

EXODUS

Written by Christian A. Dumais

Marianne and I were eating breakfast the morning after, just toast and orange juice. It was almost noon. We had about three hours of sleep between us. We weren't tired though. We were outside in her backyard eating at the table by the pool.

Fall came like a ghost during the night. The trees were bare. Some of the leaves found their way into the pool and floated aimlessly from one wall to the next like empty boats. The sun was bashful above us, giggling and ducking behind the random cloud, leaving the echoes of shade. The breeze sharpened, played with Marianne's hair and came to me. When I closed my eyes, I thought the wind was whispering something, like a secret from days past when the world was simple and gentle and smelled like sunflowers. There was a wind chime behind me.

The scenery revealed itself in pieces, as I became more awake. It felt like I was watching a painting come alive. I imagined myself staring over a painter's shoulder and he was highlighting the scene with the new colors he created during the night. He said he named his infant colors with the names of former lovers. He splashed Isabella on the trees to my left and he gave the yard a hint of Penelope. He said he wouldn't reveal Tiffany and Zuella until sunset. He stretched out his mustache and asked, "Do you see it?" I said that I didn't and he huffed.

Marianne saw me frowning, but she kept eating her toast in silence. She looked like a gypsy, pretty and mystical, especially the way her hair floated around her, like she belonged with elves. I'm sure I looked like a bum. I didn't bring a change of clothes and my shirt was wrinkled.

"I'm dying," I said.

She smiled, as if to say, that's nice.

"I'm serious."

"I know you are." She said it solemnly; her grin said otherwise.

"Last night," I said, "it was nice."

She nodded. "You were talking in your sleep."

"Really?" I finished chewing. "What did I say?"

"Mostly mumbles."

"Oh."

She brought her glass of orange juice to her mouth and paused. "You still miss her." As she sipped, she didn't blink.

I looked down at my toast. A part of my dream came back to me. The visual was fuzzy, but the feeling was tangible. I closed my eyes and pretended that it was a long time ago, long enough that my mind wouldn't know whether to process it as a memory or a dream. It would still be real, I knew that, it just wouldn't *feel* real.

Marianne said something.

"What's that?"

She said, "The pool. The leaves are moving funny."

I looked over at the pool. It wasn't until I stood up that I realized they weren't leaves at all, but frogs. There were a few dozen of them, no bigger than my thumb. They were jerking their tiny arms and legs, sliding around the pool like tossed pennies.

"They must've wandered over from the swamp last night." Marianne jumped from her chair with urgency. She opened the plastic manhole above the skimmer and glared. She ran over to the corner of the house and turned off the pump.

When the pump receded, a dark cloud of frogs poured out of the skimmer into the pool. The frogs slowly dispersed in their newfound ocean. Now there were about a couple hundred of them. They looked like green chubby babies. I never saw anything quite like that before; it was strangely adorable.

"Do you have a—" I started, but Marianne was already on it, scooping the frogs up with a net. She'd get as many as possible before walking to the back fence to drop them off at the edge of the swamp. It was such a meticulous process; there were simply so many of them. She did it so carefully too, so thoughtfully, even though it was obvious that to touch one would repulse her; and yet, she was compelled to save them, despite herself. I watched her. Her nose was shriveled, her mouth closed tight, but her eyes were sympathetic and loving.

I found a white bucket by the lawn chairs and used it to catch as many frogs as I could. Most of the frogs reacted to my bucket by diving deeper into the water, too deep for my arms to reach. The ones I did catch were the floating couples that were too in love to notice me. The frogs were stubborn. They jumped and dove and squirmed and twisted; our slippery little children rebelled against us as best they could.

After nearly an hour, she said, "I think that's it."

"Looks like."

We kept orbiting the pool to be sure. Marianne beamed with content, as if liberating the frogs had some kind of meditative quality that I overlooked. I thought about the frogs, jumping their baby jumps back to their home with their smiles that only other frogs know, with no understanding of why my friend and I had saved them. Did they even know they were being rescued or was it simply another part of their journey?

"That's what we want, isn't it?" I asked.

"What?"

"That." I tried to laugh but it didn't come out right. I walked to the edge of the pool and dropped to my hands and knees. I bowed and put my face into the water. It was cold. When I rose, the water drifted down my face and strolled down to my shirt.

She put her hand on my shoulder and slid her other hand across my cheek.

"I'm fine," I said.

I pulled back, she moved forward. "Don't," she said. "Now close your eyes."

I shut my eyes. "It's just water," I said.

"It's not the water I'm worried about," she whispered. I felt her thumbs moving under my eyes. She pressed lightly. "Keep them closed—"

"I—"

“–and be quiet.”

The wind picked up and I heard the trees moving with it. It was like a long content sigh. Dried leaves scratched against the concrete. I could hear everything but her. It was like she no longer existed. I was concentrating harder when I felt her lips touch my forehead. The kiss was so soft I almost doubted it. She leaned my head back more. Her lips came down on my eyelids, the left followed leisurely by the right. These kisses were stronger but still gentle. I almost spoke. She seemed to sense this; a finger covered my lips. She lifted her finger and our lips touched. I didn't move a muscle. I let her lips overcome my own, at first softly, then forcefully. Her breath was hot in my mouth. When she finally pulled back, I realized I wasn't breathing. I heard her say, “Open them now.”

When I did open my eyes, it took a few seconds to adjust. I looked up at her. The sun was behind her head. She looked like a giant. In the sky behind her, Renee was blending with Natalie and turning into something new. I exhaled.

She leaned over and said, “When you breathe like that, you sound like the trees.”

Thanks for reading.

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