

Story for performance #683
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Tags: [intimacy](#), [home](#)

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The Dictator first took an interest in me when the housing market collapsed. His were the cleanest efficiencies in town.

Soon as I made the final panorama turn around the tiny kitchen and said, ‘I’ll take it,’ the Dictator’s eyes misted over slightly. I only noticed this in retrospect, after we shook hands on the front porch and he reached out in an attempted hug. A sideways grasp; I’d already turned to walk away.

The Dictator was always laconic over the phone, almost, but not quite, gruff. He was a busy man and in some of that time I’d called him twice a week, which may have seemed either desperate or insistent. After calculating a budget I really wanted that apartment.

Over the past four years I’ve had a lot of time to think, to torture myself thinking. I’m only just now learning how to act. The school of hard knocks, in which I sometimes knowingly, naively, imagine I’ve enrolled as a freshman, seems to echo that old adage—the one about ‘cheap and fast, fast and high-quality, or high-quality and cheap—but never all three.’

It’s actually not even good PowerPoint presentation material, because it assumes you’re always going to get even two of those three, or that those are the only attributes there are. That old adage must refer specifically to large orders of photocopies. Or did a pimp come up with that one? Well, point is, you have to decide whether you want something based on all of its attributes, not just those you want to see. And if you still decide you want it, you have to be prepared for the cons.

When I met the Dictator to fill out the lease agreement, he waited sprawled across the front steps with his legs crossed and his head resting on the palm of one hand. A swimsuit model pose? I’m not even sure.

When he stood up, the shoulder-petting began in earnest. Any time he could reach, a tentative tap. Like once he discovered I wasn’t going to deck him with an umbrella for spending a nanosecond in my personal space, he wanted to repeat that as many times as possible. The Dictator lightly steered me to the passenger-side door of his car. I moved to pick up a stack of papers and zip-shut folder on the seat, but the Dictator said, ‘Leave them there; you can sit on ‘em.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘That’s what they’re there for.’

Gamely, I planted my ass on the Dictator’s paperwork. We drove a few blocks to a pub I’d agreed to visit before the heebie-jeebies set in. I’ve worn a ring on my finger since age seventeen; now that it’s off I find I have no perspective on these things. I just play normal in the hopes that internally I’m an over-reactive ninny.

He ordered a corset-shaped glass of yellow beer; I asked for water.

‘Are you sure?’ the Dictator said. ‘Coke, Sprite, root beer?’

‘I don’t drink soda.’

The Dictator pulled out a chair next to me, not across the table. He leaned in and unfolded a single white sheet, printed on both sides. He’d kept it in a manila folder on the dashboard, not under me.

Strategically resting one arm on the chair-back behind me, the Dictator used his free hand to point out the blue Xs he’d marked where I should sign.

I inspected the lease one last time with all its clauses. I wish I could say that I wasn’t really paying attention. Jagged static from the Dictator’s looming aura was definitely distracting, sure. And noise from the game on television, and a trio of barflies discussing global warming, and the low growl of my own stomach. But I was an adult even then. I could read. Maybe some of the cells in my body weren’t paying attention but I knew.

It was a very odd lease. I’d have to work twice as many hours to make the rent, but I expected that. There was a page of clauses about the security system alone. Two cameras, at the front entrance and one in the hallway on each level were touted as helping deter and/or capture intruders, but the lease specifically stated that additional cameras could be placed anywhere on the property without the tenants’ knowledge. The contents of the tapes could be used to enforce the other rules of the building (such as the ‘no pets’ and ‘no smoking’ policies), also without our knowledge. But if you don’t have pets or smoke there’s nothing to hide, I figured. It did beat living in my brother-in-law’s mother’s garage, I thought. Isn’t that funny? I wasn’t even living on the street.

For the first time, I looked the Dictator directly in the face. Multi-hued stubble carpeted his hamster-like cheeks. A small crescent scar on one temple ringed his crow’s feet. His eyes, far from cold and steely, were a watery bewildered kind of blue. The eyes of someone who’d been punched in the face, who had a scar like that. Someone who’d been forced to wear ridiculous clothes in public and laughed at. Someone who’d been spurned in the past.

Except already, he was more in love with me than any of the others. As a man constantly told ‘no’ who never took ‘no’ for an answer, he recognized his counterpart: a woman who every day still questioned whether her uncharted Republic was a result of standing up for herself, or of being a selfish asshole. A woman who felt pain saying the word ‘no.’

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ziggy Edwards.