

NATALIE SMITH

All the Difference

At first, I knew him only by his handwriting. Some of the office files were covered in canary-colored, sticky note addenda written in his thin, controlled pen stroke. I analyzed his penmanship on a few occasions and always laughed myself into the same conclusion: He's definitely an asshole and probably gay. Like many an overweight, female sexual abuse survivor with at least a mild interest in the male species, I've programmed myself to believe that compassionate men don't actually exist; if they do, they aren't attracted to women; if they are, they are attracted to every woman except me. So I judge, lest I be hurt again.

It was unlikely that we would ever work together or even meet: our job schedules were exact opposites, the internship was only two months long, and he started more than a month before I did. I was relieved. Not only do I prefer to work solo, I also knew that, like me, he was in art school. I couldn't bear to work alongside another creative snob who smeared his own shit on canvas and thought it brilliant.

When I first saw him enter our training center, I assumed he was one of our students. He stood before me in a long-sleeved tee and black sweat pants, breaking our business casual dress code like an employee who already knows the ropes and has established which rules can be broken. Before either of us could utter an introduction, our supervisor materialized and introduced us. My coworker greeted me with a shy smile and an unassuming expression. As we shook hands, I thought, He seems quiet.

We worked side by side that first day, and I made small talk, asking him what he planned to do after graduation. He explained that his decisions depended upon his relationship with his girlfriend, hinting more with his tone than with his words that he felt slightly pressured to move their long-term relationship beyond mere dating. He rolled his eyes, hit me in the arm and scoffed, "You know how that is, right?" I didn't, but I nodded anyway. He seemed friendly, even sweet—a first for me in a male coworker, or so I told myself—and I didn't want to scare him off by explaining that I am not only queer, but also a relationship virgin. Despite his affable nature, in the beginning, he never initiated conversation, and when we spoke he was usually succinct. He often peppered his speech with lame jokes ending in right? Mine is a dirty mouth, so I peppered my speech with shit! and fuck!, which always shocked yet amused him.

It must drive his girlfriend insane that he holds so much of himself back, that he doesn't express all the wonder dancing behind his black eyes.

I wasn't physically attracted, but I found his silence intriguing. I'm afraid of men and often mistreat them—when I'm not denying their existence altogether. But there was something about him that didn't cause me alarm, even when he sneaked up behind me while I prepped the computer classrooms in the dark, navigating by the light of the monitors. Still, I was quite uncomfortable in his presence, because of my being fat. When near his anorexic frame, I imagined he felt like a marine biologist swimming next to a blue whale.

A few weeks after we started working together, he got a haircut. A magical one. He walked in one day, late as usual, and upon noticing the change in his appearance, I blurted, "Oh! You cut your hair!"

He rubbed the back and sides of his head, where hair had been. "You like it?" he asked.

What the hell happened to him? He was dressed in the same tee and dark sweat pants as always, yet he had somehow morphed from a pale, skinny, reticent artist into an extroverted, charming Latin gentleman. I became acutely aware that the women's washroom was just a couple of feet away, and I fantasized about the things we could accomplish in there before our office officially opened. I stifled the sexual enthusiasm in my voice and responded very simply: "Yeah, it's cool."

Our conversations soon turned crude thanks to my potty mouth and the assumption that all racial minorities have a right to tease one another to an offensive degree. Whenever he asked me to do something, I snapped my fingers and retorted, "I don't take lip from no Mexican!" He once referred to me as "Chocolateface," and I cackled at his inability to create a more insulting moniker. He caught on quickly, though, and on one occasion he bravely shot back, "Well, I'm not all Mexican—I'm part white! At least part white beats all black!"

"Oh, really?" I quipped before he had time to blink. I was still much more adept at the game than he, having played it on a daily basis with my white then-best-friend for over ten years. "Don't you know, the only thing worse than a Mexican is a half-breed?"

On his final day of work, I gave him a handmade card on which I wrote that very comment.

One night, we stayed after hours to view part of his school portfolio. He seemed unusually eager when asking me if I liked his art, really liked it. I thought about our distance from the bathroom again and replied, my voice flat as paper: "Yeah, your work's pretty good."

"Your major is film, right? What did you think of that one video I did?"

"I...um...I mean...I liked the concept." I cherry-picked my words, wanting only to express my authentic opinion of his work, not my budding feelings for him. "Did they teach you video editing at your school? Did you cut this using FCP or Avid?"

"They teach us both, but I used Premiere. Why? You don't think it's good?"

I was too nervous to fully digest his question, or my own thoughts, before I spoke again. I began to ramble, sounding more enthusiastic than I meant to, unable to hide my passion while discussing the thing I love most in the world: moving images. "I only ask 'cause...I mean...I would have done the editing different. I mean, it's obvious your strength is in animation. Like that break-dancer! Dude, that was tight as hell! But you should let me edit that other video you did. I can make the cuts cleaner, and I know a song that would go perfect with your theme."

He looked at my face while I spoke, so I pointed to the screen to draw his attention away from the flaws that cracked my mirror every morning.

"I know you have to go soon, but can I see it one more time? The real short one with the break-dancer? I love that one!"

He navigated through dozens of files, attempting to relocate the animation I'd requested.

"Never mind. You better go. Don't leave your girlfriend outside waiting for you, dude. She said she'd be here at 6:30, right? It's 6:25 already."

"Naw, it's cool," he said, just as he located the video and pressed PLAY. I pulled my chair all the way forward and leaned toward him, hoping it was obvious that I wanted to see his screen better, not get closer to him. I watched in silence, awed by his work. It wasn't his talent that struck me; in fact, he was an amateur at video artistry—we both were. It was his commitment. As a fellow video artist, I knew that his 30-second animation must have taken him several weeks of effort. I wanted to ask him if we could work on some videos of our own, but I was afraid it would come off as a romantic advance, not an offer to collaborate as artists. So instead, I continued to ramble while silently praying that my internal struggle wasn't registering on my face.

“I’ll close up the office so you won’t be too late,” I said after his video ended. I avoided looking at him as we said our goodbyes.

Sometime in April, after a few months of working only one or two days a week, he had yet to complete the entire 66-day internship, but he still gave us notice that he was quitting. He tried to hug me on his last day, but I bumped fists with him instead.

“Dude, I told you: ‘I don’t do touching.’ You lucky I like yo’ half-breed, Mexican ass enough to do this!”

He tried to feign utter shock, but he couldn’t stop the corners of his mouth from forming a smile. “What? You’re not gonna hug me? But I’m really going to miss you, Nat.”

I rolled my eyes toward the sky and twisted my face in comical disbelief.

He continued, “For real.”

The pause between his words and mine was making me fidgety, so I filled it. “Fuck yeah, you’ll miss me!” I pointed at myself. “Hello? I’m freaking awesome!”

I saw him days later when he cashed in on one of the five-day classes he had earned as an intern. During his lunch hour on the first few days, we caught up with one another and fell into our old routine of smack-talking, joking around, and discussing our art and job prospects. On the last day of the course, though, I avoided him by pretending to be busier than I really was. Minutes before his class ended, my supervisor informed me that she would be exiting along with the students and instructor and that I was to close up the office on my own. I immediately scurried to the washroom because I couldn’t bear to say goodbye to him again. After I heard the group walk past the bathroom and enter the elevator, I left my hiding place and headed straight for the office kitchen. I wanted to soothe my heartache the same way I had since 3rd grade: by sucking down every bit of food in my immediate vicinity. However, I never made it to the kitchen because I saw a thin, dark figure still seated in the class that had just ended. Him. I stood in the doorway and shouted, “Dude! I thought you was gone! Why you still here?”

“Um, I just wanted to practice some more, ya know?” he said without turning to face me. He was manipulating a 3-D figure of a cell phone on his computer screen. The day before, he had excitedly explained to me that he’d taken on a client who provides insurance for iPhone owners.

I stared at the back of his head, wondering why he had to fuck up my life with his stupid haircut, which he had maintained. I took a seat at the back of the classroom, laid my head on the table, and mumbled that I hadn’t slept in days.

“You gotta start sleeping, Nat.” Though he was well accustomed to hearing me chronicle my amazing feats of insomnia, his voice was infused with sincere concern. He clicked furiously with his mouse. I expected him to offer me his usual tips about how to get a better night’s rest, but to my surprise, he said, “You going to Looptopia?”

I could hear him turn in his seat to face me, so I kept my head down and mumbled, “Yeah. My cousin wants to go, and she’s trying to help me be more social and shit.”

The springs in his chair shrieked as he hopped from his seat. He pulled out a schedule-map for the annual summer bash / arts festival and leaned over me, his right arm resting comfortably against the left side of my body. I lifted my head only enough to watch him unfold the sheet on top of my table. His slender index finger pointed to the places where I could find him if I happened to attend the all-night event. His proximity to my face—my body—melted my insides.

When he was finished, I turned my head and lay facing in the other direction, my eyes beginning to well up with tears. “Maybe I’ll see you...I don’t know. Like I said, I ain’t slept in, like, three days, man.” I rose from my seat and explained that I was leaving to take a nap in one of the other rooms. “You can

stay and practice, though,” I said, “because I’ll be here for a while. Anyways, I’ll see you later. If not tonight at Looptopia, I’ll see you when you take your next class.”

In actuality, I left because I was afraid that the tears would spill my feelings onto my face before I had a chance to get control of them.

One room and two short hallways away, I took a seat with my back facing the open doorway, laid my head on top of the table, shut my eyes against the tears, and pretended to doze off. I could hear him packing his materials. Moments later, I heard his footsteps as he walked past my room on his way to the exit. I was about to fake a snore to indicate that he shouldn’t bother waking me to say goodbye, but the entire office went eerily silent, and it was apparent that I was alone once again.

A pair of arms wrapped around my shoulders, and I screamed. “What the—dude! What did I say about the touching?” I spun around in my swivel chair and pushed his arms away. I didn’t mean to smile, but I did. The darkness of the unlit, windowless room masked the droplets hanging from my lashes.

He giggled out a “See ya later, ’k?”

I put my head down again and spoke into the table. “Yeah, maybe. Hit me up on MySpace sometime.”

I haven’t seen him in five months.

To earn as many courses as possible, I extended my two-month internship indefinitely, and to his surprise, I was still working in August when he called to inform us that he would not be able to attend a class he’d signed up to take. I chastised him for responding to only one out of the seven or eight MySpace messages I had sent him, including one that read, “Helloooooo? Are you still alive?” He apologized, claiming that he had been too busy to get back to me. While I tried to joke like we always did in the past, he spoke in clipped sentences, his voice distant. I got the point and ended the phone call quickly. Something inside me shattered. He has a girlfriend of four years, I reminded myself.

The next month, he posted photos of their anniversary celebration online.

Shortly before he posted those photos, I wrote him a detailed MySpace message explaining that I had been offered a chance to turn my internship into a paying, full-time position. I didn’t want to take the job because, as he knew, it probably would mean tedious, never-ending work for ridiculously low pay. I told him that I would rather continue to be poor and keep my creative buzz than slave my life away to maintain a decent lifestyle but have no time left for my artistic endeavors. His response—a surprise in itself, as I had grown accustomed to having him receive my messages without bothering to reply—was curt and dry: “You’ve been looking since forever and you held on this long, and now someone has finally offered you a job. You should just take it. That’s what I think. Peace.”

I can only blame myself for his standoffish attitude. Even a pushover like him can only take so many pushes—rejections—before he finally concedes. Perhaps I sealed my fate when I did attend Looptopia...but avoided every place he’d said he would be. I teetered all night along the edge of the crowd, ducking every time I saw a young, lanky Latino guy with short hair. Back at home, I cried about my inability to express my feelings to anyone other than my oldest niece. I didn’t seek him out that night—or ever—because I thought it was better to imagine him somewhere, floating in the masses, waiting for me, than to search and discover he wasn’t there.

My imagination; my creative side; the artist suffocating within—she is the only one who believes in the idea of him and me, the one who doesn’t question whether a beautiful, thin Latin boy could ever like a plump, sad, brown girl. She was the one who sent him a message via MySpace two days ago, the first one in several weeks. He not only responded, but wrote back the very next day, offering gifts he hasn’t given me since the last time I saw him in person: an entire paragraph. Details. This time, it was I who was brief, as my message simply read, “How’s it going? Found any art jobs yet?”

His response:

It's alright I guess. I have gotten about three interviews so far, two never called back and one I actually got but [it] wasn't what I thought it'd be at all so I quit the second day of work. I still have the same job though and its been alright, I'm getting more hours so that means more money. I am doing freelance still though, I'm working on making a site for a tattoo artist now. How bout you, anything new?

There is.