

Roommates

Lidia Jean Kott

Dan was gangly and hairy and everything he wore was a dull, dirt color like hemp.

“I can’t explain it, looking at Dan makes me feel sad,” Salsa said, one time after Dan had spent a half hour in their kitchen, blending pea pesto for the three of them with a small hand blender.

“I just don’t get why,” Tina said.

Salsa and Tina had lived together since they were each other’s randomly assigned roommates freshman year. After they graduated, they’d rented a little house near the farmers’ market. Tina worked at the food co-op, and Salsa worked at the circulation desk at the university library.

Tina always had boyfriends. But they never lasted long. Salsa learned to keep her head down and wait them out—like how you wait out February in most places, but especially in Michigan.

On warm evenings, they’d share a cigarette on the back steps, passing it back and forth, and talk about saving up enough money to move to New Mexico. Salsa loved Tina’s freckles. She had so many, so close together that in some places they actually merged together like chocolate chip cookies on a cookie tray.

But Dan was different than Tina’s other boyfriends. Shortly after Tina mentioned that there was a new guy at the co-op, he started coming around. At first, he would just be out back checking out their garden—giving Tina useless advice about their plant beds, which were doing fine, and suggesting that they plant obscure varieties of summer squash, like crookneck.

But he burrowed into their lives like a termite. He suggested that Tina and Salsa strip the gray peeling paint in the bathroom and offered to help. He fretted over the loose steps that led to the back door. He pondered the icicle that had taken over the majority of their freezer.

By the time he got around to officially moving in, he was basically living there anyway. Tina was doing the dishes, and passing them to Dan, who was drying them. Salsa was standing there, like an extra limb.

“Hey guys,” said Salsa. “Do we have any plastic bags left?”

“I can pick some up tomorrow,” said Dan.

“I feel like you shouldn’t have to buy poop bags for a house you don’t even

live in,” said Salsa.

“I was actually thinking about moving in,” said Dan.

Salsa imagined analyzing this scene later with Tina. “What a white male comment,” she’s say. “A girl would definitely ask if she could move in, instead of stating that she was *already thinking* about it.”

“That’s so true,” Tina would respond, in her I-just-realized-this voice, and then they’d both be silent for a moment, thinking about all the other ways it was true.

But in real life, Tina turned off the water and dried her hands on her skirt. “What do you think, Salsa?” she asked. They had actually bought that skirt together from Salvation Army. Technically, they shared it.

“I have to walk Buggy,” Salsa said, grabbing the leash from the drawer. Buggy was a fat, snorty mutt, maybe part pit bull, and his run was more like an eager trudge.

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable in your own home,” said Dan. When he put his hand on her shoulder, surprisingly, Salsa felt something inside her jump.

She leaned down, letting her hair fall onto her face, and clipped Buggy’s leash onto his collar.

That was the beginning of an era when Salsa would fall asleep, feeling alone in her room, unable to keep her ears from straining to separate out miscellaneous sounds—the whirling of the washing machine, the stray cries of drunks on the street, regular old house creaks—from the sound of what could be Tina and Dan having quiet sex in their bedroom.

It was about mid-July when Tina’s grandfather died. She had to go back home to Chicago for the funeral. Tina had never been close to her grandfather. Her mom said that he had made her clean their whole house with a toothbrush when she was little. It was something Tina thought about when she saw toothbrushes in unexpected places—at the bottom of a backpack, fallen to the floor.

Tina called Salsa two days after she left, while Salsa was walking home from the library.

“How was the funeral?” asked Salsa.

Tina skipped over that part. “I slept with Simon,” she said. Simon was her slightly older neighbor. Salsa had been hearing about him for years.

“But what about Dan?” Salsa asked.

“He knows about it,” said Tina. “Dan doesn’t believe in being exclusive. He thinks that people are meant to follow their attractions, it’s, like, a more natural way to live or something. I don’t know, I still feel weird.”

“Well, whatever,” said Salsa. She was actually stepping over Dan right then, as he scrubbed the steps with what looked like a hairbrush.

“Hey Salsa!” Dan said, “Want to have dinner together? I harvested a lot of ripe tomatoes from the garden today, and a few peppers and I was thinking of making soup.”

“I actually got takeout,” said Salsa.

Later that evening, Salsa came downstairs for a glass of water. She saw the glare of Dan’s laptop out on the front porch.

The porch was screened in but there were torn parts of the mesh wiring that you could put your hand through. They usually only went out there for parties. The whole place smelled like smoke.

“Do you want a beer?” asked Dan. “There’s some in the cooler.”

“What are you watching?” asked Salsa.

She took a beer and sat next to him, the couch sagged in the center pushing them closer together than was comfortable. They sat stiffly. Dan still laughed at the funny bits, though. His laugh came from his chest.

A few beers later, when Dan’s knee accidentally knocked Salsa’s, she didn’t move hers. At the end of the movie, in the eerie blue glow of the credits, Dan leaned over and kissed Salsa on the mouth.

She raised her arms and let him pull her toothpaste-stained U of M sweat-shirt over her head. Dan reached for his belt, but she unbuckled it for him. It was tan and ugly and looked like summer camp. It was probably vegan.

Salsa was the kind of person who picked at her cuticles until they bled, and then collected all the dead skin into a little mound. She said silent improvised prayers before going on rides in amusement parts, and she only ever went on the swirling chair one. She mostly didn’t walk on red, even in Ann Arbor, unless other people were walking, too. And she was also the kind of person who had sex with her best friend’s boyfriend without using a condom. She felt like if she said the word, it would prove that what they were doing was real, wake them up, and make them stop.

Afterwards, they gathered up their clothing quickly and matter-of-factly. Salsa didn’t put on her shoes and socks, just held them in her arms.

Tina called the next day. Her mom was overwhelmed so she was going to stay in Chicago through the weekend to help clear out her grandfather’s house.

“Are you going to use a toothbrush?” asked Salsa. She felt better when Tina laughed.

The morning Tina was supposed to get back, Salsa came downstairs in shorts and a t-shirt and no bra. Dan was already in the kitchen and dressed. His hair

even looked a little less greasy than usual.

“Morning,” Salsa said. She took the coffee pot, and poured out the dreggy remains so she could refill it with a fresh batch. Dan only drank tea, of course.

“We don’t have to tell Tina about what happened,” said Salsa. “It wasn’t anything, anyway.”

Dan looked so relieved she could have punched him in the face. He could have argued the point, at least a little. Salsa took her coffee upstairs.

Tina arrived about half an hour later, carrying bags of groceries. There were more in the car, so Salsa and Dan went out with her to get them.

They all squinted in the sun. “These steps look so good!” Tina said. She hopped in place on the second step to make her point.

“Oh yeah?” said Dan. He turned back and stood up on his tiptoes to kiss her.

Salsa had just assumed that things would be better after the Chicago trip; instead they were catastrophically the same. That evening, Dan said that he wanted to redo the garden walkway. He and Tina sketched out plans on pads of paper together, debating the merits of mulch versus gravel versus concrete pavers.

Salsa said she hated the idea of a walkway. What was this? A senior citizen center? They could all walk through the backyard just fine. She definitely wasn’t going to pay for it. The smell of fish got lodged in her throat and wouldn’t go away. She tried buying gum, ginger, brushing her teeth three times a day, only eating fresh smelling things like greens, but none of it made any difference. Ginger almost made her heave.

Finally, one morning instead of going to work Salsa walked to a Walgreens a few miles away so she would never have to go back there again. She checked to make sure there was nobody else in the aisle, and with back of her hand swiped three pregnancy tests into her basket, almost as if it were an accident.

Salsa wondered if the cash register lady though she was trying to get pregnant on purpose. Maybe she was looking at the dark circles under her eyes and thinking, “That lady looks like she’d make a terrible mum.” In her imagination, the Walgreens lady was British.

“Thank you,” she told the lady and smiled. As soon as she got back home, she ran up the stairs and into the bathroom. The lock was broken, so she put her backpack in front of the door.

Dan was downstairs in the kitchen. He was making layered zucchini cake.

“What up?” he asked, when he noticed her standing in the doorway.

“Can I help?” asked Salsa.

“Uh sure,” he said surprised. “Want to flour the pans?”

Salsa dumped the flour directly onto the first tray, not even bothering to measure it out with a tablespoon. There was definitely way too much flour, she realized. She flattened it down with her palms and wrote out, "I'm pregnant."

Dan came over to her side of the counter with the bowl of cake batter and was about to pour, when he read her message.

It was him knowing that made her eyes hot. Salsa hid her face in Dan's chest, before he could say anything. She could feel that she was getting his shirt wet, and probably flour-y too, but he didn't pull away. Instead, he put the cake batter bowl down and hugged her.

"We'll handle this," said Dan. "However you want."

Salsa made an appointment at the University clinic for the same day the next week. Dan offered to drive her and she accepted. What do you talk about on a drive like that? Salsa thought about how before her first date in 11th grade she had made conversation topic index cards, but then forgot them at home. This was different for many reasons. First off, it wasn't a date. They drove mostly in silence.

The clinic was empty. Salsa checked in with the lady at the counter behind the window. She gave her a Dixie cup with two Advil's.

Salsa sat in a mint cushioned chair with wooden armrests that were either slightly too high or slightly too low. Dan went to get her a cup of water from the water cooler.

"Geez there are a lot of baby pictures here," she said, when he came back. Everywhere she looked there seemed to be a wide-eyed baby, wearing a stupid hat.

"Just don't look at them," said Dan.

So Salsa stared down at her Dixie cup instead.

"Sally Wolkowitz?" said a nurse.

Salsa stood up, and followed the nurse's worn-down white Keds to a room in the back.

The doctor had long straight brown hair, pulled back in a low ponytail that looked like it could be featured as one of the "375+ hot new ways" to do your hair in a women's magazine.

She put Salsa's feet in stirrups, and reminisced to her about her undergrad days at the University of Michigan. Salsa stared at the ceiling.

"Now this might hurt a bit," she said. Salsa closed her eyes.

"Nothing beats the sandwiches at Zingerman's," the doctor concluded.

"You know," said Dan on the drive back, as he fiddled with the radio, "if you want to tell Tina about what happened, you should. Like, if you believe

that would help.”

“I’m never going back to Zingerman’s,” Salsa said.

“Sure,” said Dan. “It’s so expensive there. I think a sandwich is \$15 dollars or something.”

Back home, Salsa got into bed and pulled the covers up around her, even though it was hot and clammy. Buggy was at her feet, and his oddly human breathing was the only thing that felt certain. She stayed up and watched the shadows made by the slits in her blinds as they slid across the room. She heard Tina get back from the co-op, and Dan’s laugh, his *ha-ha*’s popping in rapid succession like popcorn kernels.

Salsa came down for dinner. Dan had made vegetarian snap bean pie. Afterward, she took Buggy out on a walk. Her stomach hurt, but not much.

As Salsa approached the backyard, she could see Tina and Dan in the kitchen window. Tina was washing the dishes and Dan was standing next to her, drying them. She could only see their backs, but their backs looked happy.

Salsa clicked the gate shut behind her. She got on her knees in the garden, not even caring about her jeans, and she pulled up everything she saw: the peppers, the muskmelon, the tomatoes, the zucchini, the radishes, the cucumbers, the squash, and eventually just clumps of grass. Meanwhile, Buggy took a nap.

After she finished washing the dishes, Tina saw Salsa out the window and came out. Salsa tried to wipe her face, and ended up just streaking it with dirt. Tina brushed at her clothes.

They sat next to each other on the steps and both stared at what was left of the garden.

“I think I see a tomatillo that rolled over there to the left,” said Salsa, not sure what they were supposed to talk about. “You want it?”

“I’m sorry,” said Salsa, after Tina didn’t answer. “I don’t know what got into me. Maybe I should see a therapist.”

“You could have told me about what happened,” Tina said. Salsa looked over at her and saw that her face, illuminated from the light in the kitchen, was puffy. “Or about Dan.”

Salsa didn’t move, but still she was falling. “I just don’t like mulch, really,” she said. “If it matters. I mean, it doesn’t. I just wanted to say that.”

“You mean for the walkway?” said Tina.

“Yeah,” said Salsa.

“The little splintery parts always get in my shoes,” said Tina.

“Isn’t mulch just *all* splintery parts?” said Salsa.

Tina stretched out her legs.

They stayed out in the backyard for so long that Dan came downstairs and turned out the lights in the kitchen and probably went upstairs to bed. But Salsa and Tina kept talking, even in the dark.

Lidia Jean Kott is a writer and web producer living in Washington, D.C. Her work has appeared on NPR, *The Huffington Post*, and *The Rumpus*, among other publications. This is her first published piece of fiction.