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Cameron: Necessary Conversations

NECESSARY CONVERSATIONS

David Cameron

The playwright's mother was coming into the city for lunch. She said she'd arrive at his apartment, and together they could walk to a restaurant of his choosing. She hadn't been downtown in several months, and he supposed she wanted to assess his living situation. Had her boy's life changed for the better? He liked to believe his mother was being reasonable in her hopes for him. He wanted to be seen as a peer: like her, he was mortal, and as time went on he would have his few struggles and some of them would take a toll. He'd woken early to scrub the toilet, sweep up cat hair and gather strewn clothing into a single orderly mound. At noon, his mother walked in without ringing the bell.

Was the door unlocked for me or do you leave it unlocked?

I leave it unlocked for mothers and thieves.

I'm a mother.

They hugged. She took her shoes off, saying she needed to use the toilet before they got on their way. He heard the toilet flush, and he trusted that during the noise of water she was clicking open the cabinet above the sink. Was there anything incriminating in there? Nail clippers, painkillers, assorted creams . . . condoms, he realized. There was a box of condoms on the top shelf, half full. Suggesting to her that he was conscientious. If they suggested he was sexually active, she was being misled. He made a mental note to check the expiry date, though didn't they last for years? The same box of condoms could see a man through three consecutive, drunken and regrettable one-night stands, the years-long pause that might follow such indiscretion, and then into his next polite monogamous relationship which would itself last years. For example.

He heard the bathroom door open, then some soft footfalls, the hardwood creaking faintly. Then she opened another door. His study. He stood and stepped quickly along the hall and entered the room behind her. She had picked up a yellow legal

pad that was sitting on assorted manuscript pages. The top page of the legal pad was messy with dates and times and amounts. In several places a certain clump of figures had an X through it. He'd been crunching numbers. Rather he'd been massaging them, whispering pleasantries. He wanted the numbers to like him. He wanted them to say he could afford a weekend in New York.

Are you going somewhere?

No.

She set the pad down. Quite possibly at the exact same moment, he and his mother laid eyes on the bottle of rye next to his laptop. A slender vessel standing by the keyboard like a sentry. He had, he believed, finally convinced her that the act of writing was, at its worst, a nerve-wracking and tear-inducing experience. But he didn't know how much credence she gave to the mythology of creative types, the way they are said to be tilted those extra few degrees toward self-destruction. Was the muse truly so thirsty? Was her child a drunkard by vocation? It felt like a mistake that he hadn't spared her the sight. *He places apples and oranges prominently on the kitchen table but forgets to squirrel away his booze. . . .*

Who are all these people?

Along one side of his desk there were small stacks of photographs and postcards. He was collecting images of the human face, a hobby that began one recent day when he went into a nearby curio shop and discovered, lit softly by a tasseled lamp, a box of photographs. He'd zeroed in on those that featured people. A man standing by a patio barbecue with spatula in hand, friends at a restaurant (pushing together on one side of a booth so that all heads were within the frame), a couple on the edge of a woodlot in autumn. . . . Assorted single images from the lives of strangers. Twenty-five cents a piece.

You don't know them, she said.

She had fingered through the top two or three pictures of each pile.

I don't know them. They're just people.

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DAVID CAMERON

She looked at him and smiled.

Shall we go?

A one-legged man in a black beret was balancing on his crutch outside the liquor store on Brock Avenue. His motorized wheelchair was parked nearby. They approached on the sidewalk.

Good day, ma'am, the man said.

His mother looked away.

Hello, sir. A little change?

He nodded at the man. They walked on toward Queen Street.

I guess you get to know them, she said.

Who?

As they turned east on Queen she shot a glance over her shoulder.

The . . . people.

He has a routine.

In minutes, he was reminded of how timid his mother had become, how green. She lived in the small city of Guelph, an hour's drive away, and she didn't have a car. Getting from her door to his required that she take two buses, the subway, and finally a streetcar. Not a simple journey for the homebody he thought she was becoming. Her life was a small enclosure within which she cleaned and shopped and mixed agreeably with a few individuals she considered friends. That was her life and it was everyone's life, yes. It's just that she seemed on guard amid the ordinary bustle of people on Queen. She was alert in a nervous way that he interpreted as an accommodation of bewilderment. She was stepping briskly, arms pumping, as though dawdling or appearing directionless would invite whatever dangers were particular to the streets of Toronto. She took his hand and squeezed it.

Do you have somewhere in mind?

It's just a simple café, he said. But nice.

Sounds great. You can tell me when we're getting close.

In the remains of a snow pile outside the Cadillac Lounge, he saw what was without doubt a spew of blood. It was a viscous rope. The distinctive red had become a distinctive brown. The Cadillac wasn't known for its drunken brawls, though one time, in a curious reversal, he saw a fight that had begun out on the street move inside. There was a foot chase that ended at the bar, whereupon the combatants started smashing each other with empty pint glasses. The man on stage had been playing bluegrass. He lowered his guitar and said, Can we get some help here?

You're writing, she said.

He looked at her. He didn't know whether she had seen the blood in the snow.

Are you writing?

It had been eighteen months since his play's short run had ended. It was his first—and so far his only—on a reputable stage. Response was warm. What was warm? An armpit. A bowl of soup the customer has pushed away. Yet soon enough he was taking the standard positive line: the victory was that the play had lived at all, and having done so would instigate grander things.

She had come to the premiere with a friend. She wore her favourite purple shawl and had arrived in the city early enough in the day to get her hair done. These things plus a few tears in the lobby afterward and he knew she was proud. Several people went to a bar to celebrate, and she ended up sitting next to a novelist friend of his. The novelist was a sociable man, but intense. At that point he had been working on a book for over six years. Perhaps seduced by the bourbon someone had treated him to, the virgin playwright announced that his dear acquaintance was supremely brave for giving his life over to the construction of something improbable. The novelist said the playwright was *his* hero for being as unafraid of sentiment as a preschooler. Everyone laughed. The playwright stole a look at his mother, wondering whether his fondness for the other man worried her. *Will he regress to the added brutality of being a novelist?* Relatively speaking, plays could be written quickly, and so the writer might produce more of them, and so his chances

of creating a smash hit were greatly improved. Perhaps on the way home she reassured herself with thoughts that as a writer at least he had chosen—was floating down—the more promising stream. His novelist friend told him once that the epic tale, as you go along with it, lost in this or that headspace or landscape, is not something that *comes together*, rather it feels as though it is *forever unraveling*, and the trick, or one of the tricks, is to be at ease while in the grip of what seems like a troubling chaos. He admired the novelist's calm.

He cleared his throat and glanced sidelong at his mother.

I have things I'm working on.

The playwright was in fact having a terrible go of it. For months he churned out one story after another as though he believed the best elements of each would mature and cycle back to him in time, somehow coalescing into a single striking narrative, the play that would guarantee his name. (To be loved and remembered. What other reason is there to roll out of bed and proceed once again to the sock drawer?) He had decided, in the previous two or three weeks, to be more precise in how he advanced a tale, more meticulous when making choices. This thinking had only altered his problem: he was working on the first act of a first draft of a story that wasn't showing itself. His would-be characters were giggling at him from behind impenetrable ruby curtains.

As they arrived at the café, a fire truck sped along Queen in the direction they had come from. They stood and watched it scream by. Then he held the door open for her. She was a reader, he thought. Stories made her cry. Stories made her angry when they derailed for no good reason. It occurred to him to ask for help.

They were the only customers. They ordered lattes and took a table by the window. A second fire truck sped past, followed closely by a third, their dual sirens wailing.

A fire, she said.

Maybe.

This is nice, she said. She prodded the foam of her drink with a small spoon.

Actually I've been struggling, he said.

I had a feeling. Are you depressed?

I mean with the writing.

What is it?

I don't know my people very well.

What people?

The characters in the story. I can put them in a room together easily enough, but I have no idea how they should behave. He sipped his latté and looked outside.

What's the setting?

It's just a room, he said. Sparsely furnished.

A coldwater flat. Oh boy.

It's not my life.

I'm sure. What else?

I don't know. Something's happening in the world outside.

Do you know what?

Not really, only that it's breaking down.

An apocalypse.

I guess. But really I'd like it to not be breaking down.

You want to be hopeful.

Not exactly. Whoever they are, they aren't building Eden. Some things will get better and other things will get worse.

Yes.

I just wish I could imagine a future that hasn't already been imagined.

Hope is good, she said.

The waitress, an attractive woman about his age, brought their chicken sandwiches.

The strange thing, he said, is how you deliberate at such length in order to create a terrible urgency.

She looked at him.

In a play, he said.

She looked back to the street.

Urgency is the thing, he said. I mean, what are they talking about and why does it have to be discussed right now? No moments can be wasted. *Time* can't be wasted. If time is being wasted, it's because wasting time is an aspect of someone's character, and the way he wastes time is going to cost him dearly, probably near the end of act two.

He stopped. She wasn't listening. She was his mother in the way her concentration drifted. He looked at her eyes. Once when he was much younger and staring at the very same mix of colours, and at the delicate black speckling, he had thought of fish. Each of her eyes was a tiny oval wedge of a rainbow trout that had broken the water for one brilliant second.

Everything has to matter, he said. And if it doesn't *seem* to matter, it has to resonate. It has to resonate backwards and forwards.

She wiped her mouth and gestured with the paper napkin.

I just realized that's the Queen Hospital.

Cam-H, he said.

She looked at him.

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

The cluster of dull brick buildings across the street had always put him in mind of a military school.

I had friends who spent time at Gravenwood, she said.

What's Gravenwood?

It's one of those . . . facilities. A home. On a hill, right? Rolling lawns. A fence concealed by bushes. Mostly they're in novels. You're not mad, you just need a break. Though I'm sure some of the people they had there were mad. I mean in the usual sense.

I didn't know.

It's out near Kingston.

Naturally he wondered if she was talking about herself at a remove. *I have a friend who has this condition*. . . . It wasn't always an obvious ploy to mask the truth. And he wondered why she didn't specify which friends. He wasn't prepared to ask. Over time they'd had a handful of candid conversations about her past. He

was twenty when she told him about her first husband, that there was a life before the life she had with his father. The first man had died of an aneurysm at twenty-nine. She remarried quickly, and he, the someday playwright, was born less than a year into the next partnership. Hearing about the other man hadn't been a shock so much as simply compelling. It was a piece of news that had got him thinking. Maybe she was pregnant when the first man died: you didn't have to warp the timelines very much to allow it as a possibility. A few years earlier, in a light moment, he suggested this to her. She had laughed. Then she was quiet. He might have been exaggerating the long seconds that followed, but he had watched her eyes, and they were dark and unblinking and afraid to look into his. The notion had thrown her. She was sad in the memory of that man, sad that it would somehow make more sense had her son been from the first marriage. The boy would have been the product of a truer love.

The waitress came over to take their plates. A different kind of siren sounded from the east. It was an ambulance. Behind the ambulance was a police car. The waitress stood there holding the empty plates. His mother looked up at her.

What do you think it is? What's happening?

Something big, said the waitress. But we're here.

She walked away.

She's sweet, his mother said.

Two more police cars raced by.

Probably not a fire, he said. Not with the police this interested.

A crime. A stabbing or something.

You know mostly it's men killing women, she said. Usually women they know.

Men kill men too, he said.

He had blurted it out. It was the best defense of his gender he could come up with, that as killers men don't discriminate.

I'm just relieved I made a gentle one.

She had smoothed out the wrinkles of her napkin and was starting to fold it.

Do you think I could manage here?

In Toronto?

As she folded the napkin, she was being careful to keep all of the food and lipstick stains to the inside.

I don't know, he said. There's the crime thing.

You always tell me it's nothing to worry about.

Yes. But I wouldn't be able to force you *not* to worry.

Her napkin was a small and thick white square.

You're my gentle man, she said.

She paid the bill when he was in the washroom. They put their jackets on, thanked the waitress, and stepped outside. The day was getting colder. They crossed to the south side of the street and walked towards the nearest streetcar stop.

The pictures in your room, she said. They're to help you know people.

I suppose. They're examples if nothing else.

They hugged as the streetcar arrived. The folding doors opened. She waved from the bottom of the stairs. After paying the fare she turned and waved again. She found a seat near the front of the car, waving a last time as it pulled away. He started for home, pushing his hands into his pockets. In one of them he found three twenty-dollar bills folded up tightly. In the other a little wax bag with two chocolate chip cookies, the kind he had seen in the display case at the café.

He called her at midnight. She was rarely asleep before then. It had become her practice to nod off with the help of television. On the screen at the end of the bed, Letterman was working through his monologue, smirking on our behalf about error-prone celebrities.

Thanks for the cookies, he said.

You need sugar, she said. So what happened down there?

What do you mean?

With all the sirens.

Oh. I never found out. Probably it was nothing.

I'm glad.

He was able to picture her precisely where she was. Her head depressed against two pillows. The duvet pulled up to her chin. Her mouth slightly open and opening further as, every fifteen or twenty seconds, the audience laughed.