

Bettering Myself

“Bettering Myself” by Ottessa Moshfegh

My classroom was on the first floor, next to the nuns’ lounge. I used their bathroom to puke in the mornings. One nun always dusted the toilet seat with talcum powder. Another nun plugged the sink and filled it with water. I never understood the nuns. One was old and the other was young. The young one talked to me sometimes, asked me what I would do for the long weekend, if I’d see my folks over Christmas, and so forth. The old one looked the other way and twisted her robes in her fists when she saw me coming.

My classroom was the school’s old library. It was a messy old library room, with books and magazines splayed out all over the place and a whistling radiator and big fogged-up windows overlooking Sixth Street. I put two student desks together to make up my desk at the front of the room, next to the chalkboard. I kept a down-filled sleeping bag in a cardboard box in the back of the room and covered the sleeping bag with old newspapers. Between classes I took the sleeping bag out, locked the door, and napped until the bell rang. I was usually still drunk from the night before. Sometimes I had a drink at lunch at the Indian restaurant around the corner, just to keep me going—sharp wheat ale in a squat, brown bottle. McSorley’s was there but I didn’t like all that nostalgia. That bar made me roll my eyes. I rarely made my way down to the school cafeteria, but when I did, the principal, Mr. Kishka, would stop me and smile broadly and say, “Here she comes, the vegetarian.” I don’t know why he thought I was a vegetarian. What I took from the cafeteria were prepackaged digits of cheese, chicken nuggets, and greasy dinner rolls.

I had one student, Angelika, who came and ate her lunch with me in my classroom.

“Miss Mooney,” she called me. “I’m having a problem with my mother.”

She was one of two girlfriends I had. We talked and talked. I told her that you couldn’t get fat from being ejaculated into.

“Wrong, Miss Mooney. The stuff makes you thick in the middle. That’s why girls get so thick in the middle. They’re sluts.”

She had a boyfriend she visited in prison every weekend. Each Monday was a new story about his lawyers, how much she loved him, and so forth. She always had the same face on. It was like she already knew all the answers to her questions.

I had another student who drove me crazy. Popliasti. He was a wiry, blond, acned sophomore with a heavy accent. “Miss Mooney,” he’d say, standing up at his desk. “Let me help you with the problem.” He’d take the chalk out of my hand and draw a picture of a cock-and-balls on the board. This cock-and-balls became a kind of insignia for the class. It appeared on all their homework, on exams, etched into every desk. I didn’t mind it. It made me laugh. But Popliasti and his incessant interruptions, a few times I lost my cool.

“I cannot teach you if you act like animals!” I screamed.

“We cannot learn if you are crazy like this, screaming, with your hair messy,” said Popliasti, running around the room, flipping books off window ledges. I could have done without him.

But my seniors were all very respectful. I was in charge of preparing them for the SAT. They came to me with legitimate questions about math and vocabulary, which I had a hard time answering. A few times in calculus, I admitted defeat and spent the hour jabbering on about my life.

“Most people have had anal sex,” I told them. “Don’t look so surprised.”

And, “My boyfriend and I don’t use condoms. That’s what happens when you trust somebody.”

Something about that old library room made Principal Kishka keep his distance. I think he knew if he ever set foot in there, he’d be in charge of cleaning it up and getting rid of me. Most of the books were useless

mismatched sets of outdated encyclopedias, Ukrainian bibles, Nancy Drew. I even found some girly magazines, under an old map of Soviet Russia folded up in a drawer marked Sister Koszinska. One good thing I found was an old encyclopedia of worms. It was a coverless, fist-thick volume of brittle paper chipped at the corners. I tried to read it between classes when I couldn't sleep. I tucked it into the sleeping bag with me, plied open the binding, let my eyes roll over the small, musty print. Each entry was more unbelievable than the last. There were roundworms and horseshoe worms and worms with two heads and worms with teeth like diamonds and worms as large as house cats, worms that sang like crickets or could disguise themselves as small stones or lilies or could stretch their jaws to accommodate a human baby. What is this trash they're feeding children these days, I thought. I slept and got up and taught algebra and went back into the sleeping bag. I zipped it up over my head. I burrowed deep down and pinched my eyes closed. My head throbbed and my mouth felt like wet paper towels. When the bell rang, I got out and there was Angelika with her brown-bag lunch saying, "Miss Mooney, there's something in my eye and that's why I'm crying."

"Okay," I said. "Close the door." The floor was black-and-piss-colored checkerboard linoleum. The walls were shiny, cracking, piss-colored walls.

I had a boyfriend who was still in college. He wore the same clothes every single day: a blue pair of Dickies and a paper-thin button down. The shirt was western style with opalescent snaps. You could see his chest hair and nipples through it. I didn't say anything. He had a nice face, but fat ankles and a soft, wrinkly neck. "Lots of girls at school want to date me," he said often. He was studying to be a photographer, which I didn't take seriously at all. I figured he would work in an office after he graduated, would be grateful to have a real job like that, would feel happy and boastful to be employed, a bank account in his name, a suit in his closet, et cetera, et cetera. He was sweet. One time his mother came to visit from South Carolina. He introduced me as his "friend who lives downtown." The mother was horrible. A tall blonde with fake boobs.

"What do you use on your face at night?" is what she asked me when the boyfriend went to the toilet.

I was thirty. I had an ex-husband. I got alimony and had decent health insurance through the Archdiocese of New York. My parents, upstate, sent me care packages full of postage stamps and decaffeinated teas. I called my ex-husband when I was drunk and complained about my job, my apartment, the boyfriend, my students, anything that came to mind. He was remarried already, in Chicago. He did something with law. I never understood his job, and he never explained anything to me.

The boyfriend came and went on weekends. Together we drank wine and whiskey, romantic things I liked. He could handle it. He looked the other way, I guess. But he was one of those idiots about cigarettes.

“How can you smoke like that?” he’d say. “Your mouth tastes like Canadian bacon.”

“Ha ha,” I said from my side of the bed. I went under the sheets. Half my clothes, books, unopened mail, cups, ashtrays, half my life was stuffed between the mattress and the wall.

“Tell me all about your week,” I said to the boyfriend. “Well Monday I woke up at eleven-thirty a.m.,” he’d start. He could go on all day. He was from Chattanooga. He had a nice, soft voice. It had a nice sound to it, like an old radio. I got up and filled a mug with wine and sat on the bed.

“The line at the grocery store was average,” he was saying.

Later: “But I don’t like Lacan. When people are so incoherent, it means they’re arrogant.”

“Lazy,” I said.

“Yeah.”

By the time he was done talking we could go out for dinner. We could get drinks. All I had to do was walk around and sit down and tell him what to

order. He took care of me that way. He rarely poked his head into my private life. When he did, I turned into an emotional woman.

“Why don’t you quit your job?” he asked. “You can afford it.”

“Because I love those kids,” I answered. My eyes welled up with tears. “They’re all such beautiful people. I just love them.” I was drunk.

I bought all my beer from the bodega on the corner of East Tenth and First Avenue. The Egyptians who worked there were all very handsome and complimentary. They gave me free candy—individually wrapped Twizzlers, Pop Rocks. They dropped them into the paper bag and winked. I’d buy two or three forties and a pack of cigarettes on my way home from school each afternoon and go to bed and watch *Married...with Children* and *Sally Jessy Raphael* on my small black-and-white television, drink and smoke and snooze. When it got dark I’d go out again for more forties and, on occasion, food. Around ten p.m. I’d switch to vodka and would pretend to better myself with a book or some kind of music, as though God were checking up on me.

“All good here,” I pretended to say. “Just bettering myself, as always.”

Or sometimes I went to this one bar on Avenue A. I tried to order drinks that I didn’t like so that I would drink them slower. I’d order gin and tonic or gin and soda or a gin martini or Guinness. I’d told the bartender—an old Polish lady—at the beginning, “I don’t like talking while I drink, so I may not talk to you.”

“Okay,” she’d said. “No problem.” She was very respectful.

Every year, the kids had to take a big exam that let the state know just how badly I was at doing my job. The exams were designed for failure. Even I couldn’t pass them.

The other math teacher was a little Filipina who I knew made less money than me for doing the same job and lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Spanish Harlem with three kids and no husband. She had some kind of

respiratory disease and a big mole on her nose and wore her blouses buttoned to the throat with ridiculous bows and brooches and lavish plastic pearl necklaces. She was a very devout Catholic. The kids made fun of her for that. They called her the “little Chinese lady.” She was a much better math teacher than me, but she had an unfair advantage. She took all the students who were good at math, all the kids who back in the Ukraine had been beaten with sticks and made to learn their multiplication tables, decimal places, exponents, all the tricks of the trade. Whenever anyone talked about the Ukraine, I pictured either a stark, gray forest full of howling black wolves or a trashy bar on a highway full of tired male prostitutes.

My students were all horrible at math. I got stuck with the dummies. Popliasti, worst of all, could barely add two and two. There was no way my kids could ever pass that big exam. When the day came to take the test, the Filipina and I looked at each other like, Who are we kidding? I passed out the tests, had them break the seals, showed them how to fill in the bubbles properly with the right pencils, told them, “Try your best,” and then I took the tests home and switched all their answers. No way those dummies would cost me my job.

“Outstanding!” said Mr. Kishka when the results came in. He’d wink and give me the thumbs-up and cross himself and slowly shut the door behind him.

Every year it was the same.

I had this one other girlfriend, Jessica Hornstein, a homely Jewish girl I’d met in college. Her parents were second cousins. She lived with them on Long Island and took the LIRR into the city some nights to go out with me. She showed up in normal jeans and sneakers and opened her backpack and pulled out cocaine and an ensemble suitable for the cheapest prostitute on the Vegas strip. She got her cocaine from some high-school kid in Bethpage. It was horrible. Probably cut with powdered laundry detergent. And Jessica had wigs of all colors and styles: a neon-blue bob, a long blonde Barbarella-type do, a red perm, a jet-black Japanese one. She had one of those colorless, bug-eyed faces. I always felt like Cleopatra next to Opie when I went out with her. “Going clubbing” was always her request, but I couldn’t stand all that. A night under a colored lightbulb over twenty-dollar cocktails, getting

hit on by skinny Indian engineers, not dancing, a stamp on the back of my hand I couldn't scrub off. I felt vandalized.

But Jessica Hornstein knew how to "bump and grind." Most evenings she bid me adieu on the arm of some no-face corporate type to show him "the time of his life" back at his condo in Murray Hill or wherever those people lived. Occasionally I took one of the Indians up on his offer, stepped into an unmarked cab to Queens, looked through his medicine cabinet, got some head, and took the subway home at six in the morning just in time to shower, call my ex-husband, and make it to school before the second bell. But mostly I left the club early and got myself on a seat in front of my old Polish lady bartender, Jessica Hornstein be damned. I dipped a finger in my beer and rubbed off my mascara. I looked around at the other women at the bar. Makeup made a girl look so desperate, I thought. People were so dishonest with their clothes and personalities. And then I thought, Who cares? Let them do what they want. It's me I should worry about. Now and then I cried out to my students. I threw my arms in the air. I put my head on my desk. I asked them for help. But what could I expect? They turned around at their desks to talk to one another, put on their headphones, pulled out their books, potato chips, looked out the window, did anything but try to console me.

Oh, okay, there were a few fine times. One day I went to the park and watched a squirrel run up a tree. A cloud flew around in the sky. I sat down on a patch of dry yellow grass and let the sun warm my back. I may have even tried to do a crossword puzzle. Once, I found a twenty-dollar bill in a pair of old jeans. I drank a glass of water. It got to be summer. The days got intolerably long. School let out. The boyfriend graduated and moved back to Tennessee. I bought an air conditioner and paid a kid to carry it down the street and up the stairs to my apartment. Then my ex-husband left a message on my machine: "I'm coming into town," he said. "Let's have lunch, or dinner. We can have drinks. Next week. No big deal," he said. "Talk."

No big deal. I'd see about that. I dried out for a few days, did some calisthenics on the floor of my apartment. I borrowed a vacuum from my neighbor, a middle-aged gay with long, acne-scarred dimples, who eyed me like a worried dog. I took a walk to Broadway and spent some of my money on new clothes, high-heeled shoes, silk panties. I had my makeup done and bought whatever products they suggested. I had my hair cut. I got my nails

polished. I took myself out to lunch. I ate a salad for the first time in years. I went to the movies. I called my mom. "I've never felt better," I said. "I'm having a great summer. A great summer holiday." I tidied up my apartment. I filled a vase with bright flowers. Anything good I could think to do, I did. I was filled with hope. I bought new sheets and towels. I put on some music. "*Bailar*," I said to myself. Look, I'm speaking Spanish. My mind is fixing itself, I thought. Everything is going to be okay.

And then the day came. I went to meet my ex-husband at a fashionable bistro on MacDougal Street where the waitresses wore pretty dresses with white lace-trimmed collars. I got there early and sat at the bar and watched the waitresses move around so gingerly with their round, black trays of colored cocktails and small plates of bread and bowls of olives. A short sommelier came in and out like the conductor of an orchestra. The nuts on the bar were flavored with sage. I lit a cigarette and looked at the clock. I was so early. I ordered a drink. A scotch and soda. "Jesus Christ," I said. I ordered another drink, just scotch this time. I lit another cigarette. A girl sat down next to me. We started talking. She was waiting, too. "Men," she said. "They like to torture us."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, and turned around on my stool.

Then it was eight o'clock and my ex-husband walked in. He spoke to the maître d' and nodded in my direction and followed a girl to a table by the window and just waved me over. I took my drink.

"Thank you for meeting me," he said, removing his jacket.

I lit a cigarette and opened the wine list. My ex cleared his voice but said nothing for a while. Then he did his usual hem and haw about the restaurant, how he'd read about the chef in whatever magazine, how the food on the plane was awful, the hotel, how the city had changed, the menu was interesting, the weather here, the weather there, and so on. "You look tired," he said. "Order whatever you want," he told me, as though I was his niece, some babysitter character.

"I will, thank you," I said.

A waitress came over and told us the specials. My ex charmed her. He was always kinder to the waitress than he was to me. "Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. You're the best. Wow. Wow, wow, wow. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

I made up my mind to order then pretend to go to the bathroom and walk out. I took off my dangly earrings and put them in my purse. I uncrossed my legs. I looked at him. He didn't smile or do anything. He just sat there with his elbows on the table. I missed the boyfriend. He'd been so easy. He'd been very respectful.

"And how's Vivian?" I asked.

"She's fine. She got a promotion, busy. She's okay. Sends her regards."

"I'm sure. Send her my regards, too."

"I'll tell her."

"Thanks," I said.

"You're welcome," he said.

The waitress came back with another drink and took our order. I ordered a bottle of wine. I thought, I'll stay for the wine. The whiskey was wearing off. The waitress went away and my ex got up to use the men's room, and when he got back he asked me to stop calling him.

"No, I think I'll keep calling," I said.

"I'll pay you," he said.

"How much money are we talking?"

He told me.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll take the deal.”

Our food came. We ate in silence. And then I couldn’t eat anymore. I got up. I didn’t say anything. I went home. I went back and forth to the bodega. My bank called. I wrote a letter to the Ukrainian Catholic school. Dear Principal Kishka, I wrote. Thank you for letting me teach at your school.

Please throw away the sleeping bag in the cardboard box in the back of my classroom. I have to resign for personal reasons. Just so you know, I’ve been fudging the state exams. Thanks again. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

There was a church attached to the back of the school—a cathedral with great big mosaics of people holding up a finger as though to say, Be quiet. I thought I’d go in there and leave my letter of resignation with one of the priests. Also I wanted a little tenderness, I think, and I imagined the priest putting his hand on my head and calling me something like “my dear,” or “my sweet,” or “little one.” I don’t know what I was thinking. “My pet.”

I’d been up on bad cocaine and drinking for days. I’d roped a few men back to my apartment and showed them all my belongings, stretched out flesh-colored tights and proposed we take turns hanging each other. Nobody lasted more than a few hours. The letter to Principal Kishka sat on the bedside table. It was time. I checked my reflection in my bathroom mirror before I left the house. I thought I looked pretty normal. That couldn’t be possible. I put the last of the stuff up my nose. I put on a baseball cap. I put on some more ChapStick.

On the way to church I stopped at McDonald’s for a Diet Coke. I hadn’t been around people in weeks. There were whole families sitting down together, sipping on straws, sedate, mulling with their fries like broken horses at hay. A homeless person, man or woman I couldn’t tell, had gotten into the trash by the entrance. At least I wasn’t completely alone, I thought. It was hot out. I wanted that Diet Coke. But the lines to order made no sense. Most people were huddled in random patterns, gazing up at the menu boards, eyes glazed over, touching their chins, pointing, nodding.

“Are you in line?” I kept asking them. Nobody would answer me.

Finally I just approached a young black boy in a visor behind the counter. I ordered my Diet Coke.

“What size?” he asked me.

He pulled out four cups in ascending order of size. The largest size stood about a foot high off the counter.

“I’ll take that one,” I said.

This felt like a great occasion. I can’t explain it. I felt immediately employed with great power. I plunked my straw in and sucked. It was good. It was the best thing I’d ever tasted. I thought of ordering another one, for when I’d finished that one. But that would be exploitive, I thought. Better let this one have its day. Okay, I thought. One at a time. One Diet Coke at a time. Now off to the priest.

The last time I’d been in that church was for some Catholic holiday. I’d sat in the back and done my best to kneel, cross myself, move my mouth at the Latin sayings, and so forth. I had no idea what any of it meant, but it had some effect on me. It was cold in there. My nipples stood on end, my hands were swollen, my back hurt. I must have stunk of alcohol. I watched the students in their uniforms line up for the Eucharist. The ones who genuflected at the altar did it so deeply, wholly, they broke my heart. Most of the liturgy was in Ukrainian. I saw Popliasti play with the padded bar you knelt on, lifting it up and letting it slam down. There were beautiful stained glass windows, a lot of gold.

But when I got there that day with the letter, the church was locked. I sat down on the damp stone steps and finished my Diet Coke. A shirtless bum walked by.

“Pray for rain,” he said.

“Okay.”

I went to McSorley’s and ate a bowl of pickled onions. I tore the letter up.

The sun shone on.