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Peter Bacho/Entries

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ALL AND TAN and young and lovely, she passes, and Rico watches her, but not in Ipanema. Has she somehow lost her way? Why is she here in dreary, overcast Seattle? Twenty-three, twenty-four, max, with Audrey Hepburn’s narrow, high cheekbones, a timeless face that makes makeup redundant. Only the one he is watching, Audrey redux, is younger, maybe even within reach. Long-limbed and graceful, she is stunning in her white cotton dress—glamour for the masses, a prima ballerina for the poor.

Miss Andrews, she says, in a way that isn’t from here as she continues gliding along the floor, moving up one aisle and down another, touching heads and shoulders, smiling as she goes. She declares, but not in so many words, that she wanted this landfill of minds already wasted, a class full of earthtone faces, of blacks and browns, earthbound boys and girls born without wings or hope.

In this class, there are no other hues, no Japanese or Chinese (Confucian order took care of them—made them well behaved and polite, burdened them with books, made them future dentists). There are no whites, at least on this day. Bobby Ray is white, but he isn’t present. He hangs with the brothers, makes love to the sisters. He’s missed a few weeks, having been shot in the back by his
occasional lover’s husband. As a white guy, Bobby Ray doesn’t count.

In a larger sense, the other students don’t count either. For the school district, they are academic slag, and this class (remedial English) is the district’s asshole which, after a term’s digestion, pops out colored human turds.

Still, Miss Andrews wants this high school. She wants this class.

Why? Her interrogator is a young black boy, a skeptic full of young black boy snarl and attitude. She answers first with a smile, amped even brighter now; it narrows and bores into the boy, its heat melting his will to doubt her. She thanks him for the question, then poses a question to his question.

“What’s your name?”

Bug-eyed, he stares, like he’d just seen Easter Jesus smiling smugly and strolling out of his tomb. Maybe he was blinded? Seeing the stigmata has that effect. The boy doesn’t, can’t, immediately reply.

Rico, impatient, awaiting her explanation, wanting to hear her voice, reaches across the aisle to nudge the boy.

“It’s Delbert, you dumb motherfucker,” he whispers, but not so discreetly that those nearby don’t hear. They chuckle.

“Huh?” he screeches, and begins to sweat. “Ah, yeah, uh, what was the question?” he asks, to a chorus of derision growing louder and just starting to crest.

“Fuck you, Rico,” he adds, before mumbling to himself.

“It’s Delbert, Miss Andrews,” Rico says, after the laughter subsides. His tone drips white schoolboy sincerity.

“Then you, ah . . .”

“Rico.”

“Rico, thank you,” she says, as her smile shifts from Delbert to a new, fully appreciative target.

Miss Andrews begins walking toward her desk. She then turns and casually sits on the edge and faces the class. She slouches ever so slightly, relaxed, like she is visiting old friends. But old friends
wouldn’t stare at the hem of her dress, which has hitched an inch above her knees. Rico does.

To get a better view, he has to clear an obstructing Afro more high than wide, so he leans slightly to his right. The hair belongs to Muhammad Kenyatta who, for his first seventeen years had been known as George, as in Washington—a slavemaster, a slave name. That’s why over the summer, he changed his name, as did others, even Delbert, who became Ali Karenga, a name that growled more than poor Delbert did. The name is fierce; Delbert isn’t. By the end of summer, he’d become Delbert again.

Rico adjusts to the new sounds and looks, but frankly, he has trouble recalling the African-sounding names, and liked it better when the bloods got haircuts, but that was before Stokely and Rap had made all of that political. He can’t help it if he likes the old look—Diana Ross straight hair for women, tight (co拉丁s) cuts, like Sonny Liston’s, for men—but hair in 1967 is a black thang, which means, by definition, it isn’t his. Besides, big hair and baad-sounding names make cops and teachers nervous, like hair and names could start a riot. Rico being Rico, he likes that.

Afro cleared, Rico’s target comes into focus. Tanned, he thinks, and wonders where the tan line stops or, better still, if it does. He smiles. She is clearly not from here.

She is getting ready to speak, to stir and challenge. She sighs and as she does, Rico memorizes her form, toe to head to just above her waist as he follows the movement of her breasts—inhalé (nipples up), exhale (nipples down).

Thirty-four B, he guesses. Firm and just right. Composed now, her smile reappears.

Hard now, Rico smiles at her smile. Oh sure, he’d had lovers, nasty, stank-filled one-night party stands, even rumors of a kid or two. But hey, prove it, okay? What was my name, my out-of-town one-night alias? Oakland? My hometown, my brother. He’d even had girlfriends, a few long-term (more than a month), but he’d never had Audrey Hepburn.

She is serious now as she begins explaining why she’d come
to Adams High. She begins talking about JFK asking what you
could do for something or other—“He spoke to me,” he thinks he
hears her say—and how she’d sobbed on that deadly Dallas day.
But Bobby is still here and Martin had a Washington Monument
dream of a better America, which triggers Rico’s own dream of
being invited one day to trace that tan beyond Miss Andrews’s
hem to discover where, or if, it ends.

American, he thinks—for beautiful, for spacious brown thighs
on which God has shed his grace—a place of wonder, of endless
potential. As Miss Andrews tells her story of hope and faith, Rico
smiles at her.

He has his own set of hopes.
He hopes to fuck her; he is feeling patriotic.