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The Antagonist

Also by Lynn Coady

Strange Heaven
Play the Monster Blind
Saints of Big Harbour
Mean Boy

The Antagonist

Lynn Coady



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There will be time to murder and create.

— T.S. Eliot

Part One |

1 |

05/23/09, 9:42 p.m.

THERE YOU ARE in the picture looking chubby and pompous, and it makes me remember how you told me that time you were afraid of fat people. That is, afraid of being fat, and hating those who were, so fear and hating, like of a contagion, the same way homophobes — guys who are actually maybe gay or have the potential for gayness within them — are thought to be afraid of homos. So want to annihilate them, make them not exist. You said you were embarrassed by it, though, your hatred of fat people, your fear. You knew it was shallow. You knew it was wrong. You thought it was a prejudice that was beneath the enlightened likes of you. And now, with all this time gone by, here you are in the picture. Looking chubby and pompous.

When you told me that, I remember being a little awed because we were kids, we were two young guys, and we hung out every weekend and we got drunk and declared, or

might have declared, *I love you man!* at some point or another, but you — You — as much as you talked you never really said much of anything, you gave none of it away, whereas I was always yanking off hanks of self-flesh and shoving them bloodily at everyone around me, it felt like, half the time — *no please, take it, take it, really*. And people would accept them, those red bleeding chunks — because what choice did they have, I was a hulking drunken wreck who might fall on top of them at any moment — averting their eyes, embarrassed for both of us, as was only right.

Not you, though. I heard an expression the other day in reference to this other tight-lipped son of a bitch, actually it was the prime minister — *He keeps his own counsel*. And I thought that's perfect, that's perfect, that's Adam. The operative phrase being *his own*, the operative concept being *self*.

Point being, you kept your own counsel most of the time. You never turned to me in the midst of one of our drunk-stoned hazes to implore: Help me, man! I'm all fucked up! The way guys sometimes do. Not you, not like I was always doing, or felt like I was. You never said boo. I thought that was very cool about you for a while. I thought your head was just too full — heaving with profundity.

It is stupid the way young men admire one another, the cluelessness of it, the non-reasons.

And then, lo! He turns to me, does sphinx-boy, in the middle of a typical beered-up weekend rock and roll show on campus. Our mutual friend Tina is ripping up the dance floor in front of us. Tina has put on some pounds, the way girls do in just a handful of months, the same way they immediately take it off the moment it becomes apparent to them

that guys aren't sniffing and circling the way they used to. Lately we've taken to calling Tina *Tiny* behind her back. A few months ago we would have been watching Tina dance with quiet horny awe but now she just looks fat and silly and we're embarrassed for her and disliking ourselves for thinking it because she's a cool girl, we like her, and why shouldn't she fucking dance if she wants to? And covering it up with asshole jokes.

And he turns to me, does sphinx-boy, face naked and craving in a way I've never seen. I lean in. My friend needs me!

"I think I'm prejudiced against fat people."

I have never heard such shame, such self-loathing in Adam's voice.

"That's okay, man," I reassure my friend. "Everyone hates fat people, they're fucking fat."

"No. I need to get over it."

I swing an arm around your shoulders and crush you against me, happy for the opportunity to be kind and big-brotherly.

"Look at her go," I say, gesturing to Tina out there undulating, eyes closed, jaw so slack her tongue is almost hanging out, dancing a sweat-slick frenzy. I found out later Tina was at that point well aware of her new nickname and had started taking speed to offset things.

"She's working it out there! She'll be back to baseline hotness in no time." I was right about that too. But that wasn't what you were worried about.

"I mean," you say, once I have released you, because I can tell it is awkward for you to continue your confession crushed against my manly chest. "It's me."

Of course it was you, Adam.

“I’m afraid that I’ll get fat. I’m deathly afraid of it. Getting fat.”

And look at you now, say it together everybody: chubby; pompous.

What a shitty way for me to begin! After you have been so nice. After all these years. I didn’t even think you would write me back. And if you did write back, I never imagined you would say: Sure! Send me your story. I would be delighted to take a look, that’s what you said. *Take a look*, that’s very non-committal of course, but then, that’s the Adam I remember.

Well guess what. I was being noncommittal myself. I was being noncommittal in that I was lying. That whole last email I sent was a lie.

First of all, I said *I haven’t read your book yet but am very excited to do so*. But I have read it, Adam. I’ve read it a few times now.

Second of all, I was being friendly and nice in my email, but that was in fact not a true representation of how I am actually feeling toward you. I was baiting the hook. I wasn’t sure you’d be particularly pleased to hear from me, if you would even bother to write back. So I thought I should be nice. I thought I should be all the things I knew — assuming you were still the old Adam — you would respond to: complimentary, admiring, affectionate.

Third, I said I had a story of my own. I said it was short. The first statement was the truth, but the second was a lie. I said I was trying to write and I would appreciate your help. That’s not true either — I’m writing just fine at this very moment, I don’t need your goddamn help. I said it wouldn’t

take too much of your time — not true.

You said, and I'm cutting and pasting here:

Sure! I'd be delighted to take a look.

So guess what? I am taking you at your word.

Okay, I thought I'd better go get another beer to help grease the wheels and now I'm back. So here we go.

I was born in a small town, like John Cougar Mellencamp and Bruce Springsteen. Remember how we all sat around arguing that time about whether or not Springsteen was a Jew? And Wade was so appalled — he couldn't get his head around the idea for some reason. And I got all in his face, having fun, like I was totally outraged: What are you, KKK or something? Jews can't sing? Jews can't be born in the U.S.A.? And he goes, No, Rank, no it just — it doesn't line up. In my head. It was like that time you told him Freddie Mercury was gay and the two of you argued all night until finally Kyle yelled, Dude! The name of the band is *Queen*. And the next day all Wade's *Queen* on vinyl mysteriously disappeared. Anyway, you said it didn't matter what Springsteen was, what mattered was we shouldn't say "a Jew." You said we should say "Jewish."

For years I went around studiously avoiding the term "Jew" because I didn't want to offend anyone — people like you, that is. And then one summer a guy I was working construction with used it in reference to his brother-in-law. And

I go, Look, man, I don't know if you're supposed to say that these days.