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Aimee Bender

Aimee Bender is the author of three books: *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book; *An Invisible Sign of My Own*, which was a *Los Angeles Times* pick of the year; and *Willful Creatures*, which was nominated by *The Believer* as one of the best books of the year. Her short fiction has been published in *Granta*, *GQ*, *Harper's*, *Tin House*, *McSweeney's*, *The Paris Review*, and elsewhere, as well as heard on PRI's *This American Life* and *Selected Shorts*. She has received two Pushcart prizes and was nominated for the Tiptree Award in 2005. She lives in Los Angeles and teaches creative writing at the University of Southern California.

At the party I make a goal and it is to kiss three men: one with black hair, one with red hair, the third blond. Not necessarily in that order. I'm alone at the party and I have my drink in a mug because by the time I got here, at the ideal moment of lateness, the host had used all her bluish glasses with fluted stems that she bought from the local home-supply store that all others within a ten-block radius had bought too because at some inexplicable point in time, everybody woke up with identical taste. I see two matching sweaters and four similar handbags. It's enough to make you want to buy ugly except other people are having that reaction too and I spot three identically ugly pairs of shoes. There's just nowhere to hide. I know the host here from high-school time and she likes to invite me to

things because for one, she feels sorry for me and for two, she finds me entertaining and blushes when I cuss. It's how we flirt.

About half the people here are in couples. I stand alone because I plan on making all these women jealous, reminding them how incredible it is to be single instead of always being with the same old same old except tonight I am jealous too because all their men are seeming particularly tall and kind on this foggy wintery night and one is wearing a shirt a boyfriend of mine used to own with that nubby terry-cloth material recycled from soda cans and it smells clean from where I'm standing, ten feet away, and it's not a good sign when something like a particular laundry detergent can just like that undo you.

From here, against the wall, I can survey the whole living room. TV, couch, easy plant. The walls are covered with pastel posters of gardens by famous painters who rediscovered light and are now all over address books and umbrellas and mugs. Is it really worth it to dead earless van Gogh that his painting now holds some person's catalog of phone numbers? Is that what he wanted when he fought through personal hell to capture the sun in Arles? I used to paint and I would make landscapes that were peaceful and my teacher would stroll through the easels and praise me and say, "What a lovely cornfield, dear," but she never looked hard enough because if you did you would see that each landscape had something bad in it and that lovely was the wrong word to use: I made that cornfield, true, but if you looked closely, there was a glinting knife hanging from each husk. And I made a beach scene with crashing waves and a crescent moon and then this loaded machine gun lying on the sand by a towel; and then I made a mountain town with quaint stores and tall pine trees and people walking around except for that one man wrapped in dynamite walking over to the guy with the cigarette lighter standing by the drinking fountain.

The terrible thing is that the teacher never figured it out. And she saw all three paintings. She actually thought the guy in dynamite was wearing some strange puffy suit and that the corn was

just very glinty. She said the machine gun was a nice kite. When the evaluation sheets came around, I said she was useless and should be fired.

The couples are shifting positions and I'm ready now and I find that redhead first. Lucky for me he is drunk already and sitting in a chair with pretzels and he's talking to no one because he's on break from being social because he is so drunk. I saunter over and ask him to help me look for my purse in the bedroom. "I lost my purse," I say to him. "Help." He blinks, eyelids heavy with the eye shadow of alcohol, and then he follows me into the bedroom which is covered with people's items: twenty-five coats and half as many purses. I am rich but I consider stealing some of the stuff because they are so trusting, these people, and I feel like wrecking their trust. But where would I stash a coat? We are looking around for my make-believe purse because I don't use a purse at all; when I go out, I just carry keys and slip one one-hundred-dollar bill into the arch of my shoe and let the night unroll from there. We're mumbling in the bedroom and I pretend I'm drunker than I am and then I ask him, right there, among all the coats, if he thinks I'm pretty. His eyes are bleary and he smiles and says, "Yeah, yeah." We're standing by the bed, and I lean over and I kiss him then, really gentle because at any minute he could throw up all over me, and his lips are dry and we spend a few minutes like that, gentle kisses on his dry lips, and then he starts to laugh and I am offended. "Why are you laughing?" I ask, and he laughs more, and I sort of push him and pick up one of the better coats on the bed, with a shiny lined inside of burgundy, and I put it on for a second even though I'm not cold and I ask him again why he laughed and he says, "We went to grade school together," and I say, "We did? We did?" and he tells me his name and then he tells me my name and I apologize because I don't remember him. "I remember you because you were the one with the inheritance," he says, and I tell him I was really good at painting too and he says, "Really? I don't remember that."

So I am through with him.

I take off the coat and throw it back on the bed and then head to the door.

"Wait, why did you kiss me?" he asks, and I know it is taking a big effort for him to string this sentence together because he is so drunk. "Let's go out sometime," he slurs. "I just laughed because it's funny, it's funny. To kiss someone you knew as a kid. It's funny."

I turn around and he looms above me and I can see the freckles on his collarbone and that means he has a chest of freckles and a back of freckles and knees of freckles and freckled inner thighs and I was the best artist in grade school for several years until that dumb girl moved here from Korea, and he is laughing more because he knew me as a little kid and is remembering something and I barely remember what it was like to be a little kid so it seems rude that he would recall something about me that I couldn't myself. If I can't remember it, then it should mean no one else can either.

"No," I tell him. "I don't want to go out with you, ever."

And I'm back in the main room. I return to the same wall. The redhead follows me out and collapses back into that chair, staring, but I ignore him and look at the table of food instead. The guacamole dip is at half, and there are little shit-green blobs on the tablecloth. The brie is a white cave. The wineglasses are empty except for that one undrinkable red spot at the bottom. I go refill my glass and the redhead closes his eyes in the chair. One down.

The blond is next, and he is someone I used to date and in fact only broke up with around three months ago so I think it'll be easy; I find him in the corner talking to two other guys and I glide over and because I am me I am wearing an incredible dress tonight; this one looks almost like it is made of metal; it has this slinky way of falling all over my hips and I feel like an on faucet in it and of course I am the most dressed up at the party, I always am, but that's the whole point, so when the host inevitably looks down at her everybodyownsthemjeans at the front door and says, "Oh, but it's not a formal party," I smile at her with as many teeth as I can fit and wink and say, "That's fine, that's fine, I just felt like wearing this tonight."

Inevitably, the next time I see that same host she has more lipstick on or a new glittering necklace her mother bought her but lady she is dust next to me inside this silverness. I am now almost right behind the blond man who broke up with me because he didn't feel loved and it was true, I did not love him, but he is the type to never go out with someone for a long time anyway so we would've broken up soon regardless and I just gave us a good excuse. I am next to him by now and I tell him we need to talk and could we go in the bathroom? He is confused for a minute but then agrees, and says "Hang on" to his friends who shake their heads because they remember me well and think he's being stupid and they're right but we go into the bathroom and I say, "Adam, I have a goal to kiss you tonight," and he says, "C'mon, is that what this is about?" and I tell him to come here but he has his hand on the doorknob but also he's not gone yet. "You're incredible," he says, shaking his head, and I feel mad, what does he mean, it's not a compliment, and he's out the door. And he's out the door, then. I'm alone in the bathroom and I'm sitting on the sink and my butt is falling a little into the sink part, faucet on faucet, and I turn around to myself in the medicine-cabinet mirror and check my teeth and they are bright and white because last week I bought a new tooth cleaner and it's working and my eyeliner isn't smeared because I bought the new eyeliner that swears it won't smear or you can sue the company, and I'm sitting there plotting my next blond when Adam comes back into the bathroom with determination and closes the door firmly. "You're just playing with me, aren't you?" he says, and I say, "Yeah," and he sighs a little. "At least you're honest," he says, and I say, "Thanks, I try to be honest, I do, that is one of my good qualities." He waits there by the door and I hop off the sink to go to him, stand and face him, and he's not running away so I'm moving in and then we're kissing, that easy, and his lips are the same ones I know well, in fact he was my longest boyfriend so I know his lips better than anyone's, and his upper lip is much thinner than his lower lip which I always liked and I kiss that pillow at the bottom and we kiss and it gets

more, we keep kissing and I remember just what it's like and I am suddenly feeling like I miss him and I am remembering everything of what it's like to be with him and I am forgiving him for everything and we're still kissing and his teeth and his smell and we've been kissing too long now, it's gone on long enough, so I pull away. He has lipstick on the edges of his mouth. "Okay," I say, "thank you, okay." He looks shook up but also wants more and he has the same feeling I do; he felt the room change into a different room during that kiss but I'm trying to get it back to being the first room, the one where I know it all. His hands are all over my silver dress slip-sliding around and the bathroom door opens, it's some lady who wants to use the bathroom and she sees us and blushes and I'm glad I don't know her because I don't want the whole party to know I'm in the bathroom kissing a blond while I still have a black-haired man to finish the night with. Adam is wiping the lipstick off now and his hand is still on my dress, on my hip; "You're a cold woman," he says to me, and then his hand is gone and he leaves and I am left in there again and I know I am not a cold woman because the whole point of why it was hard for him to leave just then is because I am a not-cold woman but I resent the lie anyway. I check myself in the mirror again and my skin has sharpened and the teeth and eyeliner are all still good and I am thinking about him for a minute, thinking about how when he came inside me and I came outside him he would say something like "This is it," and I'd think, It's the end of the world, and then we'd finish up and be sweating and hot and the world would still be there, like it had swung up and met us. And when we slept then it was so deep it really could've been the end of the world with sirens and megaphones and panicked TV people and I know at least for myself I wouldn't have even noticed.

I exit the bathroom after I've used it and the lady who interrupted is standing there and she is embarrassed and I am not and I step on her foot as I walk out and she says, "Oops, sorry," like all women do and I am mad at that because it was my fault so why is she apologizing? and I hate that she said "Oops" in that little meek

voice and now I'm in a bad mood. And I still have one flavor to go. It's an hour later now and the guacamole is gone and the brie is all shell and these stupid people don't know that the white part of brie is important to the taste, that it doesn't count if you only eat the mushy inside, that the French would leave en masse if they came to this party and saw the Americans carving out their cheese like cave dwellers, but the party people only like easy cheese, and easy jeans, and they are all sipping from their fluted glasses and I get refill number three or four and the wine is making my bones loose and it's giving my hair a red sheen and my breasts are blooming and my eyes feel sultry and wise and the dress is water. Adam is back with his friends and he won't look at me and they are sheltering him like a little male righteous wall and the redhead is gone by now or passed out somewhere and I am looking for black hair, looking, looking, and you'd think it'd be easy considering something like four-fifths of the entire earth has black hair and I do find one prospect but he seems harsh and too talkative so I pass him up and I find a cute black guy but he seems to be one of the married ones and I am trying to keep this as simple as possible and I'm looking, still looking, then bingo: it's the tallest man in the room. He has sharp black hair over his ears and glasses and a swarthy and he is the smarty guy and he is talking to a woman who is clearly entranced by him, but remember: I am a column of mercury, and this woman is wearing a blouse and khaki pants, drinking water from a mug imprinted with water lilies. The deal is done.

She is telling him about her job at a pet hospital. She is a vet of sorts. Every person on earth likes a vet except me, because I think there are too many animals in the first place. And when these vets keep saving the sick animals, we are just stuck with more.

"These are from the last cat," she is saying, holding up her arm which is covered with raised tracks.

He nods, observes. I, however, am not interested in her fake drug habit look-alike war wounds. I bet a thousand dollars she grew up with a dog who had a name with a *y* or an *ie* at the end. I had a dog

once, a big dog, a Great Dane, and I named him Off so when I called him, I said "Off!" and he came bounding over. It really fucked with people's heads. At the dog park no one got it. They kept trying to figure out how I did that, if I was okay, what was happening. I was laughing all the time at the dog park. I wore dresses there too and I think people brought their friends to see me, like I was a sight in the city, a tourist attraction. If I was forty it'd be a problem but I'm not so they adore me. Off died early because he was a purebred but I didn't put him to sleep, I kept him company and stroked his big forehead until I saw his eyes shut on their own. I had him cremated. I sprinkled most of his ashes into my plants, but fed a few of the remaining ones to the cat next door because she had always been tormented by Off's size and I thought it was a little bit of sweet vindication.

It's nearly midnight, and I'm waiting for the man here to say something so I can form my game plan. Adam is talking to a woman now and I can tell he is appearing extra animated to get my goat. I can only see the woman's butt from here, but it's very flat and Adam is an ass man so I'm not worried. I don't shrivel up into wiggly jealousy. Instead I feel like thrusting through all the women here, stepping on all those dainty toes, releasing a chorus of "Oops, sorries," a million apologies for something I did wrong.

The vet is still talking. "Last week," she is saying, "the sweetest beagle came in with some kind of dementia and I had to put him to sleep..."

"That must be tough," he says, "to put a dog to sleep."

I'm underneath the yellow-and-pink floral painting. Fuck me, I'm thinking. She is taking too damn long. At the door, one of the couples is saying goodbye to the host. Her hand is on his elbow. The host looks dampened; I think somebody broke her stereo.

And suddenly, in a wash, I am feeling low. I am feeling like there is nothing in this whole party for me and I want everyone to leave now. I'm thinking about how when I filled out the evaluation for the painting teacher, and I said she should be fired, I made sure to sign

my name. I've given some money to the university—not enough to get a building named after me, but close. And when the next session rolled around and I looked for her name in the catalog, I couldn't find it anywhere. My final painting for the class was that—the catalog page without her name in it.

"Oh," she had said, "isn't that a delightful picture of the sea?"

I slump a little on the wall. The red-haired man is back, asleep in his chair. Vet says, "I feel like I'm a prison guard or something with all this lethal-injection stuff."

And then the man says something about how he worked in a prison once and he saw a lethal injection once and it was the worst thing he'd ever seen and I perk up then, rejuvenated, because that's all I need to know; I figure now if he worked in a prison then he has sympathy with people who are trapped or bad and just like that my plan is set.

So I smile at both of them as I move away from the wall in a silvery wave and he notices me then, how can he not, and he nods and khaki vet is off talking again and I interrupt and say, "I have to do something," and the vet is surprised that I can talk and gives me a snotty look down her I-never-got-past-my-childhood-dream nose, and I say, to him only, "Hey, if I'm not back here in a couple minutes, will you check on me?"

He nods, unsure what I mean. She slivers her eyes at me. I open mine wide back, because eye slivering is for old hags. I'm not sure about the details of my plan yet but I step past Adam who is still talking to that unfuckable woman with no ass and I go into the bedroom. I'm planning on stealing something, but I'm not sure what to steal that would make him come find me. I survey the bed. I could steal all the wallets but it seems too unoriginal and detailed so I decide to do the thing I wanted to do with the red-haired man and that is to steal all the coats. I lean over and scoop them together, wool ones and tweed ones and velvet ones and cotton ones, and pick them up in a huge stack, my arms a belt, so heavy they make me stagger, and I go inside the bedroom closet with them and shut the

door until I am smothered with coats. It's hot in here, and it smells like shoe polish. I arrange myself underneath the billion coats and then I wait for either the black-haired man to remember to hunt for me or someone else to get ready to leave the party. After just a few minutes, there are footsteps in the bedroom and it's two people and they're ready to bundle up for outdoors and go back to where they live and of course they cannot find their coats and it's winter and they are certain they brought coats. So they leave the room and return to the host and I can hear her quizzical voice going up. "Coats? Bedroom." Her tone is always so sincere. In high school her mother wouldn't let her shop at certain stores because they were too expensive and too slutty and so I would take her shopping and buy her a blue leather miniskirt or a sheer black slip and she would try them on at my house in the ultra-mirrored bathroom and model and pose. She refused to wear them out. She just wore them for me. She has this compact body and looked sporty in everything and I told her compliment after compliment and we never touched but she still always blushed like crazy. There was this one dress of white feathers and she looked like a whole different genre of person inside it. It would've made my entire high school worthwhile if she'd worn that to her prom but she could hardly leave the bathroom and her face was bright red so that between her and the dress I was reminded of a peppermint. I never took those outfits back to the store; I kept them for a few of her visits and when she seemed bored of them or started to guilt-trip me and ask how much they cost, I gave them to Goodwill. Goodwill, for good reason, loved me. And my head is leaning back on a soft coat of lamb's wool and I can hear the talking outside getting louder and I'm thinking that the reason I kept going out with Adam in the first place was because when I showed him my painting of the ocean in my living room, on our second date, when I was wearing peach velvet, long sleeves, super plunging low neck, he looked at it for about one second and said, "Lady, you are screwed UP." And even though I was a little bit insulted, I was also ridiculous with gratitude and I took off my clothes right there, in

one smooth movement, unzipped that peach velvet to show a different kind of peach, a different kind of velvet. Within seconds he was kissing my shoulders and my side and the inside of my knee and he told me to stay standing for a while then and I felt like the tallest person ever born. And by now the couple is back in the bedroom and the party is filtering into the bedroom because they know something is wrong and they are all wondering where all the coats are and someone is getting upset, someone with an expensive coat and I reach out my hand and grope around until I find it. Cashmere. It smells like a woman, like expensive perfume, but not as rich as me; me, I buy perfume so expensive it doesn't smell like anything but skin. And they are panicking and someone is saying how the pocket of her coat has her keys in it and she's asking, "Who is missing? Who took the coats?" and I am touching the pocket with the keys, it's near my foot, and I hear Adam call my name and I am quiet but he is thinking, It's her, she is somewhere hiding with coats, and he excuses himself from flat butt but I don't want to see him ever again, I want the black-haired man to find me so I can kiss him and get home already. I close my eyes, hoping that when he opens the closet he will find me sleeping and I'll wake, disoriented; I'll tell him in a delightfully raspy voice that I was cold and needed a blanket and he will think I'm a nut or drunk but also he will be moved somehow and we'll start kissing in the bottom of the closet and he will have intuitive knowledge about my mouth, and I am hearing footsteps approach the closet, heavy ones, male ones, nearby, someone is approaching the closet and it's opening a crack and then it's open but I can't see who's there because my eyes are closed and then it's the black-haired man, it is, I can tell because he says "Oh," and I recognize his deep voice. I reach up a hand because I want to drag him in here—I am stuck, I am bad, it's jail, it's just like you like—but instead, he calls out, "Hey! I Found The Coats!" really loud, and then I pretend to wake up and say "Oh, hi, what? I was just cold," and the host comes by and when she sees me it's like I'm her troublesome dog-pet and she says "I'm so sorry," and the black-

haired man points me out and says, "Here You Are, Miss," like he's a bellhop locating luggage and I explain how I was cold and the coat couple reach in the closet as if I'm not even in it and fuss around and retrieve their coats and then they're off and everyone else is taking their coats really fast in case I'm somehow going to eat them and it's a time-limit thing and coat after coat is picked up until I'm coatless and just myself in my dress and I feel truly cold now and bare and small and then Adam is standing there in the crowd, and he says, "I'll take it from here," and I think that's so fatherly of him it makes me feel sort of sick also because it makes me feel sort of good and the host asks what I was doing, and for the third or fourth time I say I was cold, I just thought I'd be warmer with all these coats. I make my eyes blurry. And she buys it. She thinks I'm that plain drunk from her affordable-yet-delicious wine. And the black-haired man buys it too and nods but then turns around and goes back to the other room to talk to the vet. He leaves the drunk crazy lady behind and returns to the conservative animal lover. And it's just Adam there now, standing with his familiar face—who knows I wasn't cold or drunk, standing there as everyone clears out and he tells me to get up and pulls me when I don't and sits me on the bed. We stare at the wall together. And I'm thinking how I didn't reach my goal and that the whole strawberry/vanilla/chocolate trio isn't nearly as good with just two flavors, and he is sitting there thinking something else, I have no idea what, and he isn't touching me but I can hear him breathing. In the other room, people are leaving. The hidden coats scared them and they took it as some kind of cue that the party was over. Everyone is trickling out and thanking the host and whispering about me and she continues to be ultra-sincere, even when some complainer says something about a wrinkle in her coat, in a mad voice. Oops, I think. Sorry. I stare at the wall directly ahead. There's a painting of a desert hung up. It's in a simple wood frame and in it there's just a row of cacti and then the sun setting in the distance and who needs weapons when they're cacti. That's all I'm looking at when Adam takes my hand.

M E R C Y

Pinckney Benedict

Pinckney Benedict grew up on his family's farm in southern West Virginia. His stories have appeared in *Esquire*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, *Story-Quarterly*, *Ontario Review*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, *New Stories from the South*, the Pushcart Prize series, *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*, and elsewhere.

The livestock hauler's ramp banged onto the ground, and out of the darkness they came, the miniature horses, fine-boned and fragile as china. They trit-trotted down the incline like the vanguard of a circus parade, tails up, manes fluttering. They were mostly a bunch of tiny pintos, the biggest not even three feet tall at the withers. I was ten years old, and their little bodies made me feel like a giant. The horses kept coming out of the trailer, more and more of them every moment. The teamsters that were unloading them just stood back and smiled.

My old man and I were leaning on the top wire of the southern fence-line of our place, watching the neighbor farm become home to these exotics. Ponies, he kept saying, ponies ponies ponies, like if he said it enough times, he might be able to make them go away. Or make himself believe they were real, one or the other.

I think they're miniature horses, I told him. Not ponies. I kept my voice low, not sure I wanted him to hear me.