

Can anyone else feel that?

by Michael Howard

WHY WE LIKE IT:

Convincing dialogue is one of the writer's biggest challenges. In fiction, it isn't a transcription of actual speech: it has a life and plasticity all its own. This is one of the best examples of how to do it right we've read in some time. And the trim prose, cadenced and stripped of ornament, in this moving bad ass tale of post-millennial modern manners is a lesson in the art of restraint. Quote: 'The crickets are deafening now that I'm listening for them. I look up at the sky. The great yawning nothingness. There aren't many stars out. Clouds keep sliding in front of the moon. It's a weird shade of orange tonight.' It doesn't get any better, folks.

It's ten to one but the party, which was only supposed to be a small get together for Kerry's birthday, is showing no signs of slowing down. I count the people in the living room. Fourteen. There's more in the kitchen, and upstairs, too. Also on the patio. But those are mostly Kerry's brother's friends. I realize that I haven't seen Kerry for a while, can't remember how long, and wonder where she might be. I ask the kid to my left if he knows.

"Who's that?" His dilated pupils reflect the lights on the ceiling.

"The person whose house you're in."

He looks puzzled. Then he begins to nod. "Man. That's rad."

I finish my beer and stand up, walk into the kitchen. There's only two beers left in the fridge. I take them both out and hide one in the oven. I grab a cold slice of pizza from one of the boxes on

the counter, take a bite, throw it in the garbage. I wander over to the table. Brad, Mason and three girls I don't think I've seen before are distractedly playing cards. Brad's shirt is off.

"What happened to the beer," I say.

Mason looks at me. "What?"

I point at the fridge. "No more beer."

One of the girls starts taking off her socks.

"Oh, come on!" Brad groans. "Socks don't count."

"You never said that," the girl's friend says.

I ask Mason where Kerry is.

"Out," he says, shuffling the cards. The girl puts her socks on the table. They're white and the bottoms are dirty.

"Out where?"

He starts to deal. "I don't know."

I ask again about the beer but he ignores me. A strong smell of pot floats into the kitchen from the living room and hangs there. I sit down at the table hoping to see one of the girls' tits but they keep folding their hands so that they don't have to take any clothes off. After a while they get bored and the game breaks up.

"Fuckin sophomores," Brad says when the girls walk off. He starts throwing the cards around the kitchen with good technique. Amber walks in and he hits her with a few and she runs back out

guarding her face and shrieking. I drink my beer, belch under my breath. Once all the cards are gone Brad says:

"Doesn't this shit get old for you?"

Mason's preoccupied with his phone and I don't really feel like asking him what he's talking about.

"Drinking, smoking, fucking," he continues, philosophically. "If you're lucky. But what's the point anyway? I mean, there's porn."

"What do you think?" Mason shows me a picture of a woman on his phone. She's standing in front of a bathroom mirror in her underwear.

"She looks ... old."

"Forty-two," he says proudly. "She wants to meet up tonight."

"Porn's more gratifying" Brad says to no one. "I know what I like." His shirt is still off and he's now wearing aviator sunglasses.

A few people come in through the front door. I hear Kerry's voice among them. After a minute she comes into the kitchen and throws her arms around me. She smells like cherries and pot. She kisses my cheek and slobbers all over it. She calls me "baby" which means she's very high. I ask where she was.

"Riding around."

Her parents bought her a new Audi for her birthday. She wrapped her last one around a lamp post. Kerry was more or less unscathed but Jen broke her shoulder or collarbone or something. Got a concussion, too. That was about six weeks ago, just before finals.

I tell Kerry about the beer which was a mistake because seconds later she's outside on the patio screaming at her older brother Nick about how it's her party and he's not supposed to be there. It gets pretty heated after he tells her to go fuck herself. I walk out to make sure she doesn't do anything crazy.

"You're a fucking prick!" she yells.

"Get back inside," he says calmly. Some of his friends laugh. They all have beers.

Kerry starts forward but I grab her arm and hold her back. I say, "Forget it."

"Listen to your boyfriend," Nick says. "He knows what's good for you."

"Fuck you, Nick!" she says.

"Here." He leans forward and spits a mouthful of tobacco juice. It lands about two feet in front of us but Kerry loses it anyway. She's screaming like a mental patient and fighting to free herself from my grip. I've got my arms around her waist now. If she gets at one of the empty bottles someone is going to get hurt. Brad and a few others rush out and help me restrain her. Nick's friends laugh harder.

She's bawling, but no longer violent, when we get her back inside. "It's *my* party," she keeps saying. Tears are spilling down her cheeks, smearing her makeup. I hand her over to Josephine and go back out to the patio. I sit down in an empty chair and Nick tosses me a cold beer from the cooler.

"Want a lip?" he says.

"Sure."

He tosses me a pouch and I put it in. He says, "I don't know how you put up with it. I'd smack her."

I shrug. "She's cool when it's just us."

I ask him how college is. He says he gets laid every weekend. "All you have to do is look at them. No shit." Three and foursomes aren't uncommon, he says. "Look." He pulls up a video on his phone of three girls making out in a dorm room. One of his friends gestures with his arms and looks around. He says:

"Where the fuck are they?"

"What am I," Nick says, "a pimp? Get your own pussy."

Another friend nods at the house. "Some in there."

I turn and spit into the grass. I say, "Don't bother."

"Your class is pretty lame," Nick says.

I nod in agreement. They reminisce about their high school exploits. All the girls they did and didn't do.

"I'll say it again: by far the best blowjob I ever got."

"Is it true Braxton fucked her in the auditorium?"

"She works at a tanning salon. I saw her last week."

"Four or five times."

"I still have a few pics of her on my phone."

"You hear what's her name got engaged?"

"I never understood why everyone thought she was so hot."

"True, but she had a perfect ass."

"I wasted so much time with that chick."

"She's fat now."

I spit into the grass again. Fireflies are sparking in the trees behind the yard. The crickets are deafening now that I'm listening for them. I look up at the sky. The great yawning nothingness. There aren't many stars out. Clouds keep sliding in front of the moon. It's a weird shade of orange tonight. I finish my beer and move into the shadows and take a piss. When I sit back down I feel hopeless and alone. It's a familiar feeling, like I'm sinking or being pushed down. I think there must be something wrong with me. Like the people who see and hear things that aren't there. I wonder if Zach used to feel this way. Or if Kerry ever does. Nick asks me if I have any hydros.

I shake my head. "Sorry."

Inside the house things are mellowing out. The kitchen is empty. So is the oven. Someone found the last beer. Whatever. I go into the living room which is still bright and crowded. Somewhere a speaker is faintly playing the new Arctic Monkeys. I sit down next to Jamie and mechanically take out my phone. There's a couple messages from Kerry asking what I'm doing, where I am. At the other end of the room Tyler is drinking Bacardi straight from the bottle and talking loudly. Last summer someone punched him in the face at this girl's lake house. Tyler ended up winning the fight. Zach was there that night. It doesn't seem like a year ago.

"That's nothing," Tyler's saying. "That's nothing. Listen to this." He starts telling a story. After a minute I realize which one it is. I put my phone in my pocket and glare at him. We make eye contact but he carries on.

"So he's chatting with this girl every day. This nurse. And he's telling everyone all about her."

"I know where this is going," a girl I don't know says.

"Just listen," Tyler says. "So it's not long before it starts getting really kinky. They're doing the cybersex thing and he's sending her all kinds of pictures. And she's sending pictures too. Pretty dirty stuff. He showed them to us. Anyway this girl, Isabella, never wants to talk on the phone. Whenever they make plans to meet up she cancels last minute. She's toying with him, right? But he's in love. He was always falling in love with girls."

He's averting my gaze now. I don't take my eyes off him. Most of the people in the room already know the story. They're smiling, waiting for the punchline.

"Finally, after she cancels on him for the fucking hundredth time or whatever, he decides he's had enough. He calls her out and they have this big fight."

"Via text," Jamie interjects.

"Right," Tyler says. "This is all through text. So they have this fight and they stop talking. But he can't get over it. He's still in love with her. He won't shut up about her. Isabella this and Isabella that. It was ridiculous. So one day, and I don't know why this never occurred to us before, one day we decide to search her phone number on one of those websites. We had to pay like twenty bucks—but it was worth it."

"I knew it," the girl says.

"Wait. Get this. He's there at the time. We're all at Pizza Hut. And he's begging us not to do it. But we do it. We punch in her number and pay the money and *boom*, there it is." He pauses for effect. He grins. "Isabella the kinky nurse ... is a fifty-seven-year-old man."

The room erupts.

"Who happens," Tyler adds over the cacophony, finger in the air, "who happens to live right around the fucking corner. Zach knew who the guy was!"

I look around. Everyone's cracking up. Everyone but me.

"Right around the fucking corner!" Tyler says again. He slaps his knee.

It takes a long time for the laughter and chatter to die down. When it finally does I look at Tyler and say:

"Why don't you finish the story?"

Everyone stops talking. Some people are looking at me, others at Tyler. Some have their heads down.

"Go ahead," I tell him.

"I did."

"No—no you did not. Tell us the rest of it."

"Come on, man," he says, smiling uncomfortably. "Take it easy."

"Finish the fucking story."

He stops smiling. He looks at the floor.

"Not gonna finish it?"

There's silence.

"That wasn't the reason," he says at length. "I don't think that was it."

"Of course not." I get up and walk out of the room. As I'm climbing the stairs I can hear the conversation slowly picking back up.

I move down the hallway and knock on Kerry's bedroom door.

A tired voice says, "Yeah."

"It's me."

"Come in."

I try to turn the knob. "It's locked."

She pads across the floor and unlocks the door and lets me in. She's wearing a pink t-shirt and black panties. Josephine, also not wearing pants, is lying on the bed smoking a joint. Kerry gets back into bed and starts pushing her cuticles back.

"You're a little overdressed," Josephine says.

I say, "I think I'm gonna go."

Kerry looks at me with a blank expression. "You're not staying over?"

I motion to the bed.

"Jo's staying in the guestroom."

"When?"

Josephine gets the hint. She takes another drag from the joint and rummages around for her pants. When she's gone I switch off the light and lie down next to Kerry.

"Why didn't you text me back?" she says through a yawn.

"Sorry. I left my phone in the kitchen."

"Who's still here?"

"Just a few people."

"What are they doing?"

"Nothing," I say after a pause.

She offers me the joint. I shake my head. She lets it burn out and throws it on the floor. She tells me she feels old. I tell her I understand. We stare at the TV without talking. Posters and pictures torn from magazines, mostly of Taylor Swift and Lana Del Rey, are stuck all over the walls with scotch tape. I look over and see that the streaks on her wrist are almost gone. She lays her head on my chest. Her breath is warm on my skin. I can feel my heart beating against her face. The feeling from the patio is back again. Maybe it never left. Maybe it never will. Maybe it's just part of me. I shut my eyes. Outside stars are shooting across the night sky. Blue and green and purple slashes of light painted on the cosmic darkness.

I say, "Kerry," but she's already asleep.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

What inspired me to write this one is difficult to say. There's something about decadent restless youth that fascinates me—it's a theme I keep returning to; I can't seem to get away from it. The general subject matter stems from personal experience. The main idea was to convey a sense of distance

between the narrator and the world he inhabits, an alienation the reader sees and understands better than he does. Whether I succeeded in doing so is another matter. As to influences, I've got plenty and I've experimented with a lot of different forms. I'd say the minimalism characterizing this story is influenced by writers like Chekhov, Carver/Lish and Cormac McCarthy. Maybe early Ellis, too, though I haven't read that stuff in ten years.

BIO:

Michael Howard is a writer and teacher living in Vietnam. His fiction and creative nonfiction has appeared in After the Pause, Hypertext Magazine, New Pop Lit, The Forge, The Fiction Pool and The Opiate among others. His political essays have appeared in a wide variety of publications and have been translated into several languages.