

## The Seagull



At the Gala to End Sexual Assault, which was to benefit a non-profit founded by an actress who starred in a TV show that sensationalized sexual assault, and which was held in a museum of dead animals who had been shot and killed by men who were by now themselves quite dead, I found myself feeling a little—how to say it—*agitated*.

It wasn't as if I had a problem with a thirty-thousand-dollar-a-table fundraiser that showcased women as objects while claiming that women were in fact *not* objects. It wasn't as if I had a problem with a woman attending said gala wearing four-inch heels that thrust out her ass and cost more than the median weekly income for a family of four. After all, even if she was wearing fuck-me heels, it wasn't as if she were literally saying *fuck me*, maybe only *fuck me with my clear vocalized consent*. It was just that it disturbed me how quickly feminism had been absorbed by the things it was trying to fight. I found myself longing for the days when the terms of the war had been absolute and unforgiving, when feminism hadn't reclaimed sex and all its accessories: high heels, short skirts, lace. Who really cared about being femme? It took such *effort*. I was so bad at it. I couldn't play the part.

For instance, at that moment, I was wearing a gown constructed entirely from two pieces of chiffon. Somehow, in the privacy of my bedroom, I'd thought it best not to wear a bra, the better to dramatize my cleavage, but now, surrounded by TV actresses, I saw that this was wrong. Breasts were not the point of the night. The point of the night was *noblesse oblige*, and

somehow my boobs were the opposite of *noblesse oblige*; while high heels were fine, nipples were not.

But what could I do? At least the coterie of dead elephants didn't seem to mind. I took a flute of pink champagne and drifted along the edge of the party, and then suddenly the most gorgeous man alive was before me saying, "Hello, I'm Andre."

There's no way this man doesn't make money with his face, I thought as I shook his hand.

Surveying the taxidermy, he said, "So inspiring to be around so many brilliant people, don't you think? We're like a city on a hill."

"Manhattan is actually almost totally flat," I told him.

He looked at me expressionlessly. "I'm from Los Angeles," he announced, as if that weren't completely obvious. "Are you a writer?"

I nodded. "How could you tell?" But he got so excited he didn't hear me.

"I'm a writer," he said. "I'm working on my first novel. It's kind of like a noir crossed with Faulkner. You know, people don't realize it, but *Absalom Absalom*? That's total noir."

"Totally," I agreed.

"But to be honest," he leaned close, speaking conspiratorially, "I think about movies more with my novel. Like, *Rear Window*? I think about that movie a lot. This building, where I live, it's like a big glass skyscraper. It's like total *Rear Window*. There was even this suicide there once, and I was like, oh my God. I have to put that in my novel."

"Wait, really? Like, for real there was a suicide?"

"For real." A beat as we both considered suicide. "So what do you write about?" he asked.

"Just like despair and stuff."

"Whoa, whoa." He closed his eyes and grooved.

"Also sometimes family stuff," I admitted.

"Yeah," he crowed. "So, I'm like Raymond Chandler and you're like David Sedaris."

A friend once told me that David Sedaris is pretty much the high-water mark of literature in Los Angeles: he's on the radio, which in LA is practically synonymous with books, since they both don't involve screens. "I don't think I really write like David Sedaris," I told him.

"Really? He's got a family."

“Yeah, well.”

I could think of no further counterargument. We had reached an impasse. Beyond Andre’s perfectly coifed hair, I could see a waiter circling with more pink champagne. I signaled. Andre brightened. “Ohhh. I bet you’re more like Chekhov, aren’t you?”

I snagged another drink. “Yeah, I’m like Chekhov. I actually get that a lot.”

“Yeah, yeah! I love Chekhov. That short story, *The Seagull*? It’s brilliant.”

“It’s a play,” I said. “*The Seagull* is a play.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. That’s what I meant. A play.”

I sipped my drink, and alcohol, which I mistook for affection, surged through me. Leaning close to Andre’s chiseled jaw, I murmured, “It’s supposed to have the most difficult line in theater to say. ‘I am a seagull.’ It’s a very solemn moment, but it’s also a little absurd.”

“Let’s do it.”

“What?”

“Let’s say the line. When does he say it? In a fight?”

“No, it’s a she, she’s just had this realization, she’s like this tragic figure—”

“I am a seagull.”

“Yeah, exactly, all along she’s been . . .” but Andre was looking at me significantly. “Oh,” I recovered, “Yeah, that was pretty good.”

“Now you do it.”

“Oh, no, I’m not an actor.”

“No, come on, I bet you’d be good at it. Say it. Say ‘I am a seagull,’” he lifted his eyes heavenward.

“I can’t.”

“Come on, do it.” He parted his lips. His dark eyes glowed. “Please.”

“I am a seagull.”

“Again,” he encouraged.

“I am a seagull?”

“Again.” His breathing grew ragged.

“I *am* a seagull!” I sang, my arms wide.

“Wow. You know,” he said. “You remind me of this girl I used to know. Actually I used to date her. She was like a really strong feminist.”

“Cool,” I said. “How could you tell I was a feminist?”

“Do you want to know something weird? This one time, I was having sex with her, and she was like, punch me. Punch me in the face.” He looked at me, wild eyed. “And I was like, I can’t.”

I was trying to think why *punch* was so much worse than *slap*.

“And she was like, punch me harder.”

“So you did punch her.” I wanted the facts.

“I’m a feminist,” he clarified. “But this girl, she was crazy. She kept saying, punch me harder. She was a really strong, independent woman. What do you think about that?”

“What do I think about that?” I closed my eyes. I saw glass buildings, windows, movie screens. Finally I said, “I think being a woman is insane.”

Andre nodded urgently and with great compassion in his dark, velvety eyes. “I know,” he said. `

Then he disappeared. I didn’t see him for the rest of the night. It was too bad. I couldn’t tell him what I’d learned from my phone: that before Nina says she’s a seagull, she says, I ought to have been killed. She says, I’m a seagull. No, that’s not it. I’m an actress.

I was surrounded by actresses who played pretty murdered girls on TV. Nina says, I didn’t know what to do with my hands, I didn’t know how to stand on the stage. You can’t imagine how it feels to know you are acting badly.

[clear-line]

**Kyle McCarthy’s** short story “Ancient Rome,” first published in issue 62 of *American Short Fiction*, will appear in this year’s *Best American Short Stories*. Her work has also appeared in the *Harvard Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Electric Literature*, and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. A graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she lives in Brooklyn, New York.