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But I Like Hell

Some days you wait for people to say something interesting.

People talk in loops, and you want to hula hoop their words; you want movement and speed, shaking hips, energy. Your brain feels like every conversation's been pre-recorded and when someone says something different, everything lights up and you want to learn more.

The Design and the City course gave us ideas. I don't know if there's anything as worthwhile as that.

We met every Tuesday and Saturday. The School of Architecture, Design, and Engineering wasn't the biggest department but all our classes collided in large lecture halls. It would have been better if we'd had smaller shared spaces for drafting and building models. The largest hall, McKissack Hall, looked like it floated, with its pinkish-brown walls and curved lines that looked like the inside of your palm. Pretty but not functional. Where we held messy discussions. In Design and the City, we studied Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Tadao Ando, Renzo Piano, Melvin Mitchell, that real young designer David Adjaye. Design and the City was required. Architecture students from the local colleges took it freshmen or sophomore year. Then, if you passed, you took the core coursework and cemented a place in the program. So students from a Historically Black College and a Predominantly White Institution and the community college all jammed in together, determined to show we were stars. Competitive as hell. But I like hell. I don't have a lot of patience for people who expect things to just come to them.

On that first day Professor Kimberly Ericka Hays stood in front of the class for fifteen minutes before speaking. She'd dimmed the lights and there was a slide on the PowerPoint, a juxtaposition of two images: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House and Curtis Moody's Legacy House. We stared at buildings overdosed with light, watched how bright sky streamed into the buildings, harmonized and clarified both homes. We'd grown up with television, but those images slowed us. We had to look again.

So the first five minutes, we were patient. Aaron (I called him Aaron when he came in late—I'd arrived early) sat down next to me.

“On c.p. time?” I tried not to look annoyed but was. The lecture hadn’t started yet, but we had to look sharp. We had to represent. Architecture was an expensive major, not a lot of students from our school and probably the community college. I counted three brothers and me.

“Came from work.” Arthur gave a reasonable answer and opened his notebook. “Why’s she just staring at us?”

“I guess she wants us to focus.”

We did. For another five minutes. Then it got noisy, students rustled papers, coughed. A student on the left side of the room raised her hand. “Are we supposed to write anything?”

Hays moved her head—who knew whether she was shaking her head “no” or nodding “yes”—before she turned away from the class, the lectern, and toward the door. A couple of students walked out.

We looked at the images for so long they told stories. I saw how a line could echo, reverberate in the darker and lighter spaces. Lines steady us, I realized. They navigate the infinite and remind us of being located in a particular place in time. It was a thought I wanted to carry with me, hold onto and turn over. But then some punk interrupted my thoughts.

“We get it. These buildings recall Palladio’s villas, a simpleton can see that. Do we need to waste fifteen minutes on derivative work?” A guy in one of those garnet baseball hats, jeans, and a blazer, trying to show off, and it wasn’t just the comment, it was how it was all loud, in stereo. Trying to say something smart. I rolled my eyes, and the hat guy smirked. “You probably haven’t studied that.”

“罗马建筑对你和你丑陋的母亲都很好,” Arthur replied.

Arthur had a habit of speaking in Russian or Chinese when people pissed him off. (LaRose Parris, a girl I’d grown up with, did this too. One minute she was speaking Haitian Creole, and the next someone would say something dumb, and boom: she’d insult their mother in another language.)

“What did you say?”

Arthur laughed. “You and your mother wouldn’t like it.”

“See?” I told the hat guy. “Less is more.”

The class laughed then eased into silence. Hays finally began.

“It’s a new way of seeing.” Hays walked dramatically back to the front of the classroom, glanced at us, then walked to the screen. She didn’t seem unconcerned with us but what fascinated and focused her attention were the images.

“Prepare for the critiques.” Hays continued. “We’ll look at our plans and take turns challenging our weaknesses. And we’ll think about the characteristics of a citizen architect.”

Something interesting.

Hays turned the lights all the way up and painful fluorescent light penetrated the room.

“Please read Melvin Mitchell’s book by the next class,” she said. “The last chapter of the book offers a call. Be prepared to tell us your thoughts about community and investment.”

The week after that classroom meeting, we’d tour the city. But I started thinking about textures and shapes that day, how subtle shifts changed the way we interacted in a space. I’d had what Grandma Alice called “perfect twos”—encountered an idea so interesting it shook you out yourself.

Right as class ended, a migraine whirl-winded my skull. People turned silver, the color of a faded coin. And a four-foot bunny hopped across the lectern.

“You alright?” Arthur handed me his reusable water bottle. “It’s unopened.”

The classroom emptied. Some students raced out as soon as Hays said “See you Saturday”; others huddled around the professor, with a flurry of questions, some silly, some serious, as Hays walked out the door: “When’s the final project due?” “The one percent solution is growing popular...what do you think about Peterson’s work?”

I wanted to get up but couldn’t stand. It felt like all the light from the room slapped my brain. The bunny hopped over and nuzzled my cheek. Arthur tried to steady me.

“I’m fine.” I grabbed the side of the desk. My legs swayed as I thought about lines and memory, the optimal length for a class or workshop.

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