



Booth

Volume 6 | Issue 6

Article 3

6-20-2014

Prospect Summer

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Recommended Citation

Carberry, Catherine (2014) "Prospect Summer," *Booth*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 6 , Article 3.
Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol6/iss6/3>

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Prospect Summer

Abstract

Our first night in the new apartment, Max and I slept with the windows open. It was mid-July and the street sounds were steam hiss over Jamaican barbecue, stereos blasting all the radio stations at once, the drone-shriek of cicadas. Max wanted to shut the windows. I wanted to keep them forever open to the strange entomological violence of Brooklyn. We had known each other since I was two weeks old, and we didn't fight frequently.

Keywords

friendship, New York, roommates, relationships

Cover Page Footnote

"Prospect Summer" was originally published at *Booth*.



BOOTH



A JOURNAL

June 20, 2014

Prospect Summer

Fiction by Catherine Carberry

Our first night in the new apartment, Max and I slept with the windows open. It was mid-July and the street sounds were steam hiss over Jamaican barbecue, stereos blasting all the radio stations at once, the drone-shriek of cicadas. Max wanted to shut the windows. I wanted to keep them forever open to the strange entomological violence of Brooklyn. We had known each other since I was two weeks old, and we didn't fight frequently.

The apartment was on a street that marked the border between Crown Heights and Prospect Heights. Where we were from, streets were named after families who still lived there. In Rudolph, Ohio, the old graveyard overflowed with plastic flowers laid on the graves of great-great-great grandmothers who had once come from Germany and were too stubborn to leave. So we honored them.

Max slept on a futon in the kitchen and gave me the bed. His girlfriend was doing her Masters in Cleveland and didn't mind that we were living together. Max and I had been neighbors in Rudolph; we took baths together as toddlers, held hands in kindergarden parades. Of course we had kissed. Of course I never liked his girlfriends. But I was polite, and I told them that Max was like my brother, and that was nearly true.

That summer, though, I wanted girlfriends to worry. I was bent on getting somewhere. I was a subway car of want. I was leaving the station and roaring through tunnels, giving all my change to panhandling mariachi men, to boys selling candy bars to stay off the streets.

Max worked near Bryant Park and I worked five blocks east. We both ran errands for bosses who left early on Fridays for the Hamptons. Each night, we rode the subway home together, and then we would unfurl our bodies on the sofa, eat ice cream until it pooled in the carton. We sat in front of the fan at the window and I watched Max's bangs lift up in girlish wisps, then stick to his forehead.

Finally, Max's girlfriend came to visit. I gave them my bed and started staying out late after work, going to midtown bars and trying to make conversation over vodka tonics. I didn't have to lie to sound exotic. To New Yorkers, Ohio was Nepal. Ohio was miles of corn and sky. For them I was Rust Belt Julie, Julie of the flatlands, Julie who had never heard of the Crown Heights riots. I would pull out my subway map and trace my fingers over the A, C, E line.

So that's how you get to Penn Station! I would say, all apple-cheeked blink and sway. One of the men rode the subway with me and walked me home. Max and his girlfriend weren't back yet, so I led him tip-toed to the mattress in the kitchen, unfolded the silk screen and I kissed him the way I had wanted to kiss a stranger since I first came to New York.

Then there were his hands around my throat.

I remember Max and his girlfriend unlocking the door, their voices sweet and drunken. They came into the kitchen and saw me splayed, saw the hands holding down my wrists. Max looked at me disgusted just for an instant, before he realized it wasn't what I wanted.

A real brother would have done something. Max stood still, clutching his girlfriend's hand as if that would protect her. The two of them were an island and I was something bobbing in the ocean, half-drowned and barnacled. The man pulled on his clothes and left, muttering curses. Max wouldn't say anything.

Later his girlfriend told me that if I was pregnant, she and Max could adopt the baby.

I can't wait to be a mother, she said.

A week later, she was gone and it was August. I had stopped going to bars. I had stopped taking pregnancy tests. Max and I met after work and rode the 5 home.

They were lighting bottle rockets on Franklin Avenue. We stayed crouched in the subway stairwell and listened to the sizzle and blast until the kids scattered. Finally

we walked home through fading smoke, over cicada shells that crunched like dead leaves.

In five years Max would marry his girlfriend and she would deliver two fist-sized stillborns before they adopted a redheaded Appalachian baby. Somehow, their daughter looked like them. The wife would look at the beautiful little girl and think of the misshapen babies she had left in Ohio hospitals, and even though by now they were just dust over Cincinnati, she always would love them more.

That winter, my parents would divorce and I would move in with my father in his Jersey Shore bungalow. He would become a beachcomber, spending all day with his metal detector. I would come home at night and he would be sorting through his pail of nickels and bottle caps, holding up coins to the light and telling me how much each one was worth.

Catherine Carberry holds an MFA from Bowling Green State University and currently serves as Assistant Editor of *Bartleby Snopes*. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in various publications, including *Tin House online*, *North American Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Sou'wester*, and *Indiana Review*.