he says, pointing at the wall of windows. The East. Let's just call it the bloody Orient. Why not.

Sora takes a tiny sip of her drink. There are dark shapes in the panes of glass – their outlines. It occurs to her that the man is much further gone than she is. We're all the same, he says, all those brown places. We've invaded each other, colonized each other, raped each other – well before this country did any of that. We're the land of the exotic, the dangerous, the lavish, the seductive. That's what they think of us here. Even today. Come on, you know they do. The elite in this country are obsessed with their obsession with the great brown masses. They call it being cultured, well-traveled. They know how to use our spices. They drape their beds with our fabrics. Cover their floors with our rugs. But ultimately, that's what they like to do – walk all over us.

He pauses and pulls his phone from his pocket, looks at it. We're winning, he says indifferently, and refills his glass. Well, you know what? I'm obsessed with them, too. He's louder and more focused now. That obsession is how I got here. The man throws his arms into the air, gestures at the circles of gold lightly swinging from the ceiling. They gave us three décor options when we bought the place, he says proudly. Gold, silver, or white. I mean, is there any contest?

I know what you're going to say, Sora. You're going to say something about how I need to interrogate how white supremacy has affected me. I mean, look at my life. I'm a bougie asshole. I live in this trendy, godforsaken part of town. I have a wife from the northernmost, whitest, coldest place on earth. I mean, she's a fucking redhead. I won. I won, didn't I? I bet you're looking to win, too. To transcend your identity. To be seen as something other than who you are. That's why you came here, to this city. You strike me as someone who wanders around a lot. You stick around for a bit, and then you leave. Am I right? You keep trying to find yourself. Well, good luck with that; you'll never find yourself. You'll just keep finding other people who are more than happy to tell you who you are.

He sits up straighter and stares directly at Sora, his brown eyes shining, overexcited. Just by looking at you, he says, I can

probably tell you a lot about your life history. Hmm, let's see. Diaspora, first-generation – we've got that covered already. Suburban upbringing. Dad: low-level business type. Sales. Hard work, minimal reward. Mom stayed at home with the kids. Your parents made sure you went to great schools. They were obsessed with assimilation. If they weren't, you'd never be living alone at, what, age 28, in a foreign country, far away from them, photographing corporate Christmas parties. In encouraging you to assimilate, they accidentally cursed themselves. Set you free. Told you that you could be anyone you wanted to be. When in fact, what they really want is for you to be showering them with grandkids and paying their Zee TV bills and cooking them dinner every night.

The man stops and refills his drink again. It sloshes around, spilling a bit as he readjusts himself on the couch. He looks sleepy for a moment, but quickly perks up. Do you have a boyfriend? he asks, unconcerned with the answer. Probably white. Landed gentry? George, or James, I'm sure. Wears wellies at every opportunity? I'll tell you, when I was your age, my parents sent me a whole lineup of beautiful brown women. Your Priyankas. Your Samiras. Your Shrutis. One at a time. A veritable tasting menu. They were all stunning. Our women are the hottest, hands down. But I didn't want any of them. I knew they'd cook me a feast every night, do all the housework, treat me like a prince – but of a country that no one's ever heard of.

No, no, no, he says. I wanted an Alice. Or a Lucy. Maybe a Harriet. But Phyllida! Never thought I'd bag a Phyllida. The name screams rich, dumpy aristocrat. Perfecto. My parents can't even pronounce it. Now, that's a triumph. Yeah, she looks like a horse. She's going to be fat soon. But who cares? I have a VR headset. It's better than the real thing. The eye contact, it's unbelievable. She thinks I'm playing video games, but if she found out, she wouldn't care. Anyway, I love it when she yells at me, cooks me shitty food. It's all part of the upper-middle-class dream.

Sora's barely touched her drink, but she pours herself some more whiskey anyway, and then fills the man's cup. He takes a big gulp. Sometimes I can't believe my luck, he says. I've clawed my way to the top. He's quieter now, conspiratorial. I work in an office full of men who shoot birds and ride horses on the weekends. But Monday to Friday, who's the Lord of the Manor? Me. Who walks all over their carpets? Me. I've got my own pair of hunting boots. If I wanted to, I could crush any one of those guys as easily as a cockroach. He pauses, considering the image. Sora

remembers hearing that if you stamp on a cockroach, you end up releasing its eggs everywhere. But maybe that's a myth.

What about you, Sora. You certainly don't want to be an event photographer forever. I bet you're an artist. You 'make art', he says, curling his fingers into quotes. But you've got to do other stuff for money. Bartending? Wedding DJ? Nude modeling? Must be lucrative, posing naked in front of art students. I reckon you're good at that. You're so still. You're like a mannequin. He starts to trail off. His face is slackening, like a melting ice sculpture.

I can tell you're a smart girl, he says. Resourceful. He's motioning erratically with his hands. Let me give you some advice. When I was younger, I used to wake up and think: what is this all for? I mean, everything. All the jobs. The shopping centers. The laws. The skyscrapers. All the trappings of civilization. To me, it just seemed like humans were desperately coming up with ways to fill the time. Inventing reasons to exist. But you know what? Once I started making money – real money – all of that bullshit went away. I saw the light. Money is the clearest, most radical religion there is. I mean it. The pursuit of it sweeps away all doubt. All fear. All inhibition. Sweep, sweep. He giggles, trailing off again. His eyes drift to the bottle. He splashes some liquid into his cup and takes a deep, loud breath, almost a wheeze.

I've had some of the most profound spiritual experiences of my life in pursuit of money. For example. Where I work, all the conference rooms are named after famous economists. Keynes. Smith. Hume. Let's not forget these guys were also eugenicists. Anyway. Sometimes, when I'm working late, I'll go into those rooms, one by one. They all have those long, glossy tables made of fake cherry. Like the movies. Absolutely covered in lacquer. They're so slippery, you can skate on them. And in the middle of every table, there's always a vase of flowers. They don't replace them often enough, so usually they're in a state of decay, wilting and shedding onto the table. Once in a while, I like to get up onto those tables and piss into the vases. Just let it all go. A cascade of gold. Mind you, it probably helps the flowers. They need all the help they can get. But the feeling of showering those flowers... oof. I'll tell you, it's one step away from Nirvana. It gives me a high that lasts for weeks.

Sora brings her drink to her mouth and pretends to take a sip. She tops up the man's tumbler, and then pours a few drops into her own.

I know there are probably cameras. I know someday I might get caught. But that's the thrill of it. That's why it's so titillating.

And I don't really care. What will happen? I'll tell you. I'll be labeled a twisted psychopath. I'll get suspended. Women I've grazed in the elevator will come out of the woodwork and label me a sexual predator. I'll get fired. I'll get blacklisted. Whatever. I'm already at the top. When that day comes, I'll be free. Spin right off of the Wheel of Samsara.

The man's eyes are drooping. He closes them for a few moments, and it's quiet. Sora can hear the wind outside. It's picking up; it sounds like the ocean. Suddenly, she remembers that she left her camera bag in the car. It starts to rain again, sharp pings on the wall of windows. The man wakes up and smiles. It's a design flaw, he says. The amount it rains here. He looks at her dreamily, his face soft, expectant. Sora, he says. I have an idea. Get up on the table. He's leaving long pauses between his sentences. You said you were a nude model. Let's see how you do it.

Come on, he says. I want to draw you.

The man begins fidgeting, looking in different directions. He lunges forward and retrieves a pen and a pile of newspapers from the drawer inside the coffee table. He settles back into the couch and rests the paper on his stomach. He's smiling, but it's forced. Get on the table, he repeats. Sora doesn't move. I won't touch you, he says. But if you don't listen to me, I will touch you. He laughs impatiently. You get me?

Sora sets her glass on the floor and stands up. She steps onto the plastic coffee table. It's higher than it looks, like a plinth. She thinks of her black boots, old and muddy on the creamy surface, but she doesn't look down at them. The man stretches out his legs and leans his head into the backrest. He's gazing up at her. Undress, he says. Now. She kicks off her boots. Unzips her wide black trousers and slides them off. She shaved yesterday, she remembers. He's looking at her like a teacher waiting for the answer. She lifts her turtleneck over her head. It's baggy, but the neck is tight. It catches on her chain. I'm not going to help you, he says quietly. She's in her bra and underwear now, mismatched white and red. Her body feels small, pliant. She runs her hands through her hair and stands up straight. The man has let his smile go. He looks placid. The air in the flat is clammy and overheated, oil on her skin. Drop your panties down to your knees, he says. But leave your bra on. And your socks.

The man lifts the stack of paper and begins to draw, his eyes fluttering up and down. He's moving his pen in quick, jerky strokes. Sora can't see what's happening on the page. She's thinking about what the man got right. He guessed the first half of the story – the anxious immigrant parents, the middling job,

the good schools. Maybe, if he had a bit more time, he'd also be able to divine the second half. Father in jail, roped into a scheme with a banker from his hometown, the one who wore silk shirts, hosted parties, made promises – the one he'd played cricket with as a kid, at the boys' school run by nuns. And the rest. Mother drinking in an off-season rental, snow on the beach. Brother riding the trains, trying not to be found. It's almost funny, Sora thinks, the Arthur Miller of it all.

The man's pen is moving slower now. He's no longer looking at her, just refining the drawing. You're beautiful, he says, surveying his work. He glances up at Sora and laughs. You look like one of those girls I was supposed to marry, he says. She can see his neck reddening, the flush spreading to his cheeks. The man moves one hand to his crotch. He unzips his trousers and takes his penis out. It springs up and sways back and forth, like one of those inflatable tubes that dance in strip-mall parking lots. He curls his hand around its base. Your body, he says. It's so modern. He begins to move his hand up and down the shaft. You're supposed to end up with someone like me, he says. I could charm your father. I'm everything he wanted to be. Aren't I? His pace is quickening. You, though. You would destroy me. And rightly so.

He's losing control of his face. His stomach is trembling. You're so still, he murmurs. It's like you're made of glass. There's terror in his eyes. His whole body clenches, a swelling balloon. Semen spurts onto the carpet and the table. Sora feels some wetness land on her feet. The man moans loudly and drops his head back, closes his eyes. Good God, he mutters. God save the Queen. He's splayed into the couch. After a few moments, he's breathing heavily. Sora doesn't move. He lets out a snore and flinches, like he's woken himself up, but then there's another one, and another. The sound scrapes through the room, shuddering, rhythmic blasts.

Sora steps down from the table, onto the soft rug. She collects her clothes and puts them on as quietly and slowly as possible, trying not to shift the air. Once dressed, she leans over to pick up her boots. Beside them are the man's keys. One brass, one steel, and a rounded black box, the kind that unlocks the car when it's close. Her camera. She takes the keys and begins to tip-toe toward the door. Almost there, she realizes the snoring has stopped. She hears the man stir and turns around. He's raised his head up, but his eyes are still closed.

We won, he says. Biggest win in thirty years. His voice is high and thin, almost childish. We won, we won, we won, he repeats,

fading into a whisper. Slowly, his head droops back and his mouth falls open. He's snoring again.

Instantly, Sora's out the door and running down the stairwell. She's still holding her boots. As she approaches the car, it beeps and illuminates. She grabs her camera bag from the back seat. The sky is greenish and thick, but there are a few gaps between the clouds. The moon, a skein of silver. No signs of life. Sora opens the front door. She sits down behind the wheel, presses the circle of blue light beside it. The engine hums awake.

She's driving now. The road is wide and empty. On one side is an overgrown meadow. It cuts off at a construction site. Scaffolding higher than she can see. Left turn. The forever glow of a shopping center. In the distance, a half-finished roller-coaster, flaking red. She turns right. The road narrows, becomes the remnants of a neighborhood, what the area once was. A few windows lit up by decorated trees. The car bumps over the pot-holes, the leftover cobblestones. Rights, lefts. Barren street. Petrol station. A neon *Kittens*. A bridge. Right, left, or straight. Three options. Clusters of trees. Birdsong, maybe. She drives, turning at random, turning, turning, until there's water, and she isn't deciding anymore.

Meara Sharma is a writer and artist. Her work has appeared in *Guernica*, *The New York Times*, *Vice*, *Frieze*, and elsewhere. She is the editor-in-chief of *Adi*, a literary magazine of global politics. Raised in Massachusetts, she currently lives in London.