

Performance Artists in Another Life

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On the morning of their last day together, Marina and Ulay wore each other's morning gowns to the breakfast table. Ulay finds Marina's robe comforting: lavender blue and form fitting, like a hug. Marina finds his robe oversized and awkward, the navy merino cuffs dipping into her muesli bowl. She used to always feel special whenever Ulay bought her cereal he thought she'd like to try, but as she rounds off the third consecutive box of artisan muesli, she wonders if he will ever notice how much she dislikes slivered almonds.

Marina hates coffee, but Ulay always brews a pot big enough for two. After every breakfast, he empties the pot into another cup to carry with him in the car. But the morning he forgets his travel cup at work is the last breakfast they spend together. She will never know why, but every man she dates after Ulay will wear colognes with bottom notes of coffee.

In the bathroom after breakfast, Ulay places his toothbrush into a separate cup from Marina's. When Ulay will come back to collect his belongings in three days' time, he will go to great lengths to make sure he gets this cup back. Marina sees this as inconsequential, but to Ulay, this mug is one of the few items he owned pre-Marina, and will own post-Marina. The exterior is midnight black and glossy, with a faded red insignia from his university days. Since it fell out of the kitchen cupboard a month ago, it can no longer hold liquid. In a years' time, it will be sitting on his home office desk holding branded pens he took from work.

Marina's toothbrush holder is purpose-bought and sky blue.

Their second-hand car, the bicycle on the living room wall, and in fact all of their furniture was meticulously selected by Marina. Every empty surface holds wooden bowls of Marina's favourite potpourri to drown out the musk of water damage and unwashed laundry. Every piece of decor has a backstory: gifts from a friend in Vienna; self-made pieces at wine and pottery workshops; framed photographs of her family at Disneyland; birthday cards from earlier in the year. Ulay never made it onto the shelf, nor did he make his way into any of the backstories.

The bicycle was a birthday gift from Marina to Ulay. It was a sleek steel blue with retro charm and woven basket up front. She said this would help combat gas prices and reduce their carbon

footprint, but the living room wall felt barren without it on the brackets, so they agreed to leave it there. After their split, Ulay will sell it on Facebook Marketplace within a month, the post reading: “grey bike - excellent condition - almost never used”.

Marina hates how the Toyota Aqua handles. Every month, she cleans it inside and out. Every month she laments spilling coke on the passenger seat as a large dark stain occupies the centre of the cushion. A Hello Kitty plush hangs suspended from the rear view mirror and fills the car with the scent of strawberries. Thinking it cute, Ulay bought it for Marina, and while Marina admits she loves Sanrio, it makes her feel girlish and unprofessional. In two days, when she is removing his gym bag from her car, she will cut the doll’s string and place it in the key bowl on top of the fridge. The kitchen will smell like strawberry for weeks.

On the ride to work, Ulay misses the turn off from the roundabout then takes the wrong left, promising her it won’t make them late. It does. Marina’s weekdays comprise mostly data entry, while Ulay’s consist of managing a music store and skimming philosophy literature. Marina despises reading, but listens to audiobooks. She subscribes to Spotify premium for ad-free podcast listening and for Ulay to listen to songs on Pitchfork’s “Best New Music” tab. Today, he’s decided to pair *Slaughterhouse Five* with *Sign Crushes Motorist*.

Marina pairs a panadol with a glass of wine and changes into ankle-strap stilettos. She hates the way they wear but loves the way they make her feel. They make her steps deliberate and her walk five inches more powerful. Ulay wears Docs. Ulay only wears Docs. In fact, he hasn’t bought another brand since his first paycheck. He likes how long lasting they are, and it makes him feel a little less guilty for every plastic bag he has thrown out. He also likes the rush of superiority he feels when explaining how exploitative shoe companies are, and how 90% of shoes end up in the landfill. In half a year’s time, a friend will forward him an article from The Guardian wherein he will learn that only 2% of Doc Martens are actually made in the UK while the rest of the work is outsourced to Asia. Marina buys her shoes for the occasion, selling them on Depop a week later. She has a five star rating on her account from 38 different reviews.

On the day they break up, Ulay and Marina attend the birthdays of separate friends. Marina never liked Ulay’s friends, and her friends could never stand Ulay. Over their first round of blue lagoons Marina and her friends discuss what she sees in him, and she realises she has wondered that for a while herself. She claims it was his intrigue; something mature and put

together, but private. When they first began dating, she surveyed every inch of his being for a layer of depth she never eventually found. For months, she looked for something tender and malleable. But at three lagoons in, she admits defeat.

In a house party six blocks away, it takes Ulay two shots and a full pack of craft beers to come to the same conclusion. Ulay fears a cold bed, but every morning still wakes up alone, Marina having risen nearly an hour beforehand. Now he envisions a place he could call his own; a place to hang up band posters, and own a barista machine without it being pastel blue and boho chic. A place to live in, not just a place to return to.

After her party, Marina winces towards her apartment door with shoes in hand. Ulay, his footwork drunk and uncertain, approaches in the opposite direction. They lock eyes with one another, and for a moment Marina no longer sees Ulay as far away, but rather infinitely close and infinitely small. The pavement shrinks and grows with every step as they converge. Unknowingly, they are stepping in sync, leading with the opposite foot. Without her heels, Marina is the same height as Ulay, down to the inch.

Outside the apartment door, they meet in counterbalanced embrace. A tacit understanding is passed through silence and skin and, when seven seconds have passed, Marina and Ulay will continue their trek onwards in opposite directions.