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Clitastrophe

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Beth Staples

CLITASTROPHE

Roz has been on fourteen dates now without breaking down any of them to Taylor. She dates like it is her job, like she is hell-bent on eradicating free time. She is hell-bent on eradicating free time. And of eradicating her thoughts and, she is sure, some other eradication she doesn't really want to think about. She misses Taylor—her best friend, her former best friend?—or she did two months ago, after Taylor started spending all of her time with Neil. And then something about her absence started to feel familiar, and Roz began to feel smug about it, how easy it was to remember living without her. That smugness is ugly, she knows, but something about that ugliness feels good. She is strong, Taylor helped make sure of that in junior high, all those year ago, the time they never talk about.

Well, now they never talk about anything.

She feels like some half of a scientific team that's lost its partner. She is Clark, no Lewis. She is Lomb, no Bausch. She gets why doing things in teams can be so fruitful. She is fruitful anyway. She dates almost indiscriminately: an office supply salesman for 3-M, an over-dyed divorce lawyer, an agoraphobic video game designer, a bisexual with indeterminate income sources, a woman with an IMDB profile that lists her as the winner of a cooking show she's never heard of, and a guy whose ex-girlfriend is a roller derby star. This last one is Byron. She goes with Byron to see her, Full Metal Jackie, even though Roz knows that is weird, and the amount of time he spends explaining how platonic their relationship is only convinces her of the opposite. It doesn't matter. She is not dating for love. She is dating to keep herself busy. She is dating to feel something other than absence. She

will cheer for Full Metal Jackie. She may even cheer for Jackie to see Byron and feel jealous, which is clearly his goal now, as they enter the derby arena. She wonders about making this a project: going on online dating sites and offering herself up as a prop for men rather than a romantic partner. She'd still get all the activities, sex when she wanted it, but she wouldn't have to be so polite, act so interested. She'd get to know them well enough to strategize with them, and then she'd help find them a worthy girlfriend from inside the system. It takes a date to get a date, that's what they say. It's the kind of idea that could get you a book deal. She doesn't have the energy for that, but maybe a book deal would help find her some energy.

She has at least one idea like this a day: the project or life initiative or Instagram account that will change everything. She used to tell them to Taylor. Now she forgets about them.

They wait in line for beer, and then Byron leads Roz to a spot on the floor at the edge of the rink. It is where he always sits, he says. Which means: it is where Jackie will know to look for him. The roller derby stars are loud and tattooed and covered in cuts and bruises. She admires their thigh muscles and their sexy-but-pretending-not-to-care outfits as they mingle with the crowd on the other side of the rink, waiting for the game to start. Game? Match? Bout? She isn't sure. Across the room, already in their skates, the women appear to float.

Roz understands what it would take to make Byron like her. Questions about himself, easy laughter, eye contact. But it is hard to focus for the crowd. There is too much ambient noise, and Byron either talks too softly or she is already too bored to listen. She finds most men boring; she is more interested in listening to her own responses to what they say than anything else. Or she finds them creepy. So many of them are creepy.

She has wondered, many times, what it was about Neil that got to Taylor. Roz and Taylor had been hanging out together, of course, when they met him, and she remembers

feeling like she could have stepped forward and claimed him. They were at a bar playing darts, and right after they ordered their second pitcher, Neil and his friend came over and asked to join them. She'd decided to be generous, to recede, let Taylor get the attention for a change. Maybe she's always felt that way—as Taylor's sexual superior—or at least she has since college. She took one for the team, as they say, those who are still on teams, and talked to Neil's friend, the short one, who had his phone attached to his belt. They had agreed years before, during one of their list-making phases, not to talk to men who wore their phones on their belts. Or men who wore sandals or drove yellow cars, men who went shirtless in public in non-swimming situations, who did not have best friends, who did not like pets, who put too much faith in religion of any denomination or, conversely, did not allow the possibility of something greater than themselves guiding the universe. Neil, it turned out, was a dentist. This was not on the list, but shouldn't it have been?

Roz's list of unacceptable traits is too long to list now. Or maybe it is just men—the maleness—she finds unacceptable.

But in swooped Neil, and now Taylor barely has time to talk to Roz anymore, even though Taylor's headaches are back, which should be a sign that something is terribly wrong. Though Taylor won't hear it, that something might be wrong, won't hear anything Roz has to say. It reminds Roz of being fourteen again. Back then there were three of them: Taylor, Roz, and Aminah. She never even thinks about this, has done a really good job of blocking it all out, actually. Until now. Until Taylor stopped talking to her, and it's like this new hurt brought up the old one. The big one.

"It's kind of the splash zone, too," Byron is saying about where they are sitting. "Sometimes a girl will land on you." The glee on his face when he says this makes Roz want to leave immediately. She takes a sip of her beer, which is warm. Byron, she thinks, has barely concealed intimacy problems. But no matter. She's hardly concerned with Byron. She's here

to learn about roller derby, a sport she might even consider playing. Just look at all the new girl friends or girlfriends she could have, free with their cleavage and unafraid to crash headlong into one another. They are the opposite of air, she sees now: muscular and leaden, their skates like weights, keeping them wedded to the ground.

“Do you want to hear a crazy story?” she asks Byron, who turns to look at her full-on, steady eye contact, and she finds herself actually surprised by the quality of his eyes, what appears to be genuine interest.

“Of course I do,” he says.

“When I was fourteen, one of my friends went missing.” She has not done this before, or not as an adult, used Aminah as a get-to-know-you story, a party trick. She feels a little sick as she starts to do it, but Byron is practice. Just practice. She wants to hear how she will tell the story. She wants to hear what she’ll say about Taylor.

“Missing,” he says, like it’s a word he’s just learning. “Like, on a field trip?” The question is so specific that she knows he has some childhood story too, some kid who they lost on their Big Apple excursion who never came back to the bus. Some freckle-faced child who found a Chinese buffet or got lost in a subway tunnel or took a cab to FAO Schwartz. They found him eventually, she knows. They always find that kid.

“No, not like on a field trip,” she says. If she’s going to do this, she might as well lean in, go back there—the two of them, Taylor and Roz, outside of the school, looking for Aminah, the September day so hot it felt like the end of the school year, not the beginning. They were waiting at the bottom of the long flight of stairs in front of the school, not across the street where some of the kids smoked or played hacky sack. She remembers how much her feet hurt from her new shoes, and how the blisters they gave her took forever to heal, even after it seemed clear Aminah was not going to be found. “There were two of us. We were waiting for Aminah after school to walk home. It was early in the year, but we’d

walked home together every day. We waited and she never came.”

“Where was she?” He looks genuinely puzzled, and she marvels at how easy it is for men not to grasp the essential disposability of women. Has no one ever told him what it feels like to be a girl on a street corner? She hears the word *snatch* in her head, a fragment from somewhere, some kids at school, the TV. Its two terrible meanings. She’s already finished her beer and wants another, but also wants to be able to drive herself home.

“She was gone, Byron. Someone took her. She never came home.”

He chokes a bit on his beer. “Are you serious?”

“I’m serious,” she says.

“That’s very fucked up,” he says.

“Very fucked up,” she agrees. She has to stop herself from thinking of what this means, exactly, what fucked up thing or things might have happened to Aminah. She has to stop herself now, as she’s had to so many times, from imagining.

The women are lining up now across the rink. They are hamming it up, growling and stretching and poking their fingers into the holes in their fishnets. The announcer begins his announcements. He has a voice made for a late-night infomercial for exercise equipment people buy but never use. He goes down the row: Beast Infection, Madame Ovary, Clitastrophe. Roz considers using their names as the basis of a lesson plan with her sixth graders, wonders how quickly that would get her called into the principal’s office. She’d rather be the one to tell her students what a clitoris is than let them try to figure it out—figure out how to interact with it—on Tiktok. She’s not trying to be irresponsible with her students, just the opposite. She showers them with condoms. She draws anatomically correct things on the board. She knows they will know so many things soon; she thinks someone responsible should help them with that knowing. This is a debt she owes. To keep the boys from being the

kinds of men who might do something terrible.

Is Neil doing something terrible to Taylor? Maybe all men are terrible. Or maybe her barometer is off. Or maybe this is the terrible thing: the Taylor that had all the time for her is gone. Neil is doing something terrible to her, to Roz. But why doesn't Taylor think it's terrible too? Maybe Taylor has always wanted her gone. Roz reminds her of the most terrible things. But for Roz, their friendship was a reason for having hope, that it had survived so much. Without Taylor, all that's left is the unthinkable.

The whistle blows and the women all begin to move, all at once, forward. Roz lets her fingernail brush against Byron's knee. Just for a second. He looks down at her finger, at his knee, instead of looking at her. Then he clears his throat. Or she thinks he does. It is so loud, with the announcer announcing and the crowd cheering and the women yelling.

"Were you close with her?" Byron asks, near her ear.

He means Aminah, not Taylor. He can't read her thoughts. "She was one of my best friends," Roz says. This was true. For most of their lives then, it had been true. The three of them had been inseparable.

"What did you say her name was?" he asks.

"Aminah."

"Do I remember that? Hearing about her going missing, I mean." He tilts his head, the definition of stupid male contemplation.

"Do you?"

"How old are you?"

Roz is annoyed. Why does this matter, she wants to know, the math of her age? Plus he should know this if he spent any time at all on her profile. She knows he is thirty-one.

"I must be older than you," he says. "I remember that from high school. She was really pretty, right? A Black girl. Gone missing from a mostly white neighborhood."

It feels impossible that he remembers this, has it at the

ready, the exact thing she's spent her whole life forgetting. Though there were the flyers and the milk cartons, the *Unsolved Mysteries* episode. He has the details right. Aminah was very pretty, though Roz is mad that this is what he remembers. Aminah was the smartest of them, the most stylish, had the best laugh, was hopelessly clumsy. She played the tuba because she thought it was the most unlikely instrument for a Black girl to play. She practiced sketching realistic eyeballs on all of her notebooks. She wore giant plastic earrings, fruit ones and musical notes and flowers and cats—a different pair for every outfit. Roz does not know what Aminah's parents did with her collection of earrings, and when she imagines them—in a box, in the trash, she can't know for sure—she feels a well of grief ready to open inside her and has to force it closed.

"That's crazy that you remember," she says.

"It is," he says. "I have the worst memory."

A whistle blows. There's been some kind of penalty. For what, Roz can't imagine—the frenetic thrashing seems to be part of the game. For a minute, everything seems to stop. There's a woman on the floor, and the ref, also in fishnets, helps her up.

"We didn't know what to do when she didn't show after school," Roz continues, has been waiting to continue. "So we walked to the Wawa and then the twelve blocks home without her. I got a chocolate milk. Do you believe that? My friend was getting kidnapped and I bought a chocolate milk." She has not thought about this at all. She hasn't been able to, not then and not now, for more than a couple minutes, or she starts to feel her chest seize and stutter, her breath lost somewhere in the act of trying to breathe.

Byron is back to watching the game, which has started again. The match. She can't tell if he's really interested or just trying to see Jackie or whether he's avoiding her gaze. She agrees with him that this story she's telling is pretty fucked up, to just bring it up like this on a first date. To talk

about a missing girl as if it's something that happened to her, as if the important thing was what an affront it was to her own childhood. Though she does think of it that way too. That's the only way she's allowed herself to think of it.

She could go on and really sabotage this date, tell Byron about those months after Aminah was gone, when things got even weirder and more fucked up. Not more fucked up than whatever happened to Aminah, granted, but more fucked up for Roz, who went on living. (Did Aminah not go on living? She can't think of it, Aminah's life ending, though at this point, isn't that what they've all decided, without thinking too hard about it?) During those terrible weeks, Taylor started ignoring Roz completely. Why exactly this happened, Roz couldn't say. Aminah's disappearance was the reason they needed to hang on tighter. Roz had thought if they could just talk, they could clear up whatever logic Taylor was using to push her away. Roz went to their secret meeting spot one day after school, once their parents allowed them to go back to school, and Taylor had actually been there, an act of collision that seemed ordained, reason enough for reconciliation. But when Roz tried to say something, Taylor had called her "the wind," right to her face, as if she couldn't see her at all. "There blows the wind," she had said. Like some fucked up evil pirate. Roz had been too dumbfounded to speak, and Taylor had just walked away. And that had been that.

Until college, that is, when Roz and Taylor ended up drunk at a party together. A satellite campus of Penn State, the only place that took both of them—their grades suffered during high school, as anyone with any compassion might have imagined. Roz and Taylor went to the same random party and ended up hugging and crying in a corner, just like Roz had always imagined they would someday. That was nine years ago. They'd be best friends again for nine whole years.

Roz considers herself nimble, that's a word she uses in her annual self-assessments at school to describe how she recovers from the sometimes-cruelty of her sixth graders, like

them reporting her to the principle that time she accidentally gave them flavored condoms. That should have been funny, not something that almost got her fired. She has been nimble since she was fourteen when she had to find other friends, had to find a way to go on, had to find a way to blossom, so to speak. Three months after Aminah disappeared, Roz got boobs and a prescription for Retin-A, and she felt herself grow into someone a little less afraid. Because she'd already been through the worst thing anyone could go through. One of her best friends went missing, and her other best friend decided she should disappear too. At first, she'd decided Taylor's treatment of her was the worst possible thing, even worse than whatever it was that Aminah had gone through. Because at least someone had *wanted* Aminah, had wanted her badly enough to take her. She is sure, now, that what she went through was not worse. She knows enough about men and sex to grant Aminah the more terrible fate. The fact that she is here to weigh such a claim is enough reason to concede the victory. She feels bad now for that kind of selfish thinking, but she also tries to be kind to young Roz. She wants someone to be.

Roz had felt reckless in the lonely days that followed Taylor's rejection, practically offering herself up in her front yard, on street corners. She wanted to be taken, to be wanted. And she wanted Taylor to feel bad, to feel even worse. But eventually it wasn't so hard to make new friends. Her friendship with Aminah had afforded her a certain celebrity, and people were curious about her. She made up lies about Taylor, about her endless sniveling sadness, about her playing still with Barbies, about being too scared to do anything fun anymore, and her new friends accepted the break as logical and as an act of self-preservation on Roz's part. She knew if she told the truth that everyone would pretty much agree that Taylor was in the wrong, wasn't a real friend at all. But part of her worried that her new friends might recognize something in her that Taylor had seen—something dismissible. And so

she made up her lie and stuck to it.

It *was* an act of bravery, that she didn't let Taylor turn her completely into wind; she considers herself to be brave still. She feels brave in front of her sixth graders. She feels brave in the way she uses her body, brave in going on date after date and deeming each person not good enough. It is not so brave to accept a dentist who is bad at darts so seamlessly into your life, to let him domesticate you so quickly, to allow him to convince you marriage is a viable option, a legitimate institution. Byron, she knows, is not even good enough for a second date. It makes her feel brave even now as she sips her second beer and edges slightly away from him, a man she does not need to want her or even like her. A man she could take or leave. No one to be afraid of. She feels, if she's being honest, that Taylor is not brave—that Neil came along and completely sabotaged her life, their plans. On some level, Roz thinks she always knew something ordinary like this would come for Taylor—she's been courting her own easy life, the disappearance of self that comes with it, the way Roz courted kidnappers on street corners. Roz knows you have to fight that feeling every day of your life, the desire for something predictable to push you down because you're secretly sure that you belong down there.

Byron comes back to her, changes the subject. He asks her where she grew up, and she tells him Mt. Airy. He is from New Jersey, says he moved to "Filthadelphia" to go into pharmaceutical sales. Roz thinks she should probably draw the line at pharmaceutical sales. Byron pulls a pen from his pocket and gives it to her. It says CYMBALTA on the side and has small caplets floating in some kind of liquid in the body of it. She flips it over, once, twice, and watches the pills float up and down. "People go crazy for that pen," Byron says, kind of proud of himself, and she makes an attempt to thank him earnestly. This is only the first sign that she should go back on anti-depressants, she thinks. She needs at least two more signs before seriously considering a call to her doctor.

The women are still skating. One of them has a ball, she realizes. Roz tries to get the rules of the game from Byron, but he doesn't seem to really understand them. He's pointing to various girls and telling her stories about them, and she finds it offensive that he can remember so much gossip, but not remember anything about the game. She thinks Byron is definitely a misogynist, and maybe that's Full Metal Jackie's problem with him. She had hoped that watching these women skate would help her feel empowered, but she doesn't feel empowered at all. She's not sure why. She asks for another beer, which really is a bad idea, and he gets up with a loud sigh—she hates loud sighs, the sound of unarticulated protest her students rely on daily and seemingly without realizing—to get her one. While he's gone, she watches the legs of the players go around the rink, once and then twice, the various colors of their skin, the various sizes of their muscles. They push and thrash, and it is strange to see them move in so many different ways while still moving in a constant circle, like atoms. They are, in this aggregate and individually, so much more interesting than Byron is in his baggy jeans and predictable cologne. She is embarrassed to be here with him, holding a pen full of big pharma propaganda. She turns her head to look for a trash can, thinks she will feel better if she can toss the thing, and so she doesn't see the woman flying toward her until it is too late to make any meaningful move away. A knee or a skate or an elbow hits her mouth; she feels the heat of it first, the transfer of energy. She feels the difference between her brain and her skull, a disconcerting rattling, the awareness of her face as being made of bone. This is what the cartoons have been depicting all of these years: her skull is a bell, her brain the clapper. She gongs, she rings. She feels an immediate puffiness, a swelling that feels more metaphysical than physical: her teeth feel too big for her mouth, her mouth too big for her face. The parts of her don't make sense together. She feels the room looking at her, sees Byron at some distance, holding two beers, a look of delighted shock on his face. He is insult to injury. She hates

him with a vicious clarity. She hates pharmaceutical reps, and beer, and roller derby. She thinks: head ache. She thinks: this orange lightning, this unbearable heat, this horrific spotlight, this is pain. And then: poor Taylor.

But she does not think of Taylor for long. The roller derby girl, the projectile herself, is saying something to her. Clitastrophe. Byron is trying to get through the crowd, the ridiculous beers sloshing onto his wrists. A medic comes from somewhere and clears people away. "You're bleeding," he says, and gives her a towel to hold to her lip. He helps her toward a bench near the concessions, and she leans on him as she walks, limping. Her leg, she realizes, is asleep from sitting cross-legged on the floor. "We can't call it Indian style anymore," she thinks, but knows better than to say. This is not her classroom. She feels confused. She doesn't know how she'll get home.

The medic offers ice, another towel, a cup of water. He starts to warn her about concussions, and then she sees Byron is there, leaning over her. He looks concerned, she'll give him that. He holds out a fist, palm up, and then splays his fingers. "Her tooth," he says, looking at the medic, and offers it up, for one of them, though she isn't sure who, like a pill.

"Milk," the medic says, though of course there is no milk in the roller derby arena. The tooth is a goner. Roz moves her tongue in her mouth, looking for the gap, but her whole mouth feels and tastes like a wound. It would be funny if it wasn't so many other things. She imagines walking into Neil's office, the tooth in her fist. Would he call Taylor? Would she come?

She thinks of the dentist they all had as kids, his creepy smile, his bad breath. What kind of man wants to lurk in the mouths of young girls for a living? He had this chest of toys in the corner of his office. "You can pick something if you're good," he would say. She was always good. She didn't cry or ask for extra Novocain. But she never took a toy. She didn't want him to see her want something he was offering. She didn't want to have to smile and thank him.