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WE'VE BEEN TOGETHER for five years. About four years ago she said, "I love you."

And immediately so did I.

Now we say it whenever we want. We're world experts.

There will be trouble. Raymondetta never starts a new coffeehouse "loyalty card" till the last one's fully stamped.

I claim my free coffee like a poker champ, spreading my conquering hand, six or seven cards typically, and seldom a card stamped thrice.

Often I know *all* about a card I've started, but I'm reluctant to make the barrista and queue hang around while I dig for it, so I just ask for a fresh one. Is this barrista going to search me? With the frantic queue awaiting coffee, I'd like to see her try.

One day my love Raymon—"I love you too"-detta and I are sitting in our sitting room, in our pretty little semi-detached house, which we rent with two of our friends, and which is about to be the epicentre of a totally unimaginable and very very almost but not quite unfathomable catastrophe engulfing London and the cud-filled fields beyond it and the bleachy towns beyond them, and Raymondetta's going through her purse, and she finds two of these coffee house customer loyalty cards—two. She frowns.

"Is one of these yours?"

"I guess."

"*Have* it then."

"I love you."

That's how it begins.

Lorqi Blinx

Cowards are Great!

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KITCHEN SUNDAYS with Raymondetta!
I say, “You know the kitty thing we agreed on? Jar over the fridge, fortnightly fiver each, for bread, milk, toilet paper and butter? Candice has just been knowingly filling it with oil.”

“Mm...?”

“It’s all part of the same thing, isn’t it. The identification infestation. I *have* asked her about it. She said I could screw my sticking place with her courage.”

“Do you know how upset I feel, when you f-f-fish for a bitch and I’m in no kind of mood?” Raymondetta says.

“I’m sorry,” I say immediately, “these things misfire. But without speculative foreplay...”

“I know, I know. Have you called the pest people?”

“You *know* how I haven’t.”

“I need to work on this now.”

We have a grave identification infestation—grave. Candice is being cagey about her loyalties, thinking what can she gain, sleeping pointedly on a heap of snapping, jittering passports in the sitting room. Candice bugs me more than she bugs Raymondetta or Palace. Two months ago it was roaches, she became their queen and slow-danced with stacked meta-organisms of them to *Kiss From A Rose*. Leading them on if you ask me. I think of them swaying on her like a chitin-based lava lamp and blood flees from my brain to my penis in disgust.

I call our landlord. “Can I profit from this?” he asks.

“Are you getting this down? Remember how, during the roach infestation, you claimed your hands were tied by ‘a lackadaisy chain?’”

“How will I have benefited: by the end?”

“Imagine had someone made an object to symbolise all their sad and cross feelings about you, say a molotov cocktail, and then simply let it

gently drift away, like away through a landlord's unlit window. Fine line between counterfactual and counterterrorism."

"That insane attack had you written all over it. We're still picking a species of flame from the carpet. My wife says move back to Cork. Are you threatening me?"

"No. Yes. I'm all mixed up over it. I need time to think."

"I'm one to buckle under pressure. Call an exterminator, I'll pay him off. Don't hurt me or cost me anything."

"Hmm," I doubt. "Thanks."

He recommends someone and I scrawl the number he gives on the back of a dog tag.

"Sorry to call you on a Sunday," I say. "It's the Lard's day."

"And I'm sorry to hear from you."

In Yell I find two pest people who claim to work weekends. The first I call promises Mediation Not Extermination. "We will have to hear the rats' side of the story," she says firmly.

"When I say 'rats,'" I say. "I mean 'bollocks.' It's interesting, because it's not a word I normally use. Do you have any information on Mediation Not Extermination for identification infestations?"

She laughs and hangs up on me, pretty weird but she is, like, a rat catcher.

I take a moment to survey the scene. My impression is it has been tampered with. The sitting room is the hub of the infestation, but even in the kitchen little heaps of timesheets and staff passes fill every corner. On the ceiling, near the sun-honeyed kitty, an itinerant retina scan is kaleidoscoping with a perplexed cobweb, neither able to tangle the other. The air smells of stale ideas and Raymondetta has been replaced by a file on her. I fret.

While I am taking this brief but troubled breather our housemate Palace saunters in.

Palace is a pretentious people-trafficker. He smuggles containers of premises from which he validly deduces staring immigrants once they are safely in England. Palace has been a complete asshole about building on his philosophy degree and is obviously now terrified that the infestation will reveal his pretentious people-trafficking. He dumps his rucksack onto the Raymondetta file—which is the file that I *love*—

and tears me off a strip.

“Ponce, this sucks crap,” he coins, pointing the literal finger. “I’m not waiting around for you and your trapper. You’re a dinosaur.”

“Palace—”

“I’m taking matter into my own hands.”

“Like those’ll work. I just this minute contacted the lord of this land,” I reminisce. “Cowards are great, you can spin them, pick them up... all those lovely things.”

“Whatever,” Palace says, sauntering.

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PALACE SAID “DINOSAUR” either to suggest that I am ponderous or that my methods are obsolete or both. But his subconscious mind probably suggested the word because our last truly fierce argument was about dinosaurs. It’s not that we disagree about whether they are cool, or anything. It’s just that Palace is a quasi-realist about them. He even thinks that statements about dinosaurs are neither true nor false but rather expressions of the palaeontologist’s feelings.

“For so long,” he said to me, “we have fire-breathing lizards. Then they become embarrassing. So we gesticulate at shards, compromise on the fire-breathing, and bingo! we can have back our *beloved dragons*. This is *not* OK with me! Listen: they’ve recently realised damage inflicted on an *Australopithecus africanus* infant is ‘consistent’ with a huge eagle having pierced the kid’s head with its thumb-talon, hovered while he died, then ripped out his eyes to get to his brain. So they’re like, ‘We now know he wath taken by a ginormouth, regally crethted, aurulent Cainitht, cruelly hooked, her breatht like a haythtack, her eyeth the dazzling blonde of thunthtruck kitties, wingthpan of desertth, flattening the grath beneath her like a Harrier jet!’ Wake up!”

Aurulent Cainist. “Big cats have powerful jaws,” I said reasonably. “One bite would make a skull a jig of petals.”

“Flapth of deprethted bone,” Palace continued in his “palaentologist with a lisp” voice which no-one really finds that funny, “on top of the hominid’s thkull are likely indicatorth that thuch visionth blazed in the darkneth of poor thtaked Prometheuth’t h delerium—the flame of hith

transgrethion, wed with the featherth of hith torturerth!”

The flame of his transgression, wed with the feathers of his torturers.
“Palace. Call me overdosed on frank pellets,” I said, “but—isn’t your sophistry just filling official pigs with more abilities to exploit us?”

I don’t mean to give the impression I got the last word.

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THE FINAL HOUSEMATE is Candice, one of those women with a skin-tight angel carcass instead of skin and blood-like hair. I can’t believe she sides with plagues, swarms, dry rot.

I enter her fusty rustling lair intending to tear her off a strip. She hugs me, her arms lacing around my waist, under my armpits, over my shoulders, and draping my throat with two or three firm scarves of flesh. Musk units scramble.

For some reason the woozy dells of her breast-bone remind me of certain smooth, ladyless vaginas endemic to men’s prisons.

Our clings remain distinct clings, tightening and weakening but ever out of phase, never compacted into a single cling. Soon irritated knots of muscle pretty much secede my lower back. Her familiar breath—what is the back of my neck to her, the inside of her mouth? “Can this day get any worse,” she breathes. “Have a cup of tea with me?” She has practically condensed a teapot’s offal into my nape’s fine frightened fur—a teapot’s.

As I disengage I think or I *think* I think, “it forst him slacke his grasping hold, and from her turne him backe: her vomit full of bookes and papers was, with loathly frogs and toades, which eyes did lacke, and creeping sought way in the weedy gras”... but that isn’t really a thinkable thing. It probably has something to do with being in the heart of the infestation and/or the arms of its queen. I need to get out, I need space, I need a nice hair cut.

“Can I wash your brain for you, mate?” says the friendly Australian barber. Evidently a slip of the tongue so I carry on as normal, claiming it has just been washed. Raymondetta has returned but says nothing. Could she be enraged? It is difficult to know what is out there, and why things happen—that far, I agree with Palace.

“I think your name says a lot about you,” says the barber, after I mention Palace our housemate. At first he thought we said we lived *in* a palace!

We are having a nice time.

“Are we agreed that the events of a person’s life tend to shape their personality?”

“Yes,” I say. I can still hear the rustling, but it’s my hair.

“And that the ways in which people treat you are some of the events in your life?”

“*Si*, Socrates,” the girl-“I love you too”-friend says.

The barber is thinning my sideburns with the “shears-over-comb” technique.

“OK, well, don’t you think a person’s name is going to make a big difference in the way you treat them? It’s likely to be the first thing you learn about them, after all.”

“What about the way they look,” the girlfriend says, “and the way they talk and dress, and all those things.”

“Of course,” says the barber. Now he has put down his shears and comb and is removing the guard from his clippers. He carefully shaves the tips of my sideburns into diagonal slashes in order to make my cheekbones seem chiselled. “Of course, and if you unzEEP someone’s leg with a chainsaw, they’re not going to condone it like all, ‘Oh, but he’s called “Daisy.”’ But just imagine there was someone called—what’s your name, mate?”

He means the girlfriend and she tells him.

“—called Raymondetta who has a ferocious personality.”

“What am I to you—a volunteer from the audience who has a ferocious personality?”

“Bear with me. Then there’s your namesake. When *she* meets people, some of them would have met the ferocious Raymondetta, and be just a little wary of her.”

“So?” the girlfriend says.

“So, she might grow to fit their expectations, become a little fiercer than otherwise.”

He folds forward my right ear, and there is the slight smouldering tingle as the clippers touch the skin behind it.

“That might be true,” I say, “if people always did what people expected of them. But I think only about a third of people do that. And about another third react against it.”

“Anyway,” blurts my girlfriend, “maybe where *you* come from the first thing you learn about a person is his name. You don’t see people walking around *here* with a lusty handshake going ‘Hi! I’m Algernon, from Bury St. Edmunds!’”

“How do you find out then?” asks the barber.

“You slip it in at the end of a conversation, as if you’ve only just noticed. ‘Gosh, I’m Algernon, by the way.’”

“I guess the English think names are quite intimate facts.”

“Maybe we do.”

“So I guess I’m right about names,” says the barber.

“Maybe you are,” says the girlfriend.

“I’m Ryan, by the way,” says the barber.

We all laugh. “I guess I’ve been in England too long,” he says.

What a sinister character, all hypnotic buzzing and snips and chatting paranoid fever-dream. Luckily we are awash with will. Soon (dusting my neck clean of flakes and Candice’s thick teaful sighs) he says, “Your boyfriend’s right about people acting against what’s expected of them. Character traits flow from name to name, but they pass through so many filters, and are interrupted and deflected by so many other layers of networks, so the signals are utterly garbled when they arrive.”

“No, I think you were right about names,” I say, because he sounds so astonishingly brittle and sad. Sorrow and fragility in an Australian accent turns out to be unendurable exactly as I’d have guessed. Basically he has given me a conservative 3–2–1 fade with the top slightly tapered and then finger-styled to look “messy” like practically all men’s haircuts are nowadays. “Names do more than identify you,” I add.

“I guess it depends on the third third of people. You never said what they do.”

“We look very hard at people to work out what’s expected of us,” I say, “but we can’t figure it out.”

The barber makes an unusual face.

FROM THE OUTSIDE our little semi-detached is as tidy as a new haircut. I feel anxious but also perversely curious to see how the horror has intensified and spread inside. As we come into the hall, Palace snaps shut a tome with the taut air of one who has been at his pose for hours. He is sat on the stairs amongst stacks of unfamiliar books. “Ah! Where’ve you been?” Isn’t it obvious? “I’ve taken matters into my own hands with a lived *reductio ad absurdum*—spending, spending, spending, like a fiend with a death... wish... list—using the wrong tools for everything—ironed this shirt with a fried egg,” he says, with evident pride.

“Are those all infestation books?” Raymondetta asks, wide-eyed.

“Not at all. Been borrowing ultimately meaningless combinations of library books!”

“And has it helped matters,” I say. “Listen to them rustling Palace. What do you suppose to be compactified behind that door—the animals of Farthing Wood?”

“Patience,” he says, as his rucksack swallows books. “My behaviour is unresolvable to the bureaucrat’s eye. I intend to press this to the gouging stage.”

“Oh Palace.” It is clear from Raymondetta’s tone that she is fond of this sort of thing. “Let me see your philosopher’s ID! This shit you’re trying to pull is no *reductio*, it’s more just—overloading the system.”

“Sieve the plague for my credentials,” spits Palace, loading the last. “I have library books to return.”

“One’s connotation-rich as any arrogant scoop of pseudo-chaos from a deep and robust pattern *I’ve* seen,” I remark gently as he brushes by me. At the threshold, he wheels.

“Curse your cotton socks—I’ll kill you—why don’t you ever pay me any attention?”

“Hello? New haircut?”

“Why don’t you see if they’ll have this little fellow?” says Raymondetta, to distract and appease I think. “Ow!” A passport has snapped her finger, severing by the looks of things her fingerprint. “Jesus.”

“Look Pal, I’m sorry,” I say. “Is Candice home?” And he shuts the front door loudly.

NOMINALLY RAYMONDETTA AND I MATE, Raymondetta and Palace and Candice and I merely housemate, but we all four lie supposedly chastely in any of these configurations:

1. Palace & Candice
2. Palace & Raymondetta
3. Me & Raymondetta
4. Me & Candice
5. Candice & Raymondetta
6. Palace, Candice & Raymondetta
7. Me, Candice & Raymondetta
8. Palace, me, Candice & Raymondetta

and I'm sure I'm not the only one shaking like a leaf with the boho licentious swagger of it. But when Candice is slumped in my lap watching a DVD, the details are very dependant on Raymondetta's presence or dearth. Certain forms of accidental and apparently unnoticed grazes, such as the graze of my wrist's ulnar bone over Candice's breast, barely ever occur when Raymondetta is in the room. In this unimaginably delicate and fine-grained groping Candice always takes the lead. Candice and I dig horror films, which Raymondetta can't stand, so there are lots of times to subtly undulate.

The next pest person I ring has never heard of identification infestations. "The only funny stuff we deal with is ghosts," she says. "And we're more about the convincing them to pay rent."

"Bee's knees," I say. What if it means something different and alarming to them? "Hope we get a ghost." Trying to be friendly. "For your sake," I clarify, adding, "That's not a threat."

I call the number the landlord gave me. The pest person sounds old and out of breath.

"Yes, I can come and take a look at that," he says. "Is it just documents you'd keep yourselves, or are there also documents normally held by others?" I tell him I have no idea and he tells me he can be round in the morning.

Footsteps upstairs.

Candice is home after all. Candice, in her silk pyjamas still. Candice in her melt-down. Hands grab out like birds on leashes. Put out by wanderlust. Steadying herself on tea things. The very bags woven from a gazillion tresses of her own insistence and—*it's just fucking tea*. Candice always thinks tea will “make it all right” and of course when she thinks that, tea makes it worse. She tips me out a placebo poison, with a slightly shaky wrist. “Herehavesomejam.” How does she stay so *thin*? Candice has self-confidence issues. Candice has childhood sexual abuse issues. Candice has tissue issues, has to use a sponge when she sobs. When I extricate from her hugs too soon, she gives me the look Raymondetta gives when I come too soon.

Today Candice serves me tea more desperately and blankly than ever, as if the china and the tin are rich with the thoughts she lacks. Like muffins are little wise brains, oozing over the top of their confinement.

“Can this day get any worse,” she says. “Watch a DVD with me?”

“Look Candice. Will you stop siding with them.”

“What?”

“Oh nothing never mind. Let's not watch it in the sitting room. Let's watch it in your room.”

Candice is dating or sort-of-seeing a man named Gore, who is handsome, and owns a jazz club but only sort of ironically. I am no stunner *viz.* were taxonomy a brass instrument I'd be its grade eight exam parp parp parp so I wonder, since Candice could “go out for steak,” why does she “lurk at home for a veggie burger that doesn't belong to her”?

Sunday evening. A bathtub drifts up DVD darkness and Candice lays in my lap. Madame Golem's last legible instruction was “find something to obey,” but she keeps stuffing cigars down her skylight. Her Sunday roast. It slipped out like a newborn, lungfulls come up from the fatty white gold of the caul. Watch out Candice, Gore will catch you cuddling it, cooing it, catch it at its zombie frolics in the basted garden, and ask why you just stand there. Candice must be attracted to both of us, me and to Gore, but as separate projects. With Gore it's—how much can she dissemble, and tangle her hair with the hanging toenail of a god? With me it's—well—she's already revealed her decayed interior, she wants to

know whether It can have a love life too. I imagine there's also some rivalry with Raymondetta at the bottom of it. The glamorous Other Woman role to inhabit. The chance for Candice to merely lie about what she does, not who she is. Candice wriggles her skull the length of my crotch, like a terrible, shaggy, huge, hard, convex tongue. Candice always believes the worst about herself I'm pretty sure accurately.

Whenever I describe or think about Raymondetta's motives, I consciously adopt a positive attributional style, i.e. her nice behaviour is "dispositional," her nasty behaviour is "situational." *You accompanied me on my haircut expedition because you always ("stable") care ("internal") about how I look ("global—not just "how my hair looks"). But you didn't watch a DVD ("specific"—not just "spend time with me") because it so happens that tonight ("unstable") you have a lot of your work to do ("external").* Such an attributional style is apparently symptomatic of a healthy and enduring relationship. I would never for example cheat on Raymondetta with Candice. "He doesn't want us to cut through our chains," says the DVD. "He wants us to cut through our feet."

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WE ALL BRUSH OUR TEETH and we all go to sleep, but the infestation never sleeps, or brushes them. That night there is a civil rights coup in Palace's room. By morning the rules state that all police records in that precinct must undergo periodic euphemism and dithering enhancement—after four hundred years a murder will be recorded as "spot of bother" and participation in a gang rape as "I think he may have had problems dealing with authority." Unfairly, my youthful petrol bomb experiments are to be "right-sized" by a kind of inflation. The rationale *here* is that the seriousness of old crimes is being obscured by the inhabited world's increasing size and interconnectedness—murder once *meant* something, express victim as proportion of the world population and it becomes obvious. As for rape, the freedoms violated of yore were not the thin consumerist illusions they crank out these days. I have a queasy breakfast looking over a report on my misdemeanour.

Its altar piece is a ginormous fold-out diagram of me scowling through a bandanna of coarse stubble, my chest crossed out by thick

ropes of spare ammo and my chef's hat rendered useless with bullet-holes and blood spatters. Lines decorated with flames connect explanatory side-bars also decorated with flames to parts of the diagram such as the lungs, where the official story is that I don't breathe, only exhibit "a pattern of alternating 'bloating' and 'withering' behaviours." My privacy is both "illusory" and "a parasite," explains a side-bar stemming from my crotch. I am at my most social in private, because there I act by the usual public codex, and with the fewest disruptions from my bestial self-interest. It is unclear from the box of fire whether the observation applies to everyone, just me, or a sort of mixture. As I watch, the diagram squirms, one eye lazifying, and the chef's hat rising a few millimetres, like a mushroom cloud. Spookily changing diagrams are par for the course. The decorative flames are animated now. Vivid paper is everywhere. You have to scuff it out of the way like Autumn. Shine is everywhere, genomes are everywhere, and so are faceful pendants and brooches. Palace is nowhere to be found. The suspect creaks and groans which even normal houses make at night are now layering into a kind of pervasive, maddeningly arrhythmic percussive music. The doorbell screeches. It's not Palace. It's—

"Bernard. Morning."

He is small and white-haired, with a slight bustle to him. All qualities I approve of in an exterminator. "Come in," I say, gesturing with my emptied cereal bowl. "We're wading throughout. The sitting room is the worst. We're all creeped out to our teeth, to be honest. Everything I do or might do—"

"Och, international authorities would like to cremate people in an order different to that in which they die. You've got to choose your battles."

"Well," I joke, "I am so lovely, any state which holds information about *me* melts and becomes a liberal welfare democracy."

Bernard wears a look of tolerance. I am embarrassed about what he may be about to read. Candice, for example, had a fucked-up childhood. So did Raymondetta. So who cares? There is no point in childhood one-upchildship. Childhoods don't exist, all that exist are their aftermaths.

I flinch—a seven-legged origami license spider has scuttled up to me. It seems to think better of it and runs away into the kitchen.

“Few years back,” Bernard tells me, as I try to lead him to the sitting room, “Son My, totally overrun with lobsters. Couldn’t tell who was a lobster and who was just pretending for a dare. I had to boil the whole village.”

“Walk a mile in the lobster’s shoes!” I say. “You are a hired killer,” also slips out. I leave him to his business. I call in sick. “I—”

“I know,” my line manager sneers—sneers. “Pulling a sickie so’s you can keep an eye on the pest person. When do you think you’ll stop lying to us?”

“Er, probably by tomorrow.”

“Why not set Bernard on your illusory tummy bug? Since you and him are so *friendly*?”

Jesus.

Footsteps upstairs. Candice has also skived work, to attend her kitty trial. We accept she eats no bread. Loo roll is the second item. You know the score—tissue comes free with a melodramatic puff of smoke. You plunge and swab with some idea of how much material there will be and how dark, but there’s always the chance you will be taken aback. Candice holds documents which claim that her motions leave no trace on her arse, and what’s more, are spherical, like in medieval marginalia—spherical, like in medieval marginalia.

“But—not a penny in the kitty! Nothing but the mysterious oil!” I paw papers, finding only speculative low-downs. If Candice went deaf, she would not learn to lip read, but a sort of complicated Mouth Braille, it says here, kissing everyone and guilt-tripping them to mumble into her so-called “Mouthrophone.” If Raymondetta were given two hamsters she’d call them Jazz and Spazz—but if they were gerbils, Spick and Span. Has Raymondetta gone to work, I wonder. But where is the bit about milk? I have a distant cousin who wears a tongue where other men wear beards. There is a chance my child will develop a forked tongue on his or her upper lip. Palace is mixed up in heavy stuff—ontology if we’re lucky. Where is the bit about butter?

Bernard’s head waxes round the corner.

“Just getting something from the van. Identification is unlike most infestations, you see, the structural damage always comes first.”

“Its focus seems to have shifted to extrapolation and prediction

now," I say.

"Oh, aye?" he says vaguely, eyeing up the trial. "Well. Back in a minute."

I have confidence in him. Things are looking rosier. Candice has pleaded "not guilty" in a dream about something else but is being held to it. I have documents which prove "she always *does* that!". "How can we rely on this evidence, even as we hire a man to destroy it?" she asks.

"We choose our superstitions, but we can't choose our suspicions," I reply.

We are laughing, it is more of a "fun" trial now.

"Says here Palace is shoohing his friend's trousers. Detailed account of his scheme to confuse the infestation and its incredible and obvious flaws and all his crimes and how he will pay dearly. About the shoohing—the friend just looks at him, not finding it funny."

Candice squirms. So do the patterns of evidence—it's like trying to slash a crop circle into a flock of panicked sheep. My hands race around her waist and neck, she squirms and miaows, and Raymondetta stands there, staring.

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YES, OK—Candice likes me, and I am tickling her. And Candice has done everything in her power to get me into bed, including lubing the dog-ear of her coverlet. But I alone recognise my mating dance—it is to rear up a bewildering labyrinth of topics, motives and motifs, then to stargate my conversation throughout it hectically and with untrace-worthy pattern, and it was developed as a teenage "110 wpm, multiple windows" net chat fanatic brooding steadfastly to giddy bebop, so the few women who have kissed me or slept with me have always done so as a sort of, clarification or "shut up"—and I have not danced it for Candice.

Raymondetta's lively eyes, like garnet vimana dwindling into a supernova. Her hands held like an exploded prayer. "I cannot speak to you right now," she says, "I am so angry." Evidently she has found some spurious file saying I want to gently lick Candice enough to guarantee she sneezes bread sauce. I confront her. "No. Only your record with the

kitty—the hypocrisy. To *guarantee* it?”

“Rule by hippos?” I feign weakly. “I love you—”

“Find me the f-f-f-file. I’m *leaving*.”

Candice looks frightened. Raymondetta won’t look back. Palace is still AWOL and so is all the credit for anything estimable. The trial is lurching unbidden, *juramentum*, back to life, I let it. Let the bitch take her chances, I *knew* the infestation would put strain on relationships in the house. In the films Candice and I watch, the victims often spend a lot of their little time in whining, bickering, and a nasal fine-graining of dread best described as “complaining.” A common charge levelled against individual horror films by *faux* aficionados of horror is that the people in them (who are being hunted, imprisoned, dismembered, etc.) are not “likeable.” Of course they are not, they are cheap bloodsoaked stereotypes stuck in cheap twilit melodrama. But the consequences are essential to the horror. The consequences are the insidious degradation of the human condition, the individual human exposed as a faint and whickering butcher without integrity or resource, without capacity for pleasure except perhaps in the illusory circumstance of “perfect safety.” The horror of a good horror film—and the way I see it, the less likeable the victims, the greater the film—lies less in its evil than in the mundane spine-free calisthenics of those who experience its evil. It’s time to fight fire with fire.

Even before I open the sitting room door I feel the furnace behind it.

The flamethrower is reflected in Bernard’s goggles.

“Stop!” I shout over the roar. “I need to find the file of my love for Raymondetta!”

He cocks his head, then expressively plays his inferno fin over another heap. It combusts like a bee hive.

“No!”

Thumb-sized lumps of flame scatter and drift like obese sparks. “With so many facts being established,” Bernard bellows, his voice distorted by his mask, “things don’t necessarily get better or worse, just less predictable!”

“Facts in this universe are established on a competitive tender basis! This government will never privatise ontology, but the private sector has a role to play in the meaning of meaning! Palace is mixed up in this!

My housemate Palace. Until we know his stake, we can't destroy this identification!"

"This isn't the identification itself!" he says. "It's spread farther than that! Something's been spewing it out—this is but the shadowy thrum and flux of its distant existence! The facts of your life and the facts about them—there's a code you won't be cracking soon! Watch me birth seven times seventy new suns."

"I'll lead my love from Hell! I want the wants I want, not the wants I don't want! *Christ! Belay!*"

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I WONDER IF THE FLAMES fan the flames, certainly, vats of flayed legislation chimps suffer bravely, and *that* wasn't happening before. I feel I will never notice my death encroach or take place, simply find myself one day quibbling with my obituarist. Phoenixes detonate, the walls phase out, and sections of the kitchen drift through the sitting room. Every right to. The main structural supports seem to be a fog of phlogiston jealousy corporate expectancies of and for my life. Strobing lies dribble down Candice's chin into her cleavage. The trial nears its difficult conclusion. Stakeholders swarm. Candice screams and begs. Her sounds become childlike then animal. I refuse to look at her, but am partly hidden in a cottage of coffee house loyalty cards, so Raymondetta's view of my asbestos indifference is obscured. I don't realise until it is almost over that I could comfort Candice with my eyes and Raymondetta would have been none the wiser. Candice's eyes vacate and her body sears. My heart pokes from my breast, to see for itself.

As for Raymondetta... this is interesting. My memories of my feelings are like the defunct address of a temporary employee (try it: jonathan.stevenson@idea.gov.uk). So recently "we" had been the basic unit of befalling. Emptinesses clash within me with a richness usually reserved for matter.

Candice pleaded and caterwauled as she was disembowelled with wooden stakes, both signs of broadly unimaginable fear, a tiny part of which I might have shared or attempted to share, which opportunity I missed, because I was so concerned to ameliorate Raymondetta's

spiteful and shrewish and unsubstantiated sexual jealousy. Raymondetta didn't even notice my haircut and she was *there* the whole time. Yet Raymondetta too has a tube of leopard in the centre of her, the way she moves, she too has hair, and eyes, and manners. So the whole issue's thorny—fair to say, a colossal contraption of Christ-crown-cogs locking Christ-crown-cogs.

“Turn on all the taps,” Raymondetta pants, and moves upstairs. Sacs of doughy webcam squeeze from the showerheads. Bulbs of satellite pus into the sink. I grow so angry with her I take a pot from the rack and put my face in it, and grimace into the pot.

Candice is dead. I suppose I'm in shock.

I ask Bernard, “just hypothetically, if the other girl were to get mixed up in the extermination as well...”

“Fuck off,” he says, ceasing to incinerate things almost at random and giving to me his total attention. He pulls up his mask. “Don't say these words to me. I've already lost one lass today.”

“I'm sorry,” I say immediately. “But without such speculative, uh...”

“Och, shut it, I know, I know.”

20769522250

BERNARD AND I move the sofa and discover a wheezing, velveteen corporation, shoebox-sized, pitted and fungal. “You've done it!” shrieks Bernard (the exterminator). “This critter has been broadcasting!”

I give Raymondetta (the ex-girlfriend) two gerbils and two hamsters. Bernard does not think that my haircut suits me.

“If we destroy this (the corporation), will they stop knowing about us?”

Jazz and Span have died. My ex-girlfriend (Raymondetta: who has lost her job, plus there is civil action in the works, but also a possible mini-series, “Raymondetta and the Racist Vendetta”) buries them with their tiny ID cards posed on their breasts.

The exterminator (Bernard: before he popped the question, he would try on his wife Jacqui's engagement ring, all kinds of furtive tilting to admire that tiny jewel's wet cheek) shakes his head. “Way I see it, it's already sold them all the data of your future. No harm in killing a living

thing, though.”

“The data of our future?” I (who have *oæwūnæ*, *iæsn*, *umba* neying sizzle swiz cho flokkle crosty shree je zie obtund suo spuff frangia mromykombomitsch jerm zam acriflapponious yawhoe asprari grump haduoøær ka bij yammy d’djinni) say. “Can’t we live differently? Don’t we pitch our own destiny tents?”

I (who have also lost my job: too much illness and lying to everyone and yawhoe asprari grump haduoøær) move around, ferreting for the file but caring little whether I die or live. Bent worthies blab homage as a NUPPK crossbow tries to launch pig blood at them, astonishing failures on both sides. Vestigial MPs shriek and wither. At first I think their stench is suffocating me, then the twin cameras of an aunts-caked CCTV-bolas come nosing from my nose, disposed to unite in their concern for me. Wading through a bonfire of self-valorising value, street-maps on which my habitual routes are slashed and seeping like arteries, biometrics put more innocently than they actually are and fruitlessly detoured wanklogs, I keep an open mind—wonder, is *good* it has come out of my nose and is forming a ring? “Love you,” I mumble and a muscular DBAR yak comes frothing through its cocoon—I try not to read too much into it. Luckily still blinded with globby strips of serial number it bucks and skids over the observation deck. So a kangaroo shaped like a bun notes it on her little pad. Or seems to—a cover for lunging for my nose ring. I twist away, wanting shot of this. “Love you,” I mumble.

I’m sweltering, I seek to remove my shirt but it is a tattoo. Amid twitching implants and summarised correspondence, it seems the barber (Ryan: a New Zealander) could only endure cutting my hair by pretending he was a pirate looking for treasure or that the hair was a loom of nerves and I was screaming. But he found our discussion “thought-provoking.” I hand over to the police (who are clinically proven to give a damn about my pecs) four seconds of house phantasmagoria, claiming that I found them hidden in his shop under a midden of human hair. They agree that all that hair is creepy “in a serial killer” kind of way.

“Well, there are schools of thought,” says the exterminator (Bernard: who collects model cottages), “why not attend one you prick.”

With my cop reward I call Domino’s and order my favourite pizza (Revenge) because it is my favourite, it has always been my favourite,

and if it is still hot when it arrives you get your money back.

“Bernie, a domino who picks among the fallen, shaking them, all futile pleas and disbelief, needs no reminder,” I tell the exterminator (Bernard: a member of `NGGH` and `SPCWRLD`, for starters). “About the tents, I was kidding.”

“See you were. See you were.” Embers drift across `FDDR` and `MKGRAF` data, they glean, gleam, repeat. “Chin up, boyo. Sorry about your haircut, your job, your loss. If she liked the books she liked, she would have liked the books she would have liked. Her... information... in the corporate ether...well we might... *revive* her...”

`PAW` logs hate and coruscate. Huh? Um. What?

“Candice is... she’s *backed up*?” Now a `SNN` graph floats up through the floor and perches on the jamb. “She’s really out there? In all this information? I’ve heard there are ghosts. How can we—”

But `HAG` predictions only hatch, deeper with each generation. “We could revive her from her consumer preferences, if our hearts could break into a finer foam than this. Och, it’s religious language, just to make you feel better boyo. Means exactly nothing.” Consistency zap hats are blotting up acres of Internet usage, even though the exterminator (Bernard: who was only last night shat on by the same rent boy who two nights ago shat on the Hon. Elvis Pinfield, though that way of putting it utterly travesties and cheapens the experience) has sent it all smouldering like a forge. The fringe encroaches. He pulls his mask down again. His visage ripples through the heat. “Communing with the dead,” he says, muffled. “With the *dead*. The message is the medium.”

I grab two files seconds before Bernard blasts their pile. `Bernardxa7-h7` (!?) & `Bernardxe1/Q` (!!). At the door a cowled sting turtle nervously offers to buy all my “narcotics... drugs I mean... illegal drugs.” I bound over her shell-mounted siren and struggle up the stairs, avoiding the banister, which seems to be conducting iris image nectar safely into the universal sob-recognition sub-system. The blue file. The first parts are badly charred, but by the middle I can make out large bold headings like `MEANING`, `TRUTH`, `COHERENCE`, `BEING`, `CONSEQUENCE`, `OBJECTS` and `IDENTITY`, so I discard it.

I make it to the attic, shut the door.

The purple file.

The subtitle is, “The Raymondetta Caravel Love Report.”
The title is, “LET ME COUNT THE WAYS.”

42115681870

BLISS! I *do* love Raymondetta, the report asserts, and proceeds to circumscribe that love! What sung jargon, what a margin of redemption! What a shepherdess is this, upon her soft moss!

First come the methodological points. To fancy Raymondetta, it presupposes, is neither necessary nor sufficient to love her. However, fancying and loving her are so commingled that it would be impossible to hive away each for separate study.

Citing like mad, the report downplays the evidentiary import of my directly observable macro-behaviour. It looks in detail at two cases, when I spat an emoticon pip into her Pepsi plop! (2007) and my attempt to have her assassinated by a pest control agency (2009), and argues how each case could count either in favour of, or against, my love. My love can only be established, it concludes, through the objective study of subjective facts.

These facts are to be discussed under three heads: inappropriate insistence modalities, inappropriate mirth modalities, and a compulsive re-framing reflex.

1. *inappropriate insistence modalities*

Here are numerous moments, meticulously detailed, whereat I've thought to myself, “[no but] I love you/her [so much]!” with Raymondetta in mind (*l'ennui du lac* defining “Raymondetta in mind,” stony-faced I skim).

First the chapter examines how these words operate when I say them out loud. I ardently say “I love you” to convince Raymondetta that it is true, to find out whether or not it is true, and to make it true. I say it by reflex, with a microscopic jerk, in the conditions in which I have frequently said it (darkness, warmth and sleepiness partly comprise these. So do Raymondetta's cassiolette and the sight of her smile). When I am low, I say “I love you” because it tends to provoke her to say just the same, comforting me like any symmetrical behaviour comforts me, though with an added fragrance of cinnamony elitism. Often

when I am low, a grumpy “I *love* you” is shorthand for “Let me make it clear that I am not angry with *you* Raymondetta nor bored/repulsed by you; my somewhat cooler attitude towards *you* is symptomatic of my far cooler attitude towards Creation, thus it is comparative *warmth!* Aha!” “I love you” also rushes to my mouth as taboos do, so I have also bellowed it during sex with a baffled prostitute, Alicja.

An aside reminds the reader that this material has dealt with my *spoken* “I love you” and so in essence is supportive context.

The key point is this. When I *think* “[but] I love you/her [so much]!” I do so with the vehemence of the *contradicted*—even though nobody has actually claimed or suggested that I do not “love you/her [so much]!”. The chapter ends abruptly by chalking up this perverse and vehement insistence under the rubric of true love.

12472538045

THERE IS ONE TINY WINDOW up here. I peek down at the drop, but Gore is in the street, brawn bursting from his Domino’s costume like the brains of muffins, shaking a sword carved from a cricket bat and sobbing, “Murderer! Murderer! Murderer! Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!”. His motorcycle plays a track off Sun Ra’s *Space is the Place*. I settle back down, this time getting comfy.

An exploration of the appendices reveals that I also experience an “emphasis of besieged insistence” when I use pet names such as “darling” in phrases such as “Where are you going, darling?”—as though desirous of differentiating the pet name’s propositional content from those of practically perfect substitutes such as “sweetheart” and “dear.” The obvious homology between this experience and the inappropriate insistence of “[but] I love you/her [so much]!” is remarked, but the appendix is more interested in comparing it with the redundant jargon and false distinctions used in fear or petulance by some people to establish themselves as the “experts” of a contested field. In this case Raymondetta herself might constitute the relevant “field of expertise.” But I do not actually italicise out loud—it is only in my head that I accent “darling” with the implication that rank Raymondetta amateurs could have been tempted by a foolhardy “sweetheart”—and therefore

I could only be cozening myself! Anyway, this is not exactly a “love” behaviour, though surely closely related to one.

Returning to the body of the report I find:

2. *inappropriate mirth modalities*

I laugh—or feel like laughing—or feel like I do when I laugh or have just laughed—when I observe certain behaviours in Raymondetta, but *not* when I observe the same behaviours in others (here I give a reductive simplification of the report’s apparently far more sophisticated comparative procedure which deletes, insofar as it is possible without begging the question, those differences between the behaviours belonging to Raymondetta and to others which it is reasonable to assume are unconnected with my love for Raymondetta). For example, the look of existential surprise often following one of her sneezes gives me mirth. The sneeze could not have taken her *entirely* unawares! But one of my work colleagues towards whom I am relatively affectionate and flirtatious adopts the same expression and on her it rouses me to nothing more than mild pique and resentment.

My heart shakes as I read other examples of her little foibles.

According to the report I find comical content in—or, to be exact, I “take glee” from—the distorted and absurd character of my knowledge of Raymondetta in comparison with my knowledge of everything else. My glee is “good-natured” in that it is partly “at my own expense” that I laugh—or feel like laughing—or feel like I do when I laugh or have just laughed. I privately consider myself to have entered the role of the ridiculous and farcical enthusiast or trainspotter or oddball in my epistemological dealings with Raymondetta, in that am I sitting on a heap of “useless” information about her (including a good deal of *savoir faire*) *grinning* as though I am *the only one* who has realised that all this “great stuff” exists, even though on a rational level I know my stash is unenviable and that there are many like it. Part of what I find amusing about this scintillating heap of absurd and disproportional knowledge on which I sit is the very fact that I enjoy sitting on it (and am thus one of those “perverse” oddballs or “happy morons”), so my glee feeds vainly off itself.

There is a paragraph which argues that my glee is also a kind of “joyful gloating” initiated by Raymondetta’s seeming “cute” to me when

she does ordinary and objectively uninteresting things. This paragraph seems somewhat at odds with the rest of the chapter, and I wonder if it is a chance survivor of an earlier draft, or even text lazily lifted from an entirely different report because it sort of fits in. The font could even be a little different!—but it’s hard to tell. And in the end it is really only this sore thumb which I can hold onto. The rest of the chapter—something about laughter?—slips away as overly qualified and subtle things tend to slip, in infested and besieged homes, swept by all-withering blazing

3. *compulsive re-framing reflex*

The third pillar of my love might as well have been inscribed “pleasurable chest pains,” since the chapter is mainly devoted to a relentless phenomenology of a “soaring” feeling which I usually locate in my throat and chest, triggered mainly by views of Raymondetta supine, and particularly by the small motions of her hands and face in her sleep. Sometimes my face also feels flushed. During severe episodes, this sensation persists long enough to take on a fragmentary volitional content, which could be represented by the phrase “There *must* be a way...”. In other words, I experience the sensation of “renewed vigour in tackling a problem,” like a big cat momentarily forgetting the cage in favour of the jungle, prowling the circumference of a cent, slumping, sleeping. However there is no distinct “problem” and no prior experience of a struggle suspended or options exhausted. There is simply a feeling that I should take *something* to bits and look at it anew. Although there is overlap with the “inappropriate insistence modalities” chapter, separate discussion is warranted by this unfulfillable disposition to paradigm-shift, which then lifts, leaving a bittersweet residue. And apart from a few appendices, that’s the end of the report. Are those *footsteps* downstairs?

65470257780

“I DON’T KNOW if I should show this to you,” I say. Then I add—as gallantly as I can but without bothering to hide my sadness—“or gut-shoot you so badly, cops won’t bother with a chalk outline, just colour you in. People could throw pennies, who knows.”

Raymondetta sighs and shuffles over, and sits down, hugging her

knees. A piece of ash falls into my lap when she puts her head on my shoulder.

It can't be very comfortable. I sort of put my arm around her. "I can't believe she's dead," she says blankly. "Palace is missing. He did this. I found a file that explains it. He—Candice is dead because of him."

"I found a file that says I love you. But it's not as good as you think."

She lifts a partly charred blue file.

"It was on the stairs," she says. Then she laughs. "Palace wants to know about something being the same as itself. Analytic philosophers don't think the history and culture and politics of a concept's name is enough. They crave its essence. They empty themselves of its name's incidental associations, like the association of prestige when they seek CONSEQUENCE, like 'causeways' and 'caustic' when they seek CAUSE. But Palace thinks a background radiation remains in you. That you can never rid yourself of it, that you mistake its f-f-faint signals for breakthroughs."

"Well, duh," I say. Threads of smoke and smoulder whip under the door. I hug her closer. We swap files.

"But he thought he could do the opposite! Cram his life with the incidental associations. He wanted to know—"

"Identity," I say. "He wants to know what identity is."

She looks over my cheek, then shrugs and blackens her lips on it. "Yeah. A rose is a rose is a rose too. This may be a lived *reductio* after all. And Bernard is a friend of the landlord. Insurance, vengeance, insurgence. Something. The identity of indiscernibles. Hesperus is Phosphorus. I had to springboard off a snarling turtle to get up here. Poor thing came out all sides, like an upturned plate of spaghetti. Now tell me if you love me."

You seem to be tiring again, after your little philosophical burst. I love you so much. Your living eyes are as vacant as her dead ones. Candice's soul was confiscated and lost. Two badgers, you would have called them Glitch and Glock. Candice was a witch, segueing into airborne soot without notice was always going to happen. Candice was a slut. Candice didn't put enough money in the kitty, so why should I? Candice—

"I love you," I say. I open the file on her knees. Gore's mantra is still faintly audible. "Ray, I love you, I love you. Er, mostly subjective facts,

but also certain behaviours, such as hardening onto your hot ember buttock...”

“I feel so grateful that you love me, I’m this unlovable little lump. Never mind, it doesn’t matter. You are so sweet and good, sooty boy, nobody could fancy me but I’m so glad you pretended. Will we die now? Don’t answer if you don’t want to. Oh! I’m talking nonsense! Shall we play a game?”

I find a barcode and begin to comb Raymondetta’s hair with it. Raymondetta has soft brown hair, soft brown eyes. Not a lot of people know that. *Kiss From A Roach*. Missed that trick. Now she’s dead.

“When you opened the door and came in,” I say, “I think it wasn’t as hot as before. Maybe it’s dying out.”

“Do fires do that? Die out by themselves?”

“Some, maybe.”

“Stupid old fires.”

“That hairdresser fancied you,” I say eventually. “That was in his file. It said he normally just pretends he is a puppeteer dealing with thousands of wrongly attached strings, utterly useless. But with us he pretended he was excavating or torturing me and that you are his wife.”

“He’s dead too,” she murmurs. “And Candice is dead.”

“That fucking horrible sentence,” I say. “Walled up, till she sucks the down off a reeve.”

“That’s what they wanted to do to her? Immured. Reeves. It’s better she burned. I think I read that somewhere. I hope you were with her when she died, Pontius. I think I read that somewhere too.”

I think better of mentioning that she was disembowelled then beheaded or the funny thing she said about could the day get any worse. Instead I tell Raymondetta, “I was with Candice when she died.”

Below us, pew-bound NAMFA debates are split, screaming, on the wide wookie-winkie of a terror keyword probe—but not as badly as before. Barks peel off the bitten path—everything points to Tuesday’s compulsory wiretap-dancing, its wounds blooming hake syrup, ours closing like brimming, accepting eyes.

Um. Er.

But we squeeze each other. It feels safe. I won’t mind, if Raymondetta reads the f-f-file. The giant golden eagle of its analysis grapples the loping

prehistoric hominid of our love, but the claws do not quite lock on her skull, they are not quite the right shape for it, and she runs on, panicked, on a verdant and ancient plane, towards a forest-thick horizon, grooves in her bone, pigtails of blood streaming behind.

“I saw it all happen,” I say. “I watched *everything*.”

Um.

SOURCES

‘Towards Are Great!’ was inspired by the Taung Child Load Limerick competition run in the mini-AIR newsletter (improbable.com/archives/mini-air/mini-top.html). Tim Button supplied Palace’s views on dinosaurs. Pontius thinks he thinks some lines from Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. The final part of 07764640458 was drawn from e.g. Bernard Weiner, *Judgments of Responsibility: A Foundation for a Theory of Social Conduct*.

Author Info

Lorqi Blinx is a shell set up by Buckerton & Rider GmbH to dispose of assets at premium the discount brands.

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