

Potato Queen by Rafaelito V. Sy

July 20, 1990, Friday, was the first time I had been on a date with anyone. I don't remember now what I expected, if I anticipated our conversation to flow, if I worried about what Gerald thought of my haircut, or if he'd get a laugh should I confess that I had planned meeting him at his doorstep. The last I didn't dare blurt out. I liked being perceived of as the pursued rather than the pursuer.

We had Italian food on Union Street a couple of blocks down from Lombard. An uneventful meal. Oh, I learned more about Gerald — his mother was a ballet teacher in Philadelphia, his father a British businessman whose London-based cement factory went bankrupt; he was starting anew in America when they met; they divorced when Gerald was sixteen; neither one remarried and Gerald would only see his father six times in the next nine years, all for month-long summer visits to Connecticut, where his father still lives. I thought it odd that Gerald didn't ask me the typical family questions that I did him. He would just give me a tipsy smile. I had to volunteer information about myself — where I went to college, where I grew up. Nothing personal like previous relationships. After a bit I stopped because I didn't want to come across as someone who enjoys talking about himself. One thing I picked up from American TV talk shows was that Jackie Kennedy charmed guests to the White House by posing questions that got them speaking about their own interests. That's what I tried with Gerald. Whether this charmed him or not, I can't say. Not once did he expand on an answer.

“Did you play any sports in college?”

“Swimming and tennis.”

“I swam when I was a kid and played tennis in high school. Badminton, too.”

No comment.

“What do you usually do on weekends?” I asked.

“Hang out with Rowell once in a while. Go clubbing with some friends.”

“The Castro?”

He nodded.

We were silent. A small party of men entered and occupied a table behind Gerald. I recognized them from my walks in the Castro. They dressed as if they were headed to a club after this — unbuttoned lumberjack shirts with sleeves torn off, jeans tight at the butt, Timberland boots. Save for their hair color that ranged from blonde to red to brown, their square jaws and chests protruding through stretched Ts could have marked them as siblings, though I doubt a family in the world exists that can boast a collection of gloriously built progenies. Someone’s got to carry the ugly gene for the sake of yin and yang.

I quickly glanced back at Gerald, but he noticed that my attention had been diverted to what was behind him. He turned to look. Two of them looked back. They might have recognized either one of us from the Castro, as well, or they might simply have sensed that more of their kind was around. Perhaps they found Gerald cute. In any case, the acknowledgment didn’t go further than a glance. It never does.

“You been to the N-Touch?” I said.

“Yeah. That’s where I met my first boyfriend.”

This was finally getting interesting. I sat still. I might have been too still because he said, “We were together for nearly a year. It wasn’t a good relationship. Not worth talking about.”

“A year’s a long time,” I said.

“Yeah.”

And that was that.

At Gerald’s place, we sat on the edge of his bed and watched David Letterman on TV. I wasn’t listening to what jokes Letterman was cracking. Neither was Gerald, I

could tell. We were both sitting too stiffly. Our eyes were too focused on the screen. We were clearly sharing the same thought: Who'd make the first move and what would that first move be? I figured during commercial break that it was Gerald's call. He was the one who had invited me to dinner and it was his bed we were on. So he took my hand and I responded by tightening my fingers around his. We kissed then reclined quickly until we were lying down. He turned off the table lamp. I took off my clothes. The TV stayed on, providing us light to see what we were getting ourselves into.

"Appendicitis," I said of a scar on my waist. It glowed under the TV flare like a leech.

Gerald touched it, first curiously and then caressingly, gazed at it as one would a beauty mole. I tried to cover it with my hand. He pulled my hand away. "It's okay," he said and kissed my scar.

For the first time in my life I dismissed as stupid the moments I had fretted removing my shirt at beaches and locker rooms and video booths. I tucked in my stomach, straightened my shoulders, and juttied out my chest, tried to appear as confident and flawless as I could. Gerald slipped off his shirt and his boxers while I, my briefs. I got on top of him to feel his fuzzy chest against my hairless one, to savor the softness of his stomach cushion the weight of my body.

"I have a poochy belly," he said.

"No," I said. I slowly slid my head down his torso to his navel.

"You keep going lower and lower," he chuckled.

The chemistry between us couldn't have been better. Whatever inhibitions existed between us quickly crumbled; our movements were instinctive rather than deliberate. And yet...