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Miranda July

Caleshu, AP

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Anthony Caeshu

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MIRANDA JULY

It should not have surprised me that during a business trip to LA, my father arranged to meet Miranda July. One of the reasons people like my father is because he listens... and when he listens he acts. If you mention a particular wine to him, he'll go out and drink it; a new car, he'll drive it. If an artist, he'll seek out not just the artist's work, but the artist herself.

I had not set out to write my PhD dissertation about Miranda July. My research was to be on American Romanticism and the father-son motif in Herman Melville. My love of Melville had been passed down to me from my father; he'd read the sea-faring tales to me when I was a child, during the long moon-lit nights of our sailing trips from the Hamptons to St. Thomas each Spring. I had been working on a chapter dedicated to Melville's use of masculine punctuation when, on my way to the University library, I spotted a pink poster in the window of the Lower East Side art-house cinema which my father and I frequented – the word 'forever' written under invitingly symmetrical symbols:

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forever.

That weekend's programme was a retrospective of Miranda July's oeuvre to date. The advertisement was for her first feature length film from 2005. Though I did not know who Miranda July was at the time, the concrete use of typographical signs and symbols on the poster hit me as clearly feminine in its art: the parentheses representative of parted thighs; the mathematical signs for *less-than* and *greater-than*

imagistic of a spread vulva. The usher who had taken a seat next to me explained that July was the writer-director-actor playing the lovelorn heroine in auburn ringlets, Victorian pale skin, an 'elder-cab' driver who wore colourful blouses and had performance artist aspirations. Half-way through the movie, it became clear that I'd misinterpreted July's poster, assuming an hetero-normative posture by an adult woman meant to titillate an adult man, when in fact, as I'd come to learn, the relationship being exposed was gender-evasive, age-subversive, and scatological. Taken from the vantage of a child, the graphic was of a young boy's computer keyboard 'drawing', a visualization of what it might look like to 'poop back and forth' with the adult woman with whom he was unwittingly engaged in a risqué internet affair. In the after-discussion that ensued, the women in the audience spoke with tenderness about the difficulty of finding love in a loveless world. I let the night's passionate talk wash over me.

The next day I didn't go to the library, nor did I teach my scheduled seminar on Melville's pursuance of 'ontological heroics', as he'd written in a letter to Hawthorne. Holed up at my father's summer house in South Hampton, I received a concerned text from a peer, a teaching assistant like myself in X University's Department of English and Comparative Literature. Six texts later, I let her know where I was. She made the two-hour drive out of the city to meet me at the far end of Long Island. She brought with her a DVD of July's second film, 2011's *The Future*, which we watched in my father's new screening room. The narrator was an impounded '*pussy*', my colleague said with some emphasis, 'an anthropomorphic, euphemistic representation of every woman's fear of vaginal abandonment and yet, also, serious anatomical action... be it heavy penetration or bearing children.' Half way through the film, Miranda hiked up her skirt in her new lover's house to expose her pert, creamy buttocks. When my peer

reached her hand down my pyjama bottoms, I stopped her and she ran crying from the house.

Over the next week, I immersed myself in the varied artistic output of July: websites, short films, emails, installation sculptures, even a fashion collaboration in the form of a limited-edition handbag. I ordered it with plans to give to the woman I'd rebuffed, an expression of contrition. My self-imposed reclusiveness in my father's Hampton's house evolved into feelings of alternating elation and depression. I lost interest in eating, lost interest in bathing. As is the case with the most difficult manic episodes, I had little understanding of what was going on until another intervened. The teaching assistant who'd gone running from my father's house arrived again. Now in the seventh year of a PhD that still lacked an identifiable subject, she confessed that, in me, she recognized her own terrific swings of emotion that can be so difficult to be around. 'Because I don't want you to become me,' she said, 'I'm driving you back to the city, back to your father.' She left me at the curb of the Tribeca apartment building where my father and I shared the top floor. Before she left, I slung the July handbag over her head and across her shoulder. She almost looked happy to be driving away.

'Benjy, Benjy, Benjy,' my father said (he is the only person who still calls me by my childhood nickname), 'Where have you been? We can sort this out, whatever the problem.' He asked to see my copy of *Moby-Dick*, which, from the age of 13, I had carried around with me in my leather satchel. Often, during life's more-conflicted moments, my father would turn to a page at random for divination purposes. He'd read from that greatest American novel as the ancient Greeks once read from Homer.

Instead of proffering Melville's novel, I extended Miranda July's short story collection, her first mass-market published prose from 2007. He looked at me with genuine wonder, 'What's going on?'

I merely shrugged.

He read the title aloud: ‘*No One Belongs Here More Than You*. What’s it about?’
‘People.’

‘What kind of people?’

Instead of answering directly, I answered obliquely with the title of Miranda July’s first feature film, the one I’d seen at the Art Centre that day which had set me on this course of questioning and change, a re-evaluation of my needs and life: *You and Me and Everyone We Know*.

My father had helped finance quite a few movies in his time, but July’s popular indie hit wasn’t on his radar.

‘Pronouns,’ he said. ‘I’ve always found *You* to be more intimate than *I*.’

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People who know my father say that in addition to his profound and considered attention to their conversation, they are drawn to his physical presence. His already long limbs are stretched longer during daily Pilates’ sessions; even in a business suit, you can tell my father has a powerful core – one that stops teenage girls and grown women alike when he emerges from the revolving doors of Manhattan restaurants. His boyish, square jaw and salt-and pepper hair means when he is out with George Clooney, they have been asked more than once if they are brothers.

It wasn’t through the revolving doors of NYC’s Ivy, but the sliding doors of LAX the following week that my father walked, straight off his private plane, and directly into Miranda July. He’d spent the preceding days reading through July’s novels and stories – ‘clear and conscious’ prose – but had become especially intrigued by her myriad art projects, especially her messaging app, *Somebody*, which had gone live

that summer of 2014 and which (though unbeknownst to us at the time), would come to have such an important presence in our own lives:

When you send your friend a message through Somebody, it goes – not to your friend – but to the Somebody user nearest your friend, who then delivers the message as if they were you.

‘We should both sign up,’ he said to me, smiling brightly over his smart phone, though the California sun hadn’t even risen. I could still see the vast lights of LA twinkling in the distance far away from the balcony of his hotel room in the hills.

‘You simply *ran* into Miranda July?!’ I interrupted my father. ‘At the airport?’

‘Benjy,’ he shook his head at me, ‘You know how this works. My people got in touch with her people. We talked about you and your PhD most of the day. She was extremely flattered to hear you were writing about her.’

I’d woken early myself, and for most of the morning had sat at my desk, head in hands, contemplating July’s revisionism of sentimentality; how she earned affect by sending her characters on misadventures; how irony and parody weren’t in her language.

I calmed myself down and asked him how one spends ‘most’ of a day with Miranda July.

‘The first place she took me was Chez Paulette,’ my father said wistfully, ‘on Sunset Boulevard. It’s a café modelled after a café from the 50s. It’s more an art exhibition than a coffee shop; we both had cappuccinos made by actors performing as baristas.’

‘I would have thought she was a tea-drinker,’ I said, though my father missed my insolence.

The sheer sunniness of that day prompted my father to suggest a run which, in turn, led Miranda July to demonstrate the very empathy for which her art was so well-known:

‘That’s just what I was going to suggest,’ she said.

They entered Ruyon Canyon Park on the northern side off Mulholland Drive where my father enthused about the eponymous TV series/film by David Lynch, who – it transpired – was the same director Miranda July most wanted to collaborate with... not that, so she said, she was hinting that she wanted my father to make that happen!

‘Her embarrassment was palpable,’ my father said, ‘manifest in a bright red rash that began at the top of her ears and gravitated down her neck to settle in the valley of her upper chest.’

I imagined Miranda July’s swan-like neck stretching away from her pronounced collar bones, leading up to shapely lips, a wide-ish nose that sits in the centre of her very high cheek bones, crystal blue eyes, small ears sticking out from underneath her shaggy crop of auburn hair.

‘She’d changed out of her pink shift dress into a low-cut turquoise blue lycra halter top,’ my father said.

I imagined her a gangly runner, one without the coordination required to establish a sophisticated running rhythm. And yet, my father compared her long gait to that of a giraffe – ‘who you might not expect to be so smooth and synchronic, but who can stride across the savannah with extreme grace and composure.’

They jogged all the way to Dodger Stadium where they tucked into Dodger Dogs, with peanuts and beer. The home-team trounced the visitors in a pyrotechnical display of homeruns, one after another until the score went into double digits. Miranda July and my father cheered them on well into the afternoon, talking about the history

of baseball and its correlation to the social state of the nation (in terms of race/politics/faith) long after they had left the ballpark.

20 years ago while working on financing his first film, my father told his new-found friend how he used to go to Muscle Beach to relax while working the gymnastic rings so they headed there next.

‘Miranda said she was interested in the crisis of masculinity,’ my father reported, and then, without knowing why, he felt and succumbed to the pressure of the crowd surrounding him, until he had no choice but to take off his suit jacket and shirt, and put on a routine which, he assured me, was spontaneous and completely unrehearsed for the past two decades. He dismounted to explosive applause. The local weightlifters raised both my father and July into the air.

Dinner for my father and July that night was at Wolfgang Puck’s *Spago*. I’d spent many evenings as a child sampling Mr. Puck’s fusion cuisine and didn’t need my father to remind me about the way food can complement friendship. Wolfgang joined them briefly at a cocktail table on the patio, where they drank his version of a Mai Tai. Though I’d imagined her a vegetarian, my father said she tucked into her dinner with relish: grilled lamb rack with falafel macarons and harissa aioli. A vintage bottle of Opus One was shared with Wolfgang’s compliments.

‘It was getting late at this point,’ my father told me in earnest, ‘but Miranda is a big fan of popular music.’

She pulled him by the tie into The Echo on Sunset to listen to Kera & the Lesbians. In the club’s neon lights, my father took off his tie and swayed to the bipolar folk like a palm tree in the gentle Southern Californian breeze.

The night concluded at Griffith’s observatory, where Miranda had a friend who let them in the back door. They could see Jupiter and the Orion Nebula, and Perseus

Double-cluster. Most impressively, because it only occurred twice a year, they watched the last crescent of the moon slip into a rose-pink total lunar eclipse.

‘Sounds like you two had quite a time,’ I said when my father finally finished.

‘Hey,’ my father said, ‘Hey, hey, *hey!*’ You’re not implying I was pursuing her, I hope? Like I said, we talked about you and your scholarly ambitions for most of the day, and night! – she is very much looking forward to meeting you. She, herself, dropped out of college – she has enormous respect for someone like you who’s pursuing a career in the Academy.’

‘She didn’t say that.’

‘She did to! And so too did her husband, a filmmaker himself. We met him when I dropped her off; it must have been two in the morning. She’d phoned, but he’d refused to come out with us due to a pressing deadline. Also, he was minding their child. Though he was sound asleep, he looked a beautiful boy, based on the photographs I saw. He reminded me of yourself once upon a time. They’re very much a happy family.’

Despite the ensuing silence, beaming at me over the space of 3500 miles, I could see my father’s face, lovingly studying my own.

‘I imagine she and her son,’ my father said, ‘love each other as much as we love each other. The maternal bond some say is even stronger than the paternal.’

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I saw very little of my father for the rest of that last month of summer. When I did see him – in the kitchen, in front of the expansive floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the Hudson, sipping his morning NutriBullet of spinach strawberries,

avocado and almond milk – he looked disconcertingly irregular, like a man who was living in two-time zones. Which, it turned out, he was.

He was backing a new film, he told me.

‘Is Miranda July involved?’ I asked him.

‘I’m not going to lie to you Benjy,’ he said, as he poured me some of the NutriBullet.

He ran his hand through his hair.

Their short time together had evolved into a serious relationship. She’d taken him to meet her parents who still lived in Berkeley: ‘The flatness surprised me; the *sprawl*. Her new film is about capturing *sprawl*. Not just geographic, but personal, emotional *sprawl*.’

He took out of his bathrobe pocket an antique dragon-fly brooch he’d bought her, the sort one might read about a character adoring in one of her fictions.

‘It’s true she rarely wears such things, but these pieces aren’t exactly for everyday wearing. They’re more statement pieces to be worn at, say, the Oscars.’

‘She’s getting an Oscar!?’

‘Wooh! Don’t get ahead of her here... the film hasn’t even been written yet!’

I put my NutriBullet down; its strawberry sweetness lost to the bitter iron of the Spinach.

‘I hadn’t intended this Benjy,’ he said. ‘You of all people can understand her allure.’

I would never be my father, it was clear to me now, as it had been for my entire life. And he saw that it was so, and I could tell that it hurt him as much as it hurt me.

‘I’d like you to meet her,’ he said, ‘We’re going to be spending a lot more time together so I’ve bought a place in Malibu. We’re having a pre-production party next week. It will be meaningless without you.’

What ensued for the rest of that week – August slipping into September, September slipping into the Fall – was a metaphysical distance which transpired into a physical distance between my father and me. I had no intention of flying into the setting-sun of the West. Instead, I stayed in the dark behind our apartment’s drawn-curtains, only venturing out to skulk in the night shadows of the New York City skyscrapers.

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At the end of that long week, our doorman knocked on our door:

‘Benjy,’ he said, staring me in the eye, ‘you’re absence from my life is breaking my heart.’

He was a heavy-set fellow, middle-aged with great bushy eyebrows which looked all the bushier when he dropped his head to look down at his phone. He looked up again, this time with a tear trickling down the side of his nose: ‘Miranda and I would love you to join us. Even she knows she cannot compensate for the lack of you.’

On the doorman’s phone I could see Miranda July’s *Somebody* app. Our doorman was delivering my father’s message to me. He moved in for a hug, but then reappraised the situation and shook my hand politely before he wiped his eyes with the thick back of his hand and walked back to the elevator. He looked up at the ceiling as the doors closed.

The next day I flew across the country, to land in a city for which I’d never cared, to find my father in the grips of new love, making a new home.

‘Miranda,’ my father said at the pre-production party, on the enormous balcony in his new home in Malibu, ‘Meet Benjy. Benjy meet Miranda’.

The house was embedded in the cliff face, the balcony supported by great steel stilts; it held a bright blue pool. Actors and directors, grips and cameramen, producers and executive producers walked around making conversation. They drank champagne cocktails the colour of the sun. All the men were dressed in pale blue and black. But my father wore a crisp white button-down shirt and a candy pink bathing suit, as pink as the poster which had first drawn me to Miranda July's work.

'I love you both more than I can say,' my father said, 'You're not just my East and West but my North and South. Please get to know each other while I take a dip.'

My father was a masterful swimmer; as a kid, I used to watch him slip in and out of the water as he performed the butterfly. With his shirt off, he revealed a tanned and toned body, kissed Miranda on the cheek then hugged me. His dive into the blue depths of the pool was nearly splashless.

Down and deep, my father swam, lap after lap, flip turn after flip turn, – like a needle darning a pink seam through the baby-blue, glaucous-blue, phthalo-blue.

Time stopped.

Though Miranda July looked at me pensively, perhaps even askance, she let me take her hand.

'Please come with me,' I said, 'He'll be swimming for a while.'

And with those words, which I delivered more confidently than any I had ever spoken, I led her willowy frame out the front door of my father's house, and into the convertible I had waiting.

'The bright sadness of LA, the connected-disconnect between people and buildings,' I recalled my father saying a few days before, 'is embodied in this woman we are both coming to know. She's in the *air*.'

I contemplated the air as I drove: the air of charitable foundations, suburban yearning for love; the air of epiphanies, where endings weren't endings but the

beginnings of self-awareness and hope. Miranda and I breathed it in together, and the wind ruffled our hair as we drove the Pacific Highway. Flying high above were birds of prey hunting the lonely and vulnerable which, with her by my side, I no longer was.

We talked as we drove, we talked about minds and souls and how they co-existed with the body. I asked her about the attention she paid to bodily cleanliness in her prose: the tangible description, for example, of the smell of a character's feet in her novel. I asked her about the propensity for women to be mindful of their bodies before intimacy, the trope by which they would hang their bottoms over the bath for a wash in preparation of sex in her short stories. I told her that I had a friend who washed his penis before and after sex.

'Is your friend literally, as well as metaphorically, dirty?' she asked.

'Not that I've seen, or rhetorically heard,' I said.

'Is your friend really you?'

I responded with an unconvincing denial. But it was true – my friend was me – and she knew that he was. And I knew that she knew I was, and there was no shame, nor pride, no affirmation, nor judgement.

'This pain, this dying, this is just normal,' I recited to her from her own work, *'Life is just this way, broken, and I am crazy to hope for something else.'*

We drove to Runyon Canyon, where we ran with our arms out, wild in the sun. We ran all the way to Dodger Stadium where we raised those same arms in a Mexican wave while sitting just above the home-team's dugout. We spoke of the pleasures of love as requiring an emotional catalyst to release physical joy.

When we arrived at Muscle Beach, she jumped and did a pirouette on the balance beam. I contemplated doing my own unrehearsed display on the rings, but by then she had dismounted into my arms. To the cheers of the body-builders, we walked hand in hand to Spago where Mr. Puck had already decanted a bottle of Opus One.

After dinner, at the Echo, we watched a line of perfect people line-dancing to Kera and The Lesbians' rockabilly guitar. '*You perfect thing,*' I shouted to Miranda over the reverb, '*You'll always be loved!*' saying to her the very words all those women she wrote about wanted to hear.

She smiled at me but a new tension entered the air. I could feel the connection between us being challenged. The hands of the arms I was waving fell like stones to my side. I wondered if my sexual energy compelled her as she compelled me. I wondered about my father; I wondered about her attraction to strong men and if a lesser model of maleness was attractive to her.

I wondered about her own Sapphic writings in the context of a bar where so many women were dancing with women, making me feel not only unwanted but downright vestigial. I recalled an interview where she spoke matter-of-factly about lesbianism. I worried over having to compete with both genders as the object of her affection. I recalled her use of lesbian narrators and the brutish physicality of the protagonist in her novel, *The First Bad Man*, the beatings imparted from one woman to another, their burgeoning lesbian relationship founded on an act of role-playing masculine violence.

In that moment, for reasons too complicated for even Freud to ascertain, I confess to imagining Miranda July's pretty mouth devouring my masculine violence: my un-delicate pastry, my éclair.

'You like sweet crème,' I'd ask her, 'You want some of this sweet Pineapple crème?'

'I'm practically a pineapple addict,' she'd say.

I was so embarrassed by these thoughts, but also alive with them. There is nothing more satisfying than thematically reconciling the substance of an author's oeuvre.

But before I could think another thought, it was her turn to take my hand, to move our night on until we stood gazing at the new moon from Griffith's observatory.

'Your real interest, of course, isn't in *my* relationships, or even *our* relationship. It's in your relationship with your father,' she said to me, looking me straight in the eye.

The moon was full. The breeze cool.

Her pocket vibrated. She looked at me with a question in her eyes: 'You bring so much joy to me, you must know that?'

She looked at me, the moon's spherical light reflected in her eyes.

She glanced down at her phone a second time.

'I would never want to hurt you,' she said.

The moon in her eyes burst from her pupil and reflected the hole in my heart.

'You won't,' I said.

'I love you my son. I won't come between you.'

There wasn't the extreme pathos of our doorman in her delivery, but there was something *real* in the manner by which she held my gaze with her own. My father's message to me having come via her own *Somebody* app, and now being delivered by her, acting as my father.

'How long have we been without a woman in our lives? How long have we known only each other's love?' she said.

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The story of my mother – my father's wife for those early years of our life together – is a story my father and I don't share with others. And though it's a story that goes

unspoken, we keep it between us, tied around our waists like a rubber band... whenever we get too far from the other, we come snapping back.

My father was underwater, still swimming in the pool when we returned.

Two women were standing over him. With their hair pulled back in elaborate buns, they could have been air-stewards. But they were not so generous as air-stewards. They snubbed us.

‘Just so you know, your hair-bun looks like an anus,’ Miranda said, prompting them to leave.

A woman and a boy, we imagined her teenage son, smiled at us as the sun began to set. The woman wore a black t-shirt under a white cardigan. The t-shirt had sparkling diamantes spelling out what Miranda and I were sure were the words, *Sex Addict*. We wondered how the son felt about his mother’s t-shirt’s declaration when her cardigan blew open and we saw that the diamantes actually spelled out *Lex Addonis*, which is an example of how a marginalized sub-genre of trans-persons can appropriate a derogatory term and re-establish it with a sense of pride. Miranda returned my sense of pride. ‘How could we have gotten it so wrong?’ she said, laughing not at me, but with me.

We looked away.

We knew that something Freudian, or Lacanian, or performatively Butlerian was going on. We both knew too that I’d sexualized myself in ways which were false. Ten minutes in bed with Miranda was just about all the carnal I imagined I could handle. In those ten minutes, I’d be both contented and ruined for life.

My father was swimming the breast-stroke now – up and down, in and out – breaking and submerging again and again through liminal space. The last of the pre-production crew began to leave.

For the third time that night, Miranda took my hand. In the Malibu air that surrounded us, we could both feel the interactivity of the afternoon. Conversations, the touch of words which weren't being spoken. We disappeared into one of the many bedrooms in my father's new Malibu house.

'Parent-child relationships,' Miranda said to me as she undid my bow-tie, 'can be so difficult to navigate.'

I undid the yellow sash cinching her orange dress, the colour of the champagne cocktails I'd never even tasted.

I felt at sea. Like I needed rescuing from a ship gone down. Like the most famous character of the most famous book of the author I'd once planned to dedicate my life to: 'Like Herman Melville's Ishmael,' I told Miranda, 'I claim no right to salvation.'

She stepped out of her dress. I knelt and slid down her panties. With her Espadrilles still on, she stepped out of her underwear and into the middle of the floor: the sun breaking through the window, the sun bouncing off the white walls, the white bedspread, the burning stars of her pale breasts.

Why are we alone? I once asked my father. Is there not more to life than living in the bowels of a ship, in the company of men?

There was no need to worry about betraying my future, because the future came then... in the form of my father, still dripping from his swim and standing above us in bed; his phone buzzing with a message.

Almost as quickly as Miranda texted, my father spoke: 'It's time I left you,' he said.

My phone buzzed with a message. 'I had a great time,' I read aloud to my father whilst smiling, if not as brightly as Miranda.

Her phone buzzed with a message: 'Can we fly back home now?' she asked me, sounding more like my father than I would have thought humanly possible.

Buzz.

'(::~) (::~)', I said.

Buzz-Buzz.

'~)-----(:', my father said.

Buzz-Buzz-Buzz.

'(((O)))', Miranda said.

My father and I know so little about women. The weight of those signs flying between our phones was more than any woman should ever bear.

