

After sharing a poutine in the Byward Market, we ducked into Cafe Deckuf, just as it was starting to rain.

The place had a bar, several tables, a few cushy lounge chairs in the corner, and a 15-foot stage. They hosted bands and also had a poetry night every Thursday.

"They call it Spoken Word," I told Laura.

"What's the distinction," she asked.

"Spoken word is more like a performance," I told her. "It's like Jazz, but with words. And it also makes you think, like poetry."

My friend Lilian Studt was taking five-dollar cover at the door and stamping hands. Her jazz duo *Cedrick* was comprised of her and her partner William Echard. They were scheduled to close out the poetry show with music.

"We're gearing up this year to have more gigs," Lilian told me. "If anything comes up, please let us know."

"I sometimes booked music acts for my art openings," I explained to Laura as we walked in.

Laura called me a "true bohemian."

"That's what everybody thinks," I told her, "But this is all business. It's all expensed out. You're on the corporate account, baby."

She got a laugh out of that but there was some truth. I was going to write off the gallery tickets from earlier and the drinks we'd have tonight.

We settled into an intimate booth in the corner. Droplets of rain decorated the darkening window. Laura sat against the cushions, facing the stage. I shifted my wooden seat to see the stage, as the performances began.

The first poet up was a pale girl with purple hair and thick granny glasses. They had fringes on the corners. We listened to her, as we scanned the stage and the vibe in the room. The blue and red stage lights double-lit her face. Her poem was confusing at first. It sounded like she was reading book titles. She was. *The Great Gatsby*, *In Cold Blood*, *Harry Potter*, an *Archie Digest*, a textbook on Social Sciences, and the list went on and on. She revealed it was a list of books on her ex-girlfriend's bookshelf.

You can tell a lot about a person's bookshelf. The first books that the poet recited were the famous titles. Authors she recognized. The books at the end of the list were either more obscure or controversial. At times, the titles were

metaphors for her relationship with her ex. Like *Sophie's Choice* came at a point when she digressed about their situation. There was an autobiography of Donald Trump hidden away in the corner, near the bottom. She said it was a book her parents gave her. Another book was about family trauma as it's passed on through heredity. In the end, it was the books that were hidden away which caused conflict in their relationship. The things we carry with us which don't represent us truly. Even the junk books in our personal libraries linger in our personalities.

Laura smirked and raised one eyebrow.

I leaned in and whispered, "I'm not showing you my library."

She couldn't help but tell me about her love of books. Then asked me, "Do you read, Alex?"

"Of course I read, Laura."

"What do you read?"

"I read comics. Mostly for the pictures," I told her.

"So you like picture books, Alex?" She said busting my balls.

I played along telling her, "I'm up to a third grade reading level now."

"Oh la la, you're a big boy."

"You better believe it."

We laughed.

"I read some non-fiction and crime fiction too," I added, before turning the inquisition on her. "What about you?"

"Biographies and a lot of literary fiction. Some romance," she admitted, giggling.

The candle on the table tanned her face yellow. We talked about our favorite books from the poet's list. *Archie Digest* really resonated with her.

"When I was a little girl, granddad brought home little paperbacks. I loved them so much. I've been a fan of *Betty and Veronica* ever since."

"I learned English from Archie comics," I told her.

"Really?! English? What language did you speak before?"

I got good at introducing myself over and over, on these first dates. It was only recently I thought I needed a "logline," like a film description. An elevator pitch, in case I met my next lover in an elevator.

"I was born in Romania, actually."

"So you're Romanian?"

"By birth, yes. Canada has been my home for twice as long. Besides the food I had at home growing up, I feel more Canadian than Romanian."

"Do you speak the language?"

"At the level of an eight year old. You know, Romanian is very close to French. It's a Romance language. One of the five Romance languages. French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian."

"*D'accord*," she said, figuring I'd understand.

"*De acord* would be the equivalent in Romanian. Means *to agree*."

"Of course," she translated. "It means 'of course.'"

"French is required here in Ottawa, with the government and all that." I caught myself in my dad's speaking pattern. "We're supposed to be bilingual," I continued. "I just lost interest in high school and haven't practiced since."

"You ordered poutine fine," she teased me.

"Stick with me, lady, and you won't starve," I said. And I gently flicked her chin upward, like we were starring in *Casablanca*.

We heard the next poet being called up on stage. He wore beads around his neck and wrists. Dressed in all black. Had a little peach fuzz goatee. He started speaking at a rhythmic pace.

"I ain't no provider," he said. "I got a lot on my mind-ah..."

I don't believe in matrimoney

I'm all about the mattress honey

Laura and I looked at each other. The delivery was stern and serious. But the tension released laughs among the audience. He went on for about three minutes.

It's in my nature, I'm a runner

Once you accept it, it'll be funner

I don't even know why you want me

Din't your parents warn you about me?

Laura laughed through the cringe.

*Our love is now, not for evah
Sorry, I can't offer you bevah
If I could, I'd buy you dat ring
I'm upfront about what I bring*

I ain't no provider, he said.

When he finished, he held out the mic and dropped it to the floor. He walked off stage into a crew of five guys at a front-row table. They cheered wildly, high-fives, and patted him on the back. One guy waved down the waitress to order his friend the poet a drink.

The cafe crowd loved it for being outrageous. Laura tried faking a laugh to fit in. I laughed it off, trying not to focus on the element of truth behind the comedy.

"Are you a provider, Alex?" She caught me off guard.

"Me? I'm an artist," I told her.

"Yes, I know you're an artist, Alex, but can you see yourself as a provider?"

This was a sore point but I took it on. "Being an artist is not an easy life," I told her. "It's not easy keeping a relationship."

"It's not?"

"Historically speaking. The artists I like, from the Renaissance, they were medians for god. Michelangelo, Da Vinci, both died as virgins. Rafael indulged himself and died of fever after love-making. He paid the price. Even Andy Warhol was a virgin till his sixties."

"I know you're not a virgin, Alex. What I'm asking is if you can provide for a woman."

"Great men don't know their abilities until they're tested," I told her. And then I added, "If love is on the line, I suppose I could be capable of anything."

"You're using language out of books, Alex. Let's be realistic."

"Oh, so you're traditional," I said, trying my best to deflect. "I understand. You need the support of a man."

"Quite the contrary," she said, offended. "I'm an independent woman."

"I get it, sweetheart," I said winking. "Things are hard nowadays."

"What if there were children?"

Laura was bringing out the heavy guns with heavy topics. I wasn't sure where her mind was going.

"My dear Laura, we just met," I said, making a joke of it again. Humour was my sole defense. "I want to keep things light," I told her. "But I'll be honest with you, Laura. I haven't given it much thought. I mean, it all depends on the couple I guess. You'd have to be able to negotiate who does what. I have friends where the roles are reversed. The female has a corporate job with benefits and he's the caregiver." I looked into her eyes and thought, I better tell her something good. "It all depends how the heart communicates between two souls," I finally said. "We have to get there, Laura. I *want* to get there *with you*, Laura."

I reached across the table and I touched her hand. She let me hold it, next to the candle warming our fingers.

She changed the subject, commenting how she liked the place I've chosen. When Laura dazzled me with her teeth, I mirrored her liveliness and cracked a few jokes, to bury her serious questions into the past. Her mood had flipped to a new page. Her eyes shimmered in the candlelight. Faint stage lights shifted colours on her cheeks.

The jazz duet came on. We listened to *Cedrick* for the first song and then we switched to chatting face-to-face. The sounds of electric piano and acoustic guitar became the soundtrack to our conversation. When the tempo was fast, our excitement matched it. When the music was smooth, we were romantic. Laura's words blended into the sounds. They danced through my ears. If it got too loud and hard to understand, I smiled and nodded and made sure she was comfortable.

I whispered in her ear, "Do you want another drink?" Her hair smelled like vanilla.

At the end of the night, as we were getting up to leave, I told Laura, "I changed my mind..."

"Changed your mind about what?" She was confused.

I held her breath with my words and said, "I thought about it and... I'd like to show you my library."