How to Survive this Fucking Election

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Fiction
How to Survive this Fucking Election

You met her freshman year. You were from Alabama and she was from New York, and she wore a leather jacket and four-inch-high heels that you would have fallen over in and you thought *God, she’s beautiful*. She caught you staring in class once and her lips curved into a slow smile, and you looked away because staring at her felt wrong, even though you were just looking and even though you had a boyfriend and even though—the point is, you looked away.

You had one class together, an intro writing class that all freshmen had to take, and if it hadn’t been for that class you probably never would have met her, because she was a computer science major—which took you by surprise, to be honest—and you still didn’t know what you wanted to do with your life, but in that class she wrote essays that began with *fuck the patriarchy* and when she read them out loud every guy in the class looked away. You wrote essays about growing up in a small town and Friday night football games that everyone went to and the diner that always had one light out so at night it read CLO*SE* instead of CLOSED. You got As on your papers, and she got *Minah, see me after class*, but at night you couldn’t get her words out of your head.

Your friends didn’t like her. They thought she was too loud and wore too much makeup and *why does she need to dress up like that for class, anyway?* You might have said, *well, you don’t know her* but the truth was they did, you all did, because you were all pubpol majors—
yeah, you chose pubpol eventually—and she kept taking pubpol classes, and her other classes were like data structures and machine learning and other things way over your head, but she was in that healthcare class with you that one semester and then that education class the next semester and you kept seeing her and she kept smiling at you, her dark eyes even darker with eyeliner that looked like wings and those lips that looked like sin.

Other things happened in other years too, but these stood out: the way she’d lean forward on her elbows when she was paying attention in class, how she talked with her hands when she got really worked up. She would always cuss in class, things like *hell no we can’t privatize healthcare* or *have you ever heard of institutionalized-fucking-racism* and you’d think *dear God, what is she doing?*

You broke up with your boyfriend, eventually. It took longer than it should have. This isn’t a love story so it shouldn’t have mattered that you and your boyfriend broke up, except it did because the day you told her she said *oh*, in a small voice you had never heard from her before. Your friends didn’t like her but it was just you and her in your dorm room and it was getting dark outside and she said *remember the thing you wrote freshman year?* and you said *yeah* and she said *closed, close, come fucking closer.* And it felt like you were balanced on the precipice of something, something you didn’t have the words for, and when she kissed you, you thought *dear God, what have I done?*

But you kissed her back, tangling your hands in her dark hair and breathing in the smell of her, roses and sea salt and Minah. She was the one who pulled away first, and when she did she laughed at the expression on your face. *You look like you’ve never been kissed,* she said, and you said, breathless, *not like this.*
Anyway, this isn’t a love story, so the point is she broke up with you after twelve-and-a-half months. It didn’t take you by surprise. She was beautiful and loud and outspoken and you heard from someone a few weeks ago that she got a return offer from Google but she broke up with you because once she tried to hold your hand in public and you, like the idiot you are, flinched away. She said she would give you time but a year later—well, she had run out of time to give.

It’s senior year and it’s Tuesday night and you don’t know what she’s doing. You’re with your friends, anyway, and you have pizza and champagne on ice and a Polaroid camera to document this moment but really, it’s so you can take pictures of the Polaroids and post them on Facebook with hashtag-I’m-with-her-hashtag-Madam-President. You aren’t one to say fuck the patriarchy but right now? Fuck the patriarchy. You are so ready for this.

You watch the results come in.

You keep watching.

They call Florida for Trump and you wonder what Minah’s doing.

They call North Carolina.

You live off campus this year so all your friends are at your apartment, and you and your roommate haven’t turned the heat on because it’s fucking expensive—you started cussing, after dating her, and you haven’t been able to stop and you’re not sure you want to—and it wasn’t cold before but it suddenly feels cold now.

They call Ohio.

They call Pennsylvania and the New York Times indicator has Trump’s chances of victory at more than 95%. You and your roommate don’t have a TV so you’ve been watching on your computers, side by side. You have CNN on and she has the New York Times live analysis
pulled up, and if you were with your more conservative friends they would have said the New York Times is way too liberal but right now you’re thinking what does the New York Times know anyway.

You haven’t talked to her in months, but you text her now. Nothing much. You miss her, but you don’t say that. Are you watching?

She doesn’t respond.

You get in the shower and the water soaks your skin. You turn it hot, hot, hotter. Your friend knocks on the bathroom door. You told her to get you if anything happens, and so now you turn off the water and wrap a towel around you and walk out into the living room with dripping hair. It is dead silent. At the bottom of the computer screen, you see a headline, white letters against a blue bar: *Clinton calls Trump to concede*. For a moment, you read it as she is calling for Trump to concede. But, of course, that’s wishful thinking.

You hear, for the first time, the president-elect’s voice, tinny through your laptop speakers. He is saying something about unity.

You walk away.

You get back in the shower. You turn the water hot, hot, hotter.

Minah is from New York, born and raised, but before your parents moved to Alabama your family lived in New York too for a few years. 2000-2002.

When you told her that, she said, that’s fucking shitty timing.

You heard somewhere that if two Americans talk long enough, they will always talk about where they were during 9/11.

Actually, you might have heard it from her.
Eventually, she texts you back. You’re in bed by then, and the blue glow of your phone lights up the room.

Yes, she says, as if it’s not hours later, as if it’s not all over by then.

The next day, you go to class. Minah’s not in any of your classes this semester, so you don’t see her. Someone makes a joke about the election and if you were her you would have said *do you think my fucking rights are a fucking joke* but you aren’t her so you laugh weakly and walk away.

You have two classes that day but you only go to one. You go home early, and you sit on your mattress because you never bought a bedframe because what’s the use of them anyway—what’s the use of anything now—and you haven’t cried since she dumped you but you cry now. They’re giant, wracking sobs, sobs that make it hard to breathe. You don’t tell anyone about it and by the time your roommate gets home your eyes are dry.

You try to read the news.

You stop. It has become hard to breathe.

There is a protest scheduled for the next day. You mark *going* on Facebook but when the day comes you can’t leave your bed. Your friends send you snapchats and you look for Minah in them. There she is—the flash of black hair, the eyeliner like wings. She looks like bravery.

Somehow, somehow, a week passes.

You see her on campus. You are wearing sweats and a hoodie that says Alabama State because it’s the only one you have and she is wearing the leather jacket she always wears like armor. You raise a hand at her and let it fall.
When she smiles, it isn’t the one you’re used to the one that cuts you open, that is hard to look at. This one is different, not as sharp. She has been hurting too. It shouldn’t have surprised you, that her grief is as written on her as it is on you, but somehow it does.

It makes it just a little easier to walk up to her.

*Hey,* you say.

*Hey,* she says.

You walk in silence for a while longer.

*I fucking hate this,* you say at last.

*Me too,* she says. And then: *Fuck this weather.*

It is midday, and the sun is bright and cold. It is exactly the right thing to say.

*Fuck him,* you say.

*No fucking thanks,* she says.

It’s the first time you’ve laughed in a week.

She looks at the sky. *What are you doing tonight?*

There is another protest scheduled. You marked *going* for that one, too. Now she looks at you, and that moment, you decide you’ll actually go. She has always been braver than you. But she has always made you braver, too.

*The same thing you are,* you say.

Her smile is a knife, this time. It is a relief to see it, to know that not everything has changed. *I’ll see you there,* she says.

You want to reach out, to touch her hand, to do something, anything, but she is gone before you can.
That evening, you wear a black tank top you borrowed from her and never returned. You need a little extra bravery tonight. You remember when the Black Lives Matter protests were going on—your friends had midterms and didn’t want to go, and you watched from your dorm room window and felt the quiet burn of shame. She’d been out of town that week, interviewing in San Francisco, and she skipped her flight to join the protests there. She sent you a picture of it—of her, on the shoulders of some stranger, holding up a sign that she made herself, the flash of the camera making the whole world look too bright, overexposed.

Before you started dating, before you really knew her, you asked how she could do it—the school and everything else, wearing her beliefs like a badge, like a flag, not caring who saw. She laughed. *I’m a fucking compsci major*, she said. *They don’t care what you do as long as you can code.*

You think back to the pubpol classes she’s been in with you. You don’t know what she got in them. She probably doesn’t either. Her GPA doesn’t matter to her, it never has. There are bigger things in the world.

You, well, you have a 4.0.

You’re not proud of that either.

Your parents are. Everyone in that Alabama town is proud of you.

The night is cool, too cool for a tank top. When you get there, you see her standing at the corner of the street. There are people in the streets already, shouting, but her arms are wrapped around herself and she looks, suddenly, very small.

You realize she’s been waiting for you.

The people are chanting. *Not our president*, they say, over and over. The moon is high in the sky, and it turns everything silver. The light glances off the sharp planes of her face.
Are you ready? you ask when you reach her.

She uncurls herself, brings her hands to her mouth to breathe some warmth into them. You wonder how long she’s been waiting for you.

_I am so fucking tired_, she says.

_Do you want to go home?_ you say.

_How can I?_ she says. _This country doesn’t feel like home anymore._

Yes, you say, because you feel it too. _I know._ It is still cold outside. Everything is still silver. It is too fucking beautiful.

She is beautiful too.

She looks away from you, at the crowd, the signs and the people and the way they surge forward like a wave, moving toward an unnamed destination.

Her voice, when she speaks, is a sigh. _I wish_, she says, and then stops.

_You wish?_ you ask.

She shakes her head. The piercings in her ears glimmer like fallen stars. You remember counting them, _one-two-three_, kissing your way up the nape of her neck. There are so many memories like this. Your friends know none of them.

In class, you learned about intersectionality—the way identities can overlap, the way people can belong to more than one group. _This is a safe space_, the professor said, and so you went around in a circle and said the groups you belonged to.

_You said, female._

You didn’t say anything else. You grew up in a small town in Alabama and the new president of the United States says the way you feel is a sin and the only girl you’ve ever loved broke up with you because for 21 years you have pretended to be someone you’re not.
When Minah looks at you, it is like you’re seeing her for the first time all over again.

*I wish things were different,* she says. *But they aren’t, so come on. Let’s do this.* Her voice is low but her eyes are bright. She is always ready for a fight.

This is not a love story. You know that. You know it can’t be.

But the moon is high in the sky, and the sounds of the protest have grown distant, and—and Minah is holding out her hand.

*Let’s go,* she says again. She says it like a challenge this time, and your heart is a jackhammer in your chest. It counts out the beats, *one-two-three* like the stars that shine in Minah’s ears, *one-two-three* like the start of a race. *One-two-three, ready-set-go.* There is only one stoplight in your town and the people in your high school used to have races when the light turned green.

Her expression wavers.

This is not a love story. It can’t be. *It can’t.* You have read the news articles. People get *killed* because of this sort of thing.

But Minah is standing there, and her hand is outstretched.

You take a deep breath.

And then you take her hand.

You, for all your flaws, are not stupid enough to make the same mistake twice. And she has always made you braver than you are.

*Let’s go,* you say.

And then the two of you are running, running to join the protests, running to catch up to the faraway lights. Your heart is pounding out that same jagged rhythm, *one-two-three,* and you
are fucking terrified—God, you are *so fucking terrified*—but she is next to you, she is next to you, she is next to you.