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THE PRINCETON DINKY

THERE IS a time machine in Princeton, New Jersey. I've been a patron from time to time. By all accounts, it's been there since 1865. However, I wouldn't discover it for some 154 years. To find it, one must make their way to the Princeton Junction railway station, accessible directly via New Jersey Transit's Northeast Corridor line. There you can board a 170-foot-long by 9½-foot-wide hunk of stainless steel known as the "Dinky." This two-car shuttle was originally devised as a mode of transport specifically intended to fetch bright-eyed coeds from the town's main depot and into the heart of the university campus, some 2.7 miles away. It is this distance that qualifies the Dinky as the shortest scheduled commuter rail line in the United States. In fact, a one-way trip takes less than five minutes. However, if you ride it right, a single fare can carry you back decades.

Despite being a New Jersey resident for the near entirety of my life, I'd only become a semi-regular rider in my early adulthood. Of course, I'd always known of the town's existence, the same way any local would. However, with my semi-above average high school grades falling well afield of the university admission standards, I'd never had any real reason to visit. Because of this, the place itself had taken on a bit of a magical construct in the back of my mind. I'd imagined a somewhere the elbow-patched intelligentsia walked great stone hallways chewing on the ends of pencils, where they thought great thoughts and attended debates in velvet robes and where, at the end of each day, they'd gather for a feast of wild boar before heading off to cheer on the varsity jousting team. What surprised me, when I finally did make it there, was how much I'd gotten right.

Late into my second year of unemployment, when I'd decided to step away from the act of self-harm that was the job search and, instead, focus my energy on finishing grad school, I decided to take in a little real-world college atmosphere. As my master's program was remote, having started with the intent to balance higher education and full-time work, I had the luxury of matriculating anywhere that offered a charging port and decent Wi-Fi. While there were several more geographically convenient schools available to me, I figured, if the sole purpose of this outing

was to engage in a little intellectual carpetbagging, I might as well shoot for the stars with it. So, on a date that is now lost to history, I donned a costume of low-rise Chuck Taylors, a crisp, white long-sleeve Oxford, a baseball cap, and wire-rimmed glasses. And, as I met the mirror gaze of a guy named Thurston—or, in my case, with my gay little short short, Thurstyn—I grabbed my laptop satchel and made for the Dinky.

Once aboard, the transmutation occurs mercilessly quick. The transfer at Princeton Junction is accompanied by a sonic boom wherein, just across the platform, the pitch and intensity of the surrounding conversation jumps anywhere from two to three octaves. The machine itself embarks like raging bull, bucking out of the station as if powered by sheer, unbridled enthusiasm. Around me, some kids are headed to a morning class having never gone to bed, whispering their confessions from a night out in the city into the greasy guts of a breakfast sandwich while others are flipping through decks of flashcards and saying prayers to the gods of geophysical fluid dynamics. Between them, a chorus of the trivial and the monumental and me, twisting the beaded bracelets on my wrist as if they're the wheels of time until, when it comes time to de-train, we're all the same age.

Off the platform, the world is only slightly at odds with my estimation. Around me, jousters don't whiz by on horseback but, rather, on e-bikes. And the velvet robes of the great debaters are cotton-poly blend and bright orange with the letters "PU" emblazoned over the hearts of their wearers. But these superficial variations are lost altogether as they fall into a massive bodily surge, as if toward some massive celestial body. I surrender myself to the pull of their tangerine riptide.

It's easy to fall into a movement, especially when it offers to do most of the work for you. For me, just one in a crush of bobbing heads, direction is meaningless when all I can see is the back of someone's neck, even more meaningless when the shoulders pressed against mine seemingly lift me off the ground. Would I have looked down I wouldn't have been surprised to find my feet dangling inches off the blacktop that slid beneath me. But my attention is drawn upward as, over a crest of the bed-headed, spires clawed into the blue sky and the campus wraps its sandstone arms around us. Only then, when it's too late, when the solidity of the place has wielded its gravitational pull, does one realize that they are on a collision course. I am just one in a swarm, a collective body carried forward by an intent to crash upon the buildings' Gothic surfaces without ever truly knowing why.

Then the crash comes. And, with it, not destruction but, instead, the creation of something entirely new. The bloc splinters into shards, skittering in all directions. Some disappear behind the buzz and clack of residence hall doors while others are swallowed down the mouth of hungry archways. Some flop to the grass, joining a waiting circle of friends already picking the flecks of conversation from between their teeth. It all happens like a tidal wave, the kind that occurs on the hour, engulfing everything at once and receding just as quickly. The kind I used to ride with no hands but in which, now, I kick and flail just to remain above water.

If the rustiness of my sea legs betrays me, it's not so obvious as to tip off those around me to the interloper in their presence. Whether mistaken for a grad student or, at worst, a TA, I step into the crowd without catching any looks of suspicion, making a point, as I pass the collegiate chapel, to say a small prayer to the patron saint of tiny Italian men with good skin. Whatever it is, acceptance or indifference, that which I am granted gives me the anonymity and the space I need to fall quickly into the storybook landscape that unfolds around me. Upon the turn of a page, I am wandering down carved walkways, slipping my finger into the groove of a limestone wall while, overhead, a gargoyle gets off on my perversion. Past a set of iron lions lies a world of Tudor facades dotted with windows, each with their own anachronistic stories to tell. Under one, where someone once surely scribbled essays by candlelight, I catch the purple glow of LED strips tracing the ceiling and tossing some illumination upon a self-stick decal that reads "Dream big, little mermaid." Under another, where a future Son of Liberty once engaged in quiet study, I catch a whiff of the indistinguishable, dank aroma of dude, quickly confirmed by a guttural howl that pours from the third floor sill, indicating what could just as easily be a violent orgasm as it could be a violent death. It's a world of sights and sounds. It's a world that takes the term "Ivy League" so horticulturally literal that every freshman enters with aspirations and graduates with a rash. It's a world that has me under its spell in less than an hour.

No matter what I find myself wanting on a given day, the town, like any decent drug, is there to provide a fix. And this quick intoxication soon finds the Dinky coming to know the outline of my underside far too well. With each visit, I find something new to love. On a Tuesday, I come to love how I can celebrate the legacy of genius with a visit to Albert Einstein's cottage house as well as with an Avocado Veg Out

sandwich at the bagel shop around the corner that bears his name. On a Thursday, I come to love the bookstore on Nassau Street where the latest Sally Rooney hardcover is twenty bucks but where I can still snag a used paperback of *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* for \$4.99. On a Wednesday, I come to love how the town celebrates its pre-Revolutionary heritage with storefronts like the Yankee Doodle Tap Room, located right across the street from Ye Olde Godiva Chocolatier. I come to love how it's the kind of place that still boasts a working two-screen movie theater where my choices are either *Jumanji 2: The Next Level* or an old Alain Resnais flick. How it dares to stand frozen while allowing time to walk all over its face. And how here, among the bare-chested history and contradictions, I am just another red and white striped shirt on the pages of *Where's Ralph Waldo Emerson?*

It is true, however, that this frozen nature can catch if one stops for too long. Sure, there is schoolwork to busy myself with, but not enough to fill a day. And lack of access to any of the university resources keeps me at arm's length, working from a coffee shop and paying for my right to squat at a booth with the cheapest item on the menu. There I am a student, yes, but only on the periphery of honest-to-goodness matriculation, posting my analyses of the week's reading assignments and engaging in class participation, which, for an online program, consists of responding to other students' posts in the class forum. Eventually, one runs out of two-hundred-word ways to say "I concur," and I find myself, eyes glazed, clicking through the only six websites I seem to know on an otherwise boundless internet and feeling the stagnancy grab me by the ankles. Eventually, Princetonians trickle in for a double shot between lectures, moving one hundred miles a minute while standing stock still, inhaling espresso and exhaling optimism, and I'm out the door before I pass out from the fumes. In this game of perpetual movement, I pop into the fine foods store to make a meal of bread cubes and samples of artisan olive oils before the shopkeeper can get wise to me. Then I'm down the alley and up the cobbled pass, moving, weaving through a field of Patagonia vests, all entering the second hour of their business lunches. I pass the window of the jewelers to admire some Patek Philippe watches I'll never be able to afford. At the Ralph Lauren, I pretend to be interested in an overpriced patchwork sweater until the clerk steps behind a curtain and I juke into the fancy bathroom to drop off my iced Americano. If the object is to remain in motion so as to never know one's place in the race, I'm doing quite well, until I find myself stopped,

waiting in line to buy chapstick at the Urban Outfitters behind a couple of boys buzzing about the upcoming semester.

"Yeah, man," says one, slinging a pair of maroon Reverse Terry sweat-pants over his shoulder. "For my ecology track we're going to be spending three weeks at the Mpala Research Center in Kenya getting actual experience in the field."

"Shit. Kenya?" offers his cohort, holding the same pair of pants in sky blue.

"Ken-yeah, dude!"

Before I can douse the pair in extra-virgin sourdough spew, I abandon my balms and make for the station to reverse-Dinky at breakneck speed.

I'm never gone for long, though, always imagining that each return offers an opportunity to lay claim to a bit of hedonism that had been missing from what had been an otherwise unremarkable undergraduate experience. Still, there are days when my legs ache for a break from the relay. And on one such occasion, I skip it entirely, skirting the town center and flashing my ID for free admission at Grounds for Sculpture. In my mind, this is as much a reprieve as it is a tactic. Here I don't have to look over my shoulder to check and see who's lapping me because here, where everything is bolted to the ground, I am a veritable gazelle.

Past the ticket desk the expanse of the park opens entirely, and all at once. Across the forty-two-acre garden, some three hundred works of art are built directly into the landscape. Where not an inch of safety wire exists, the pieces dare you close while ostensibly inviting visitors to consider themselves part of the collection. This takes some getting used to as the more contemporary pieces near the entrance are amorphous behemoths forged from rock and steel. Delia Deetz-looking creations; cold and severe which, on a personality level, I suppose I can relate to. Things change a bit farther in, where the path curves and forms begin to emerge. *The Oligarchs*, a semicircle of aluminum busts, sits around one corner, staring out at a reflecting pool. I join them for a bit, but it takes only a few minutes before I grow weary of the view, and I leave wondering how they can stand to look at themselves all day. Around a different corner, I step inside *The Chamber of Internal Dialogue* to find a leather armchair on one end and a wall-sized re-creation of Munch's *The Scream* on the other. So I sit for a while and join my host in a little shriek, wondering if the artist had thought to soundproof this installation. I can't be sure how long I'm in there, but when a knock on the door finally comes, I meet the

chamber's next occupant with my face painted the same color as the back of my throat. With what would be the perfect excuse to disappear, I find myself in an alcove, standing over *Mirage*, a cast-iron woman who lays, naked, on a bed of leaves. From one vantage, she appears resigned to sink into the hellfire red foliage that seeks to engulf her. Yet when I get down next to her and mirror her pose, knees folded to one side, arms overhead and chest to the sky, it feels more like a taunt, delightfully contemptuous. Suddenly, I'm reveling, tits out, in my own destruction.

Of all the pieces, it's the works of Seward Johnson that become my favorite. Down in the depths of the Grounds, there is a forest of humanesque figures, bronze at their core but sloshed with slick layers of color and sheen so as to give off the impression that they one day leapt from an oil painting and gained dimension. They stand scattered, some alone and others in congregation, neither fully liquid nor fully solid and, as such, exist without a state of being. And yet, they be. In all, there must be dozens. Tens of dozens, in no apparent order. But it's in this absence of order that I can come upon them as chaotically as I might have any non copperbased life form.

Around a wall of bamboo, a maiden on a half-shell, *Redon's Fantasy of Venus* stands slicking back a torrent of blonde hair to expose her full bosom while keeping her legs crossed to give gawkers a taste, but not the full raw bar. She's slippery. There is no grabbing her. If you want it all, as the shell suggests, you'll have to slurp her up whole. A ways farther, another woman, just as buxom, leans out of a second-floor window at such an angle as to flaunt her own endowment. Hair in curlers, she greets a planter box overflowing with blood-red geraniums. *There My Little Pretties*, she says; or so says the placard. Though, with the way a draped feather boa frames her chest, the subject's intentions are—subjective. Farther still, beneath a green trellis, a threesome gathers at a modest table for a modest breakfast of soft-boiled eggs. Two—a lady and a bearded gent—lock eyes, engaging in what appears to be a superficial conversation while the third, a slouch, nips a half-finished cigarette between his fingers, waiting for them to tire. *Pondering the Benefits of Exercise*. How nice, I wonder, as my left knee cracks, to never have to finish that thought.

Under a striped tent, I come to rest in an empty chair at what appears to be a marvelous party. *Were You Invited?* asks the sign. By the looks of things, I'm not sure if any of the twenty or so frozen merry-makers would either know or care. As the only moving object, I begin to wonder if

really all that I've found is just another way to be a party crasher. Luckily, before things are allowed to get too cerebral, my phone lights up on a patch of the table's forever-rumpled cloth with an answer to the tableau's burning question. I have been invited.

I agree to meet Aleksandr at a bar and grill just off campus. As I make my way to the meeting place, I flip through his Bumble profile, which doesn't offer much outside of his age and a few well-posed photos. This leaves a lot of room for questions to trickle in. Questions like *What happened to the other "e" in your name?* and *Are those deliciously plump cheeks the results of genetics or did someone have to knead them and leave them out to rise?* The older version of me might've thought better of meeting up with a possible catfish but my Dinkified brain couldn't help but be impressed by someone who responds to a match with an immediate invite for drinks. Plus, with his "post-class" identifier, I figured the worst a student could do would be to try and strangle me with a lanyard. So, as I sidle up to the entrance of Metro North and smooth out my generational wealth drag, I catch my summoner as he makes a beeline out the front door.

"Can we go somewhere else?" he huffs, digging his fingers into my shoulders. The expression on his face is manic. It's as if someone snapped his eyelids back like a window shade.

"Um, hi," I say. "Sure." I peek over his left shoulder, then back at him, asking, with a laugh. "There an ex in there?"

"Yes," he says, matter-of-factly. "And I'd prefer not to run into her tonight."

Some small part of me, the part that loves drama, instantly regrets my acquiescence, wanting nothing more than to be a guest star in some bisexual fracas. However, being a man of my word, I allow him to escort me to his car, and within minutes, our glasses are receiving a generous pour at some high-end chain. Looking around at the polos and pocket insignia, this is clearly a watering hole where the pharma bros from the nearby Johnson & Johnson headquarters come to kick one back after a long day of "killing it." But the height of Aleksandr's shoulders suggest he's more comfortable, and I'll go just about anywhere someone's picking up the tab for some Napa Valley whites.

"You're a student?" he asks, revealing a slight eastern European accent I only just now notice.

"Mmm hmm," I swallow, adding quickly, "not at Princeton," before lowering my glass. "I was just having a day at the sculpture garden."

"Ah," he says, fingering the base of his stemware. "And now you've come to see some *real* art."

What would otherwise be a criminal line is immediately pardoned by the emergence of a single dimple. He has the naturally smooth face of someone who could just as easily be twenty as he could be forty and a manner of running his hands through his coif that suggests he often gets his way. This is undermined, somewhat, by a sporadic tendency to look down at his glass, evincing just the tiniest bit of fear. We talk for a while. He asks about my writing program. I ask him what he's majoring in. He replies with something that sounds like "architecture" but, with the way he chews his consonants, could just as well have been "Arkansas." He's sweet and cute and only a little bit pretentious. The kind of guy I would have had a ruinous crush on in college. Over the course of a few refills we laugh and he loosens up. I prod him about the near run-in from earlier, and those two brioche rolls on his face run beet red.

"It was not really an ex," he says, pinching his collar. "Not as big as all that. We went on a few dates, very casual. I just didn't want the distraction."

"I can understand that," I reply, my hopes for a scene fully dashed.

"I just wanted to focus on you."

By the time the ringing in my ears subsides, we've killed the bottle and we're in the car on the way to his dorm where I've been assured there's more wine. We don't need to discuss the fact that my primary incentive is the notion of having sex in a castle. The campus takes on a whole different feel at night, a maze of shadows, silhouettes, and walkways illuminated by what I want to believe are gas lamps lit every night by men in overalls who bear an uncanny resemblance to Dick Van Dyke. We leave the Victorian era on the other side of the residence hall doors where I'm greeted by a familiar scent, one that only occurs in nature when 1,001 blankets from all corners of the globe come to occupy the same building. I want to bottle it and send it to Tom Ford so that he can call it Duvet Mystère and sell it for \$400.

Inside Aleksandr's room, I discover modest L-shaped quarters with a galley kitchenette, a single bed, a dresser, and a doorless bathroom. What I admire most, however, is a large lattice window that lets in blue light from a well-placed fluorescent outside. It streaks across the floor, resting at the bare feet of my host, who pulls two coffee mugs from a cabinet over the sink.

"There should be a bottle in the fridge. Can you grab it?"

Upon swinging open the door, what I find inside, other than a half-empty Cupcake Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc, are bottles and bottles of something called Soylent. The shelves are stocked with them, back to front. There is nary a bottle of ketchup nor a Kraft single. Just rows of white bottles with black screw tops and thin type that reads "Soylent. Original."

"Oh," I say, handing him the Cupcake. "You're a serial killer."

"They're just meal replacement shakes," he laughs. "They're good! You wanna try one?"

"No, thanks." I close the door in time to receive one of two bright orange tiger mugs that we clink together. As he draws his upward for a sip, this is the first time I'm noticing his little baby doll mouth. The kind where the upper lip is just a suggestion and the lower is the size of Montana. He must catch me staring because he leans toward me and, just like that, I'm in Helena. There is a flash, as there is at the beginning of every first kiss, where I brace for the worst, for too much spit or for a sandpaper tongue or for having the lower half of my face eaten off. Then there are rarer moments, when the apprehension is quickly washed away by the realization that two sets of lips from opposite ends of the earth can meet in a strange place and, somehow, speak the same language. These are the kinds of miracles that drive one to their knees. And, so, that's where I find myself. On his bed, clinging to his sides as he stands before me.

I immediately move to unbutton his pants, as is my wont, and he follows by lifting a tight gray tee over his head to reveal quite the body of work. Beneath his collarbone hangs a silver chain drawing my eyes down past dinner plate nipples and toward a set of heather cotton boxer briefs. This is a form equal parts firm and supple, a Seward Johnson figure come to life. Though he's never known a cookie in his life, he is not something chiseled from stone. Rather, he is molded from liquid metal. Still but, with his fingers hooked in his waistband and an almost imperceptible sway in his hips, moving. If this is the kind of physique that can be attained by an all-liquid diet, I resolve to throw out everything in my refrigerator the minute I get home.

It is one thing to kneel in admiration of such a composition. It's an entirely other thing to lie beneath it, to have it lower itself upon you and, then, to become a piece of it. But that is what happens. Either he removes my clothes or they disintegrate on contact, but their sudden absence is not of my making. What I do make is every effort to stifle the suction noises that result when his hills meet my valleys. I try to puff my

chest, try to move and not move, concerned that anything unsexy will bring an abrupt stop to the proceedings. That is, until, while navigating his open mouth, I notice the divots, teeth marks from chewing on his bottom lip. Each one driven by his own nervousness. Because nothing about this is inherently sexy. Frottage on a twin bed is not the stuff of bestsellers. It is the stuff of web forum fan fiction. And yet it is that very inartfulness that makes it erotic. The huffing, the grunting, the poorly aimed thrusts. It's the urgency. The making it work.

Accepting this means letting go of any sense of control and letting this be whatever it needs to be. Within the bounds of the ultraviolet chain link Aleksandr becomes every boy I ever stared at across a classroom or dining hall, he becomes the guys who would run shirtless through the quad and then stop to catch their breath in front of the tree where I sat listening to Save Ferris. He becomes the kind of guy I'd fantasized would bring me back to a room that smelled like a gym bag and push my face down into a mattress. All he had to do was smell good, and he does. All he had to do was pull my hair, and he does. All he had to do was reach an itch that I couldn't scratch, and he does. With claws.

Whatever that itch is for him, all I can hope to do is hold up my end of the bargain. I try to move with him, match his rhythms. I look for suggestions, like when he rolls onto his back and I kiss my way down his chest, stopping to lap from both saucers. Farther south, I'm surprised to find a rigid cock whose proportions I had not yet fully appreciated. I trace my finger up and down, taking him into my hand with the delicacy of who I was and then into my mouth with the restlessness of who I am. Aleksandr flexes and seizes through machine gun breaths, grabbing my shoulders to steady himself at first and then to hoist me northward when it's clear I've brought him dangerously close to the brim of something. I slide off to his side, still bound by his arms, as he regulates his breathing and turns his head to me.

"Maybe I should just fuck you," he puffs.

But he doesn't. Instead he rolls on top of me, pins my legs down, and scrawls his life story into my clavicle, letter by letter, until I pass out.

If time is, in fact, cyclical, the night's procession is a testament to that. At random intervals, he'll nudge me awake, or I him. There will be more kissing, more ass grabbing, a little light fellating. And then, pre-climax, another hypothetical that never comes to manifest. Somewhere around the sixth or seventh "Maybe I should just fuck you," I decide to break the cycle.

“So do it, then.” I challenge him, out of either hunger or frustration, knowing full well if my offer is accepted, he’ll split me in two.

For a split second, his eyelids begin to retract, on their way to that same terrified expression that he’d greeted me with. But before they can complete their journey, he stops, softens, smiles a bit, and then buries his head and some half-hearted chuckles into my ribcage. We sleep again. The interruptions come at such a pace that, at some point, in that part of the darkness where night becomes morning, when I can no longer tell what is or isn’t a dream, he rolls from my arms and into the bathroom. Upon exiting, I follow the sounds of his heavy footfalls to the window, where he rests his hands against the frame. There, against the diamond crosshatching, where the blue light washes the man from his contours, he is nothing but a boy in a cage. This is where it begins to dawn on me that these sheets might be new to the idea of two mothers’ sons. That what he was running from earlier was not an ex but just the potential of being spotted by a familiar in an unfamiliar situation. That all of his “maybes” had been less about teasing me and more about convincing himself. That maybe, in this Aleksandr’s search for an “e,” what he needed was someone to walk him to the edge. Even if it was just so he could see what was possible. Even if he wasn’t yet ready to jump. Maybe he just needed to know that he could.

Amidst all these maybes, what I know for sure is this boy doesn’t need another set of eyes on him. So, I close mine and leave my arms in such a way that he can crawl back into them as if he’d never left. We wake, the two of us, in the uncured daylight that accompanies an ungodly hour. There is the requisite forehead brushing after which I let his buttocks lead me to the shower. Behind the curtain, we laugh and take turns under the water, bumping against one another and cupping ourselves the way one does when they know they’ve misbehaved. Upon toweling off, I reapply the previous evening’s clothes, only they don’t seem to fit the same way. Not exactly. I expect this. It’s a feeling I’ve come to know well enough, one that has led me to believe that nights like these have a way of remaking us, if only by a fraction.

“There’s coffee,” offers Aleksandr, along with a steaming cup.

We sit for a while, drinking out of tiger mugs that still smell of wine, enjoying each other’s slurps. I take a moment to admire him, standing there in his performance half zip tucked into pressed chinos. He’s made himself back into a man. Time is moving forward again. The Dinky calls, and so does his engineering lab. But he’ll walk me toward the station, he says.

The campus is still quiet at this hour, with only a straggling wee-hour warrior here and there. For the ones that do pass, I find myself hoping to get caught thrashing in the wind, if only so they can get a load of the lunk who done thrashed me. In a way, it's good that the vacancy persists if only because, when the time does come for our paths to split off, it gives Aleksandr what he needs to kiss me and grab another handful for the road. And as he heads off with a hunk of me in his side pocket, I'm reminded of how dangerous an act has to be before it can become routine.

This morning, I'll find the seats on the train pointing away, the gadget set in reverse. I'll let the catcall whistle of a seat cushion tongue my ear as it deflates under the weight of me. But no matter. While we wait to depart, I'll sit there and enjoy myself as the fresh-faced trickle in, on their way to a fellowship in the capital or perhaps to Lake Carnegie for crew practice. I'll pretend not to notice as each of them clocks me. Me, with the telltale hair of a whore. Me, the boy with one and three-quarter butt cheeks. Me, with the breath that could launch a locomotive. I'll pretend not to revel. Tits out, in my own destruction.

There is a time machine in Princeton, New Jersey. It is known as the Dinky. I've been a patron from time to time.