

Contempt

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“On the surface, our stories are all about *personal choice*,” June said, “but all I see is the thin veneer of artifice that screens us from causes and effects.”

June pushed pieces of salad around her plate with a fork. She speared an anchovy. She sucked on a caper. She slurped her red wine. She peered at Dick. She narrowed her eyes. He made her thighs quiver. He made her insides shake. He made her feel hot and furious and disgusted all at once.

“We think our lives are about personal choice,” June said, “but our lives are really about the something, the one thing, that we all have in common.”

“I once argued with someone about whether or not we all have one thing in common,” Dick said. He was not eating his goat cheese and tomato flatbread pizza. He held a glass of scotch and ice, but he had only sipped it once. “She thought we did, and she thought it was humanity. I thought we did not have one thing in common, that we were each unique in our own ways.”

“We can’t bear to look at what we have in common, because it is too horrible,” June said. “It is something that if we fully confronted, we would not be able to go on. We could not reproduce, because

we would see it was selfish; we could not make culture, because we could see it is pointless.”

June noticed she was holding her silverware in the air and gesturing with her fork and knife. She lowered them to her plate.

June sat facing the window. It was nighttime, and outside, cars were pulling into the pub’s lot. Each one sent a bright flash of headlights deep into her retinas. Each time she cringed and held her hand up in front of her face.

Dick was checking his phone. He was not listening to June, but nor was he focusing attention on his device. Dick was recalling the spread-eagle of a splayed woman, an image he studied extensively that morning, as he did most every morning.

“Already this is something we think about,” June continued. She squinted again as the white light bathed over her. It felt like it flashed *through* her. Certainly she was blinded; all she could see was Dick’s shadowy outline.

“We must enjoy what we have,” she continued. “We must make the effort to enjoy our lives while we are *alive*. And, things can change. That’s what we have to tell ourselves. That things might be different tomorrow.”

“June, dear.” Dick reached across the table and covered her soft white hand with his soft white hand. His nails were manicured with clear polish. His purple Brooks Brothers shirt was starched and crisp, his cuffs rolled up over the sleeve of his black sweater. “Do not shoulder the burdens of strangers. These concerns you can shed without guilt.”

His eyes were dark brown, and warm, and soft behind his hipster glasses, June noticed. Now she could see his face again. His chestnut stubble. His perky features. He looked concerned. She melted.

He caressed her hand with his fingers as he spoke.

“June, he said, “darling. You are so beautiful. And you know I love you. But you are such a huge problem. These ideas in that head of yours. If only you would use your talents to improve on your – how should I say – your *situation*? Your *condition*? Even you, dear, must see, that your life could use some – definition. Everything is a choice, June. And we have so many choices to make. Choosing to live, choosing to love, and yes, choosing happiness, June! We can choose to work out problems rather than run away, or we can choose to walk away rather than live another day enmeshed in conflict. We can choose whether to answer the phone and talk, or to not answer the phone, and let it go to voicemail. We can choose to date or not date, to live alone or with someone else, to have children or not have children; to rent or buy; to drive a car or take the bus. Each of us must choose a career path, and each of us must choose how to eat. These days, you know, you can have organic, local, vegetarian, vegan, gluten free, dairy free.”

Dick’s eyes glazed over with sentimentality, and his voice rose and fell in a gentle cadence as he spoke. June was transfixed. Certainly she could be improved upon, she thought. Perhaps Dick could remake her – in his vision. She imagined the revealing of the new, and much improved, June. Would she have a beehive? Thick eyeliner? Mini-skirts?

“Of course,” June said. “We also must choose what to wear, what to read, what to listen to, and what to post to our profiles.”

“Bonbon,” Dick said. He gazed at her over his glasses. “We must choose our personal style. We must define our good taste. Isn’t that what sets us apart from the true poor – our knack for the aesthetic, our devotion to the beautiful? Isn’t that the ultimate indicator of how far we’ve come – as a species?”

“Sugarpuff,” June said. She smiled sweetly. “The young people tell me that deep in the simulation, there is only the illusion of choice.”

June was a teacher, so she often remarked on what the young people were doing.

“They tell me, ‘Have you read the ingredients on the different jars on mayonnaise in the supermarket?’” June said. “They are all the same. Only the labels are different.’ And even the labels are not so different, I remind them. Not so different at all.”

Dick reached into his back pocket. “Please, allow me,” he said. He put three stiff bills on the table. He put his hand on June’s lower back as they left the café.

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They walked side by side under the golden canopy of autumn maples. June’s honey-colored ponytail glowed. She nestled her chin in her scarlet-colored scarf and clutched at Dick’s arm. He stiffened and stuffed his fists down into his pockets. But she managed to hang on.

Three young boys and a girl approached them on the sidewalk. They wore knitted skull caps of different colors, their shoes were held together with duct tape, and dark creases were visible under their eyes. They ducked their heads as they hustled by.

“When I was young, we all thought we were Jay-Z or Beyoncé,” June said grandly, and she laughed. “We were all amplified to the role of celebrities in our cyberlives.”

From the car window, June saw a group of people on the corner. She saw the young adults they passed standing on the sidewalk. They were holding signs. *30 Years of Class Warfare Against Us. Banks Got Bailed Out We Got Sold Out. Hey Hey Ho Ho The D’s and R’s Have Got to Go.* They were surrounded by people wearing dark hoodies and Guy Fawkes masks. A man with long dreadlocks played a bongo drum. A hunched, shriveled elderly woman wore an orange raincoat. Her sign said *End Corporate Greed.*

“Now many people have had enough,” June said dimly. “They are ready to fight for even the faintest wisp of a hope that someday, they might be able to live a different way.”

Dick, who had put on his dark driving glasses, didn't respond.

"The kids were raised in the cellophane culture," June said. She shook her head. "They have realized their payday will never come. It is said many of them will never work."

"Ah, yes," Dick said. "*Les enfants terribles* must transition into the *nouveau servitude*."

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June followed Dick into Dick's flat. She sat on Dick's couch. She lit a cigarette and crossed her legs under her full yellow skirt. Dick loosened his watch, placed it on the coffee table, and walked by her into his bedroom. He emerged in a white undershirt, boxer shorts, and slippers. He sat next to her. He put his hand on her knee.

"Dick," June said. "What about the things we can't choose?"

"I'll get you anything you want, June." Dick ran his finger along her leg. He started to push up the hem of her skirt. "Just name it."

"Dick," June said. Her forehead had creased, her eyes clouded over with concern. "We cannot wear clothes without inheriting someone else's misery. In most cases, we cannot eat for the same reason. We work jobs where we are only asked to be efficient."

Dick's hand was now at her thigh. "You decide," he said, "what kind of work *you* want to do. And then you make – adjustments."

June's eyes started to droop.

"Turn over," Dick said, and June did. He pulled aside her underwear, entered her in a quick motion, and started to move. June propped herself up on her elbows and held her chin in her fists.

"I don't know, dear," she said. "We cannot gather in public space and share food, thoughts, and companionship without petitioning the government for permission. We cannot exchange ideas without

being watched, listened to, or monitored. Everyone who has ever wanted to live a life of service has had to go through their mental checklist: where do I make exceptions to my ‘morals’—? In what I eat, buy, or believe?”

Dick finished quickly with a spasm against her buttocks and a grimace.

“June.” Dick sighed as he tucked himself back inside his boxers. “Morals don’t exist. We no longer have the capacity to live by them.”

June rolled back to a seated position. She picked her underwear out of her crevice. Dick started to smooth down her skirt.

“Maybe,” he said, “it would help you to think about what we *can* do. We can work, we can enjoy our home, we can host dinner parties. You love dinner parties! We can take walks in the park, travel to beautiful places, and enjoy sports, sex and intoxicants. We can laugh. Think about how good it feels to laugh!”

“Ha!” June said. She stood up and threw her hands in the air. “Ha! Ha!” She turned around once, slowly, like a ballerina. Then she sat down again. She looked Dick in the eye. She pursed her lips and nodded.

“Hmm,” she said. “It does feel good to laugh. But Dick! The illusion of choice masks the fact that in one way or another, each of us learns to submit, each in our own way!”

Dick lit a cigarette and with his other hand, he cupped June’s chin. His hand was cold and so were his eyes.

“Dear,” he said. “You simply haven’t grown up. You live in a dream.”

June felt something steely in her stomach. She peered at Dick. She wondered if she hated him.

“You’re right, June,” Dick said. He leaned back and locked in on her gaze as a spiral of cigarette smoke rose in front of his glasses. He waved it away as he spoke. “You figured it out. You can choose to eat healthy or not, to be on the left or on the right, to get married or not get married, to buy an apartment or a house, but all this means is that you choose the conditions of your bondage. You can never choose a different fate.”

He smiled. “It isn’t personal,” he said. “It’s just the way of things. The way things are, if you will. There simply is not another fate available to you or to anyone. That skin you’re in, shall we say? It’s nothing but a valuable resource in a world where resources are getting scarce.”

“Now baby,” he said. He put out his cigarette and leaned in and took her hand in his. There was no ring on her finger. There never would be. “Be a doll and set out something good for us to eat.”

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Dick popped the champagne bottle open and poured the sparkling liquid into two tall flutes. He handed one to June and enjoyed a long sip for himself. He was wearing his emerald green velvet house robe, his navy blue silken pajama pants, and his favorite rabbit-fur slippers. June had put on her pink apron overlaid with a sage green floral pattern. She stood at the kitchen counter and prepared an antipasti plate.

June was feeling a little frustrated now. She had tuned out during the sex, quick though it was, and only now was she starting to feel amorous.

“I love Sundays,” she said. She moved salami, piece by piece, from the container onto the plate. “Sundays are my favorite days.”

“Do you feel closer to God?” Dick said. There was a baiting edge to his tone now. “I never believed, myself.”

“No God?” June said as she crumpled up the remains of the salami packaging.

“Of course not,” Dick said. He shrugged. “No creator, no miracles, no one raised from the dead.”

“No one thinks about God anymore,” June said. “I mean, why would they?”

“I suppose,” Dick said, and took a sip of his champagne, “that *questions of conscience* are noticeably absent from the popular literature.”

“Well,” June said. She put down the meat and cheese platter and stood by Dick at the kitchen counter. She rested her head on his back. Behind her, on a windowsill that looked out into a city street, was a purple orchid in full bloom. “There really is no urge for social justice without belief in God.”

Dick shrugged her off. He put his drink down. He started to pace the kitchen floor. He gestured in the air with his hands as he spoke.

“Why can’t it just be pragmatic to care for each other?” he said. “Why can’t we do it simply because it makes sense to do it? Why does it have to be because a God tells us to?”

June stared at the green marble of the kitchen counter. Because it makes no sense whatsoever to try to live a moral life, she thought. It is far *more* pragmatic to have only the most superficial relations with everyone, to *move through* the landscape rather than to interact *within* it.

Dick was checking his phone again, and imagining a hairy orifice opening and closing, opening and closing. He had the urge to pull off. He squashed it.

“But dwelling in transcendence is more compelling to me than endless bean tallying,” June said. “What a stupid life we live of infinite ‘how much did I earn—how much can I spend—how much

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can I borrow.”

Dick walked up behind her and gripped her tightly around the waist. “In this world you have to pick a side and fight,” he said. He nestled his chin on her shoulder and pressed his cheek against hers. “There is no reason to believe peace exists. There are precious few historic examples of people living in harmony with the earth and with each other. Where do these ideas come from?”

His face was smooth again, and he turned his head, and his hot lips softly kissed her neck.

“When the oppressed rise, they seek to liberate,” June said. She smiled, but her eyes were faraway and empty. “They believe in themselves, but I am not so sure they believe in justice.”

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