

Over Caprese Sandwiches: A Vermont Love Story

She picked up a tomato and examined it. It was a little soft, but she put it in her grocery basket. She was going to prepare a tomato, basil, and mozzarella sandwich later. She was cooking for her date, an optometrist named Carl whom she had met on online. It was their third date (first was coffee and the second was an early dinner). Carl was divorced. She had been drawn to his seemingly kind smile on his profile picture. He had two children, both grown. She never had any and often wondered if it was her greatest mistake. She was a poet who taught at the Community College of Vermont spent her summers at poetry retreats and stumbled in and out of depression, as if it were an old sweater that she wore and took off with ease. She had learned to expect and occasionally welcome her depression. Not run from it. Sometimes it even helped with poetry.

She wasn't that well-known, but had published a few volumes of collected works with a medium-sized publisher. She made a decent living as she luckily found her way in the field before all the adjunct professors at Champlain College and at The University of Vermont needed to collect food stamps and work in bars at night.

Her last relationship was with Ned, a professor of botany at the University of Vermont. They had met at a symposium on whiteness in Vermont. They sat next to each other during a lecture, and after a long presentation, Ned invited her for a coffee at Muddy Waters. She accepted. Helen had found Ned slightly annoying, as he had mild social anxiety and an occasional tick which caused his head to twitch to the left mid-conversation. Helen found his body uninteresting and found his lovemaking equally uninteresting. Sometimes she thought of curious words while he was thrusting inside her, such an incandescent and incendiary and oath.

After selecting her tomatoes, she hurried to the cheese section, skirting her way between the shoppers pushing carts, the children running around, and the maze-like bulk section of City Market. The cheese options were plentiful and while examining the mozzarella selections, she wondered if the optometrist was lactose intolerant. She hadn't asked. She hoped he wasn't. She made her way to the check-out line, her grocery basket banging into her hip. Checking out was her least favorite part of grocery shopping. She didn't like the cashiers knowing what food she picked out and she often was nervous about seeming like she was over-spending. It seemed shameful, somehow, having her food lined up on the conveyor belt. Sort of how she felt when she observed animals urinating or defecating. Such a vulnerable act that somehow seems inappropriate to be in public.

There was traffic on her way to her home back to the South End of Burlington, but Helen knew that the traffic on Pine Street in Burlington was nothing compared to the endless lines of cars in other cities outside of Vermont. That was one of her favorite parts of Vermont. Helen loved living in Vermont and felt deeply tied to her identity as a Vermonter. She sometimes worried that her love affair kept her from falling into other love affairs. But after growing up in the sleepy town of Lincoln, Vermont, finding poetry at Bennington College and after twenty years of living in Burlington, Helen knew the landscape of Vermont as much as the landscape of her own hands.

She joyfully followed the routine of Vermont: biking and running during summers on the bike path, spending winters cross country skiing, fall meant apple picking, mud season was the time for baking. She never complained about the weather. It was just part of her romance with Vermont. Sometimes it was cold. Sometimes too icy. But it was always beautiful to her. It was part of it's charm and it's challenge. While shoveling the driveway and scraping her Subaru hurt her back, she would think of resting by her wood stove afterwards. While other faculty spoke longingly about teaching in more cultural sports such as New York City or in Boston for a semester, Helen was pleased by watching the changing leaves during foliage and didn't feel a need for more museums.

Helen pulled into her driveway and made her way into her home, fiddling with her key until it fit in the sensitive keyhole. It was a simple home that was rather uncluttered and had very little space for entertainment. She had one small TV, in her bedroom. She didn't have much wine, junk food, or other distractions and preferred to work in silence. She enjoyed folding laundry to classical music, but otherwise preferred to listen to the routine sounds of the appliances in her home and the cars passing her home.

At the sink, she washed the tomatoes and basil and wondered if she should wear perfume. She usually didn't and tended to wear the same style of clothes every day: black pants with a darker solid color blouse or shirt. She sometimes wore a scarf when she taught as well as a pair of glasses because she had read that students respect faculty who wear glasses. She did it more out of habit, because she had stopped caring so much about the approval of her students, deans, or her readers. That was the hardest part of her work as an author, the sense that irritable and tired and overworked and underpaid people read her poetry (if they read at all) and formed their own opinions of it. She used to feel buoyed by praise from her editors and publishers, but even positive feedback didn't have an effect on her anymore. She sometimes read her poetry out loud to the trees in her backyard, wishing that they could tell her what she thought. She often imagined that their silence was acceptance and if they moved their branches, it meant she had to revise a few words.

As she glanced at the clock, she realized that the Carl would be arriving soon. She didn't feel nervous, but more resigned. As she began chopping the tomato and slicing the cheese for the sandwiches, Helen knew that it was only fair that she was honest with Carl. He would have to know that dating Helen also meant dating Vermont. He would need to know that Vermont was her priority. That she would go to all the climate change rallies at the State House in Montpelier on weekends. That she would be part of the volunteer team to get Bernie elected in the evenings. That she would always read *Vermont Digger* before reading *The New Yorker*. That she would think of her favorite rivers and streams (Moss Glen Falls and the Winooski River) instead of thinking about Carl's children and anniversary dates. It meant that she would want to visit farms in the Northeast Kingdom and breweries in the Southern tip. That she would always want to spend a weekend in the woods in a yurt in Pomfret instead of travelling to Spain or Paris.

Helen opened a small closet where she keeps her fancy china. She found the elegant Simon Pearce plates and set three of them on her table. As she gently placed a sandwich on each plate, Carl appeared at her door, holding a bottle of red wine. She took a deep breath and wiped her

hands on a dishtowel before walking to the door. Carl smiled as he stood outside. Helen noticed that he was wearing a nice sweater and that he looked a little more handsome than she remembered. She opened the door and they hugged each other awkwardly, leaving some space between their bodies. Helen gestured to her table and Carl followed her. As he sat down, he looked at her curiously.

“Are we expecting someone else?” he asked, gesturing to the third plate.

“It’s for my lover,” she said calmly, resting her hands in her lap. Carl looked confused and re-crossed his legs and coughed slightly. He tilted head to the side a little. Helen laughed a little. “It’s for Vermont,” she added, letting the words hang in the air like the smoke that lingers after a candle has been extinguished.