

HER MOUTH DELETING KISSES

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Gabrielle rolls up her ramp and hears the phone as she turns her condo key. Damn. She's got groceries on her lap and her briefcase under one arm. Even as her chair zooms into the kitchen she hooks the cord with the corner of her notebook. She's sure she recognizes the ring. It's Manitoba Mennonite—Manny for short. Manny has an aunt in Calgary she visits four times a year. Several months ago, she fell into Gabrielle's lap when the C-Train curved around Riley Park. "May as well stay here," Gabrielle advised, "lots more curves up ahead." And Manny did. She phones from Winnipeg whenever Gabrielle isn't home and leaves her voice as a clue, but is never there to pick up when Gabrielle calls back. Gabrielle doesn't leave a message. She hasn't figured out yet if she's irritated or intrigued. Both, obviously, but which one the most?

Tonight, catching the call just before Manny gives up, Gabrielle sighs into the receiver. She exhales her day into Manny's eager ears.

"Tonight," Manny breathes back, "I'm going to DO YOU on the telephone." Manny's making a phone-sex booty-call because, "long-distance loving is sexy," she broadcasts, even though Manny has yet to stub even one big toe into Gabrielle's actual bedroom. That first day, they got off the C-Train at Motel Village and plunged into a rent-a-bed, stroking and kissing and licking and humming against each other's throats and breasts and bellies. Manny didn't even wait for Gabrielle to brake properly, just tipped the two of them towards the bed where they both pulled off shirts, scabbled under the covers, and moaned kisses onto each other's lips. Hearing Manny's breath over the line gives Gabrielle the shivers, like a voice from the radio has kissed the back of her neck. She pours herself a glass of red, turns off her chair's power, and transfers to her manual chair. Two minutes later, she leans back, cradles the phone against her forehead.

"Say it again," Gabrielle instructs Manny. Yes. Phone sex is exciting, phone sex is grand. Phone sex is an across-the-prairies promise and Mennonites always keep their promises, right? Manny's only been back to Alberta twice since that first stumble, each visit arrowing towards that same motel room, the same frantic grabbings.

"What time is it there?" Manny asks, and Gabrielle giggles. First phone call she made, Manny's message said it was 6:11 p.m. in Winnipeg, so it must be about 5:26 in Calgary, she'd call back in an hour. Gabrielle got home at 7:00, sat by an unringing telephone for half an hour, the radio beside her bed blinking 7:29, 7:32, 7:38. Gabrielle finally turned the radio to face the wall, its eerie lights projecting a tiny glow onto the bed's headboard. Turning the radio worked like a charm, Manny called within seconds, low voice rumbling into Gabrielle's body. "What time is it there?" is now sex code, and Gabrielle's all for infusing the commonplace with double-entendre.

"My clock radio's in the bedroom, want me to go check?" she asks. "Or I could grab some paint from my studio and stroke blazing magenta onto my nipples?" Manny usually likes to hear about Gabrielle's art projects, but naked breasts aren't enough for today. "Or would you prefer me permanently parked in the middle of the living room, my clothes scattered in a circle around the chair—nude condescending towards hallway?" Nothing like some good old-fashioned arty porn-talk.

Except: Manny blows it by forcing fantasy into the mix. Manny moves conversation away from skin-stroking and toe-kissing to romantic scenery. Too bad, sex without being in the same room could have been so good for their relationship, could have been *great* for them, Gabrielle thinks. But then Manny blows it, or Gabrielle blows it, but because of Manny's fantasy.

"Not in your chair. Or even on a bed," Manny directs. "On the couch. No, delete that image. We're both lying on a bear's-skin rug in front of a roaring fire, in a cabin so remote we have to hike three hours from the closest campsite just to get there. We'll be *alone*." In a cabin, Manny can be a Mennonite *and* a lesbian. As long as the closet isn't located anywhere near a house or city or people. As long as the two of them are sequestered so deep in a fictional forest, no one hears them fall in love. Gabrielle sees a burst of yellow, Manny standing in front of her wearing an apron, with a greasy spatula in hand. Shit, forget the outdoor facilities, the pine-scented deck, Gabrielle wants to taste Manny's hair, smell her wrists, lean her forehead against Manny's sturdy collarbone.

"I don't ... hike," she interrupts, staccato. Why is she doing this? Why burst Manny's festive mood? Gabrielle doesn't long for goddamn smouldering wood, she longs for smouldering bodies.

"Hey, we're just playing," laughs Manny, her voice deep and lusty. "Don't have a cow. Wouldn't you like to make love beside a real fireplace?" Her laugh rumbles in the phone like the snow-blower on display at the front of the home-improvement store where Gabrielle spent her afternoon today. Blow on snow for energy efficiency and lower decibels. A *real* fireplace? Does Manny want a *real* woman to accompany her inside this fantasy? Gabrielle transfers the phone to her other ear.

"Are you going to carry me to this fabulous cabin?" demands Gabrielle. "Are you going to hike three hours with me on your back, clinging to your neck like an ableCross?" What's wrong with her? She knows she should be talking about Manny's wine-flavoured nipples, and how she'd love to suckle the mole on Manny's left wrist, but her hot gut escapes through her thorax. "You want to gather up twigs and dried leaves and dead branches and make a fire? You really want to lie on a skin torn from a bear's body?" Gabrielle knows she should stop, Manny isn't even thinking about make-believe sex by now. But one more question lets go from Gabrielle's blazing belly, one more bushfire-orgasm of a question. And when she does ask it, she knows Manny will slam down the phone and there will be no across-the-provinces sex for either of them, not for a very long time. She draws in a breath, chokes on the skinny flames flossing her teeth. "Since you plan to carry my weight over this goddamn three-hour threshold, what I want to know is: who brings up my chair—your husband?"

Manny slams down the phone into Gabrielle's devastated ear. Gabrielle finishes off the wine and rolls herself over to her desk to catch up on her work. She's a secret shopper by profession. The secret is she's not a shopper at all, she's a spy. Companies pay her company to trip-up their employees, to throw a wrench into their metaphorical wheelchairs, to pose as a bad-mood mole. Today, she had to schlep to a hardware store in an outlet mall on the

other side of the city, tomorrow she scouts out a bank around the corner from her house. She'll drop by in the morning, reminding tellers that the bank promised lower counters last time she was there. Banks are big business for her company, they usually want an inspection every month. She'll go at lunch, when the line-ups are longest. The tellers won't be able to see her folded hands and since she doesn't own a stand-up wheelchair, plain old customer crabbiness will have to suffice.

Gabrielle studies the work form, then tilts her head towards the phone. Maybe she should leave Manny an apology on her answering machine? She strokes the handle tentatively, as if the phone might ring before her fingers completely grab the earpiece. Another thing: the message has to be more undercover manoeuvrings, so Manny's husband can't decipher their code. Remembering him, having him reinserted into *her* sex fantasy, causes Gabrielle to break her pencil in two, slam the phone back into its cradle.

No, not a phone message, she'll write a *real* letter, the envelope filled with patchouli and lip-stick kisses and self-portrait porn drawings of Gabrielle naked in her chair, telephone receiver in hand, the cord wound around her toes. She pushes back to her desk for a pen and some blank pages. Make-up sex is tricky when you need to achieve second base in an envelope. To be absolutely honest with her own crabby self, Gabrielle doesn't know what to include in this letter—a locket filled with pubic hair? One of the hardware store's romantic fireplace installation brochures? Or a card depicting a big droopy dog with a speech-bubble above his hang-over pink eyes saying, TIME TO LET ME OUT OF THE DOG HOUSE?

No, not a creative apology-filled envelope. Delete, delete, delete. Gabrielle might take the Mennonite out of Manitoba and the wife out of the marriage, but she won't take herself out of the chair. Not for the sake of fantasy, not to hide their bodies even more from each other. She erases what she's written on the front of a card, tosses the paperwork onto her desk and heads for the fridge.

Gabrielle gulps down cold lasagne while parked against her kitchen counter, then enters her art studio, chooses a plastic canvas already glopped with yellow-cab and urine-coloured paint. She chooses a tube of fallow-daisy, and squeezes toothpaste amounts onto the clear frame. After a few hours of pinching and wiping, Gabrielle rolls to her bedroom for an early night. 9:36. She pulls back the covers and slides between the cool sheets. 10:21 Manitoba time.