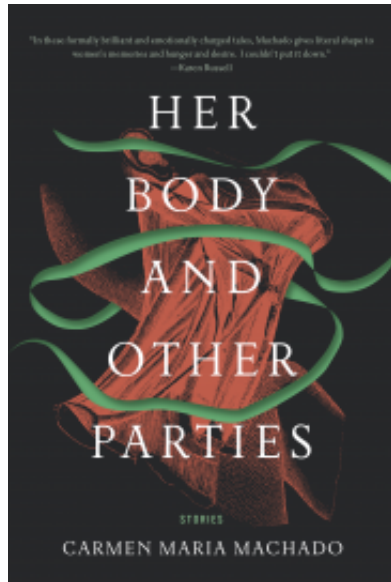


EXCERPT

# "INVENTORY"

CARMEN MARIA MACHADO



*The following is from Carmen Maria Machado's collection, Her Body and Other Parties. In this collection Machado demolishes the arbitrary borders between psychological realism and science fiction, comedy and horror, fantasy and fabulism. Carmen Maria Machado's work has appeared in Granta, the New Yorker, Guernica, Tin House, NPR, Electric Literature, and elsewhere. She has been nominated for a Nebula Award and a Shirley Jackson Award.*

One girl. We lay down next to each other on the musty rug in her basement. Her parents were upstairs; we told them we were watching *Jurassic Park*. "I'm the dad, and you're the mom," she said. I pulled up my shirt, she pulled up hers, and we just stared at each other. My heart fluttered below my belly button, but I worried about daddy long legs and her parents finding us. I still have never seen *Jurassic Park*. I suppose I never will, now.

One boy, one girl. My friends. We drank stolen wine coolers in my room, on the vast expanse of my bed. We laughed and talked and passed around the bottles. "What I like about you," she said, "is your reactions. You respond so funny to everything. Like it's all intense." He nodded in agreement. She buried her face in my neck and said "Like this" to my skin. I laughed. I was

nervous, excited. I felt like a guitar and someone was twisting the tuning pegs and my strings were getting tighter. They batted their eyelashes against my skin and breathed into my ears. I moaned and writhed, and hovered on the edge of coming for whole minutes, though no one was touching me there, not even me.

Two boys, one girl. One of them my boyfriend. His parents were out of town, so we threw a party at his house. We drank lemonade mixed with vodka and he encouraged me to make out with his friend's girlfriend. We kissed tentatively, then stopped. The boys made out with each other, and we watched them for a long time, bored but too drunk to stand up. We fell asleep in the guest bedroom. When I woke up, my bladder was tight as a fist. I padded down into the foyer, and saw someone had knocked a vodka lemonade onto the floor. I tried to clean it up. The mixture had stripped the marble finish bare. My boyfriend's mother found my underwear behind the bed weeks later, and handed them to him, laundered, without a word. It's weird to me how much I miss that oral, chemical smell of clean clothes. Now, all I can think about is fabric softener.

One man. Slender, tall. So skinny I could see his pelvic bone, which I found strangely sexy. Gray eyes. Wry smile. I had known him for almost a year, since the previous October, when we'd met at a Halloween party. (I didn't wear a costume; he was dressed as Barbarella.) We drank in his apartment. He was nervous and gave me a massage. I was nervous so I let him. He rubbed my back for a long time. He said, "My hands are getting tired." I said, "Oh," and turned toward him. He kissed me, his face rough with stubble. He smelled like yeast and the top notes of expensive cologne. He lay on top of me and we made out for a while. Everything inside of me twinged, pleurably. He asked if he could touch my breast, and I clamped his hand around it. I took off

my shirt, and I felt like a drop of water was sliding up my spine. I realized this was happening, really happening. We both undressed. He rolled the condom down and lumbered on top of me. It hurt worse than anything, ever. He came and I didn't. When he pulled out, the condom was covered in blood. He peeled it off and threw it away. Everything in me pounded. We slept on a too-small bed. He insisted on driving me back to the dorms the next day. In my room, I took off my clothes and wrapped myself in a towel. I still smelled like him, like the two of us together, and I wanted more. I felt good, like an adult who has sex sometimes, and a life. My roommate asked me how it was, hugged me.

One man. A boyfriend. Didn't like condoms, asked me if I was on birth control, pulled out anyway. A terrible mess.

One woman. On-and-off sort-of girlfriend. Classmate from Organization of Computer Systems. Long brown hair down to her butt. She was softer than I expected. I wanted to go down on her, but she was too nervous. We made out and she slipped her tongue into my mouth and after she went home I got off twice in the cool stillness of my apartment. Two years later, we had sex on the gravel rooftop of my office building. Four floors below our bodies, my code was compiling in front of an empty chair. After we were done, I looked up and noticed a man in a suit watching us from the window of the adjacent skyscraper, his hand shuffling around inside his slacks.

One woman. Round glasses, red hair. Don't remember where I met her. We got high and fucked and I accidentally fell asleep with my hand inside of her. We woke up predawn and walked across town to a twenty-four-hour diner. It drizzled and when we got there, our sandaled feet were numb from the chill. We ate pancakes. Our mugs ran dry, and when we looked for the waitress, she was watching the breaking news on the battered TV hanging from the ceiling. She chewed on her lip, and the pot of coffee tipped in her hand, dripping tiny brown dots onto the linoleum. We watched as the newscaster blinked away and was replaced with a list of symptoms of the virus blossoming a state away, in northern California. When he came back, he repeated that planes were grounded, the border of the state had been closed, and the virus appeared to be isolated. When the waitress walked over, she seemed distracted. "Do you have people there?" I asked, and she nodded, her eyes filling with tears. I felt terrible having asked her anything.

One man. I met him at the bar around the corner from my house. We made out on my bed. He smelled like sour wine, though he'd been drinking vodka. We had sex, but he went soft halfway through. We kissed some more. He wanted to go down on me, but I didn't want him to. He got angry and left, slamming the screen door so hard my spice rack jumped from its nail and crashed to the floor. My dog lapped up the nutmeg, and I had to force-feed him salt to make him throw up. Revved from adrenaline, I made a list of animals I have had in my life—seven, including my two betta fish, who died within a week of each other when I was nine—and a list of the spices in pho. Cloves, cinnamon, star anise, coriander, ginger, cardamom pods.

One man. Six inches shorter than me. I explained that the website I worked for was losing business rapidly because no one wanted quirky photography tips during an epidemic, and I had been laid off that morning. He bought me dinner. We had sex in his car because he had roommates and I couldn't be in my house right then, and he slid his hand inside my bra and his hands were perfect, fucking perfect, and we fell into the too-tiny backseat. I came for the first time in two months. I called him the next day, and left him a voicemail, telling him I'd had a good time and I'd like to see him again, but he never called me back.

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One man. Did some sort of hard labor for a living, I can't remember what exactly, and he had a tattoo of a boa constrictor on his back with a misspelled Latin phrase below it. He was strong and could pick me up and fuck me against a wall and it was the most thrilling sensation I'd ever felt. We broke a few picture frames that way. He used his hands and I dragged my fingernails down his back, and he asked me if I was going to come for him, and I said, "Yes, yes, I'm going to come for you, yes, I will."

One woman. Blond hair, brash voice, friend of a friend. We married. I'm still not sure if I was with her because I wanted to be or because I was afraid of what the world was catching all around us. Within a year, it soured. We screamed more than we had sex, or even talked. One night, we had a fight that left me in tears. Afterward, she asked me if I wanted to fuck, and undressed before I could answer. I wanted to push her out the window. We had sex and I started crying. When it was over and she was showering, I packed a suitcase and got in my car and drove.

One man. Six months later, in my post divorce haze. I met him at the funeral for the last surviving member of his family. I was grieving, he was grieving. We had sex in the empty house that used to belong to his brother and his brother's wife and their children, all dead. We fucked in every room, including the hallway, where I couldn't bend my pelvis right on the hardwood floors, and I jerked him off in front of the bare linen closet. In the master bedroom, I caught my

reflection in the vanity mirror as I rode him, and the lights were off and our skin reflected silver from the moon and when he came in me he said, “Sorry, sorry.” He died a week later, by his own hand. I moved out of the city, north.

One man. Gray eyes again. I hadn’t seen him in so many years. He asked me how I was doing, and I told him some things and not others. I did not want to cry in front of the man to whom I gave my virginity. It seemed wrong somehow. He asked me how many I’d lost, and I said, “My mother, my roommate from college.” I did not mention that I’d found my mother dead, nor the three days afterward I’d spent with anxious doctors checking my eyes for the early symptoms, nor how I’d managed to escape the quarantine zone. “When I met you,” he said, “you were so fucking young.” His body was familiar, but alien, too. He’d gotten better, and I’d gotten better. When he pulled out of me I almost expected blood, but of course, there was none. He had gotten more beautiful in those intervening years, more thoughtful. I surprised myself by crying over the bathroom sink. I ran the tap so he couldn’t hear me.



One woman. Brunette. A former CDC employee. I met her at a community meeting where they taught us how to stockpile food and manage outbreaks in our neighborhoods should the virus hop the firebreak. I had not slept with a woman since my wife, but as she lifted her shirt I realized how much I'd been craving breasts, wetness, soft mouths. She wanted cock and I obliged. Afterward, she traced the indents in my skin from the harness, and confessed to me that no one was having any luck developing a vaccine. "But the fucking thing is only passing through physical contact," she said. "If people would just stay apart—" She grew silent. She curled up next to me and we drifted off. When I woke up, she was working herself over with the dildo, and I pretended I was still sleeping.

One man. He made me dinner in my kitchen. There weren't a lot of vegetables left from my garden, but he did what he could. He tried to feed me with a spoon, but I took the handle from him. The food didn't taste too bad. The power went out for the fourth time that week, so we ate by candlelight. I resented the inadvertent romance. He touched my face when we fucked and said I was beautiful, and I jerked my head a little to dislodge his fingers. When he did it a second time, I put my hand around his chin and told him to shut up. He came immediately. I did not return his calls. When the notice came over the radio that the virus had somehow reached Nebraska, I realized I had to go east, and so I did. I left the garden, the plot where my dog was buried, the pine table where I'd anxiously made so many lists—trees that began with *m*: maple, mimosa, mahogany, mulberry, magnolia, mountain ash, mangrove, myrtle; states that I had lived

in: Iowa, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Virginia, New York—leaving unreadable jumbles of letters imprinted in the soft wood. I took my savings and rented a cottage near the ocean. After a few months, the landlord, based in Kansas, stopped depositing my checks.

Two women. Refugees from the western states who drove and drove until their car broke down a mile from my cottage. They knocked on my door and stayed with me for two weeks while we tried to figure out how to get their vehicle up and running. We had wine one night and talked about the quarantine. The generator needed cranking, and one of them offered to do it. The other one sat down next to me and slid her hand up my leg. We ended up jerking off separately and kissing each other. The generator took and the power came back on. The other woman returned, and we all slept in the same bed. I wanted them to stay, but they said they were heading up into Canada, where it was rumored to be safer. They offered to bring me with them, but I joked that I was holding down the fort for the United States. “What state are we in?” one of them asked, and I said, “Maine.” They kissed me on the forehead in turn and dubbed me the protector of Maine. After they left, I only used the generator intermittently, preferring to spend time in the dark, with candles. The former owner of the cottage had a closet full of them.

One man. National Guard. When he first showed up at my doorstep, I assumed he was there to evacuate me, but it turned out he’d abandoned his post. I offered him a place to stay for the night, and he thanked me. I woke up with a knife to my throat and a hand on my breast. I told him I couldn’t have sex with him lying down like I was. He let me stand up, and I shoved him into the bookcase, knocking him unconscious. I dragged his body out to the beach and rolled it into the surf. He came to, sputtering sand. I pointed the knife at him and told him to walk and keep

walking, and if he even looked back, I would end him. He obliged, and I watched him until he was a spot of darkness on the gray strip of shore, and then nothing. He was the last person I saw for a year.

One woman. A religious leader, with a flock of fifty trailing behind her, all dressed in white. For three days, I made them wait around the edge of the property, and after I checked their eyes, I permitted them to stay. They all camped around the cottage: on the lawn, on the beach. They had their own supplies and only needed a place to lay their heads, the leader said. She wore robes that made her look like a wizard. Night fell. She and I circled the camp in our bare feet, the light from the bonfire carving shadows into her face. We walked to the water's edge and I pointed into the darkness, at the tiny island she could not see. She slipped her hand into mine. I made her a drink—"More or less moonshine," I said as I handed her the tumbler—and we sat at the table. Outside, I could hear people laughing, playing music, children romping in the surf. The woman

seemed exhausted. She was younger than she looked, I realized, but her job was aging her. She sipped her drink, made a face at the taste. “We’ve been walking for so long,” she said. “We stopped for a while, somewhere near Pennsylvania, but the virus caught up with us when we crossed paths with another group. Took twelve before we got some distance between us and it.” We kissed deeply for a long time, my heart hammering in my cunt. She tasted like smoke and honey. The group stayed for four days, until she woke up from a dream and said she’d had an omen, and they needed to keep going. She asked me to come with them. I tried to imagine myself with her, her flock following behind us like children. I declined. She left a gift on my pillow: a pewter rabbit as big as my thumb.

One man. No more than twenty, floppy brown hair. He’d been on foot for a month. He looked like you’d expect: skittish. No hope. When we had sex, he was reverent and too gentle. After we cleaned up, I fed him canned soup. He told me about how he walked through Chicago, actually through it, and how they had stopped bothering to dispose of the bodies after a while. He had to refill his glass before he talked about it further. “After that,” he said, “I went around the cities.” I asked him how far behind the virus was, really, and he said he did not know. “It’s really quiet here,” he said, by way of changing the subject. “No traffic,” I explained. “No tourists.” He cried and cried and I held him until he fell asleep. The next morning, I woke up and he was gone.

One woman. Much older than me. While she waited for the three days to pass, she meditated on a sand dune. When I checked her eyes, I noticed they were green as sea glass. Her hair grayed at the temples and the way she laughed tripped pleasure down the stairs of my heart. We sat in the half light of the bay window and the buildup was so slow. She straddled me, and when she kissed

me the scene beyond the glass pinched and curved. We drank, and walked the length of the beach, the damp sand making pale halos around our feet. She told about her once-children, teenage injuries, having to put her cat to sleep the day after she moved to a new city. I told her about finding my mother, the perilous trek across Vermont and New Hampshire, how the tide was never still, my ex-wife. "What happened?" she asked. "It just didn't work," I said. I told her about the man in the empty house, the way he cried and the way his come shimmered on his stomach and how I could have scooped despair from the air by the handfuls. We remembered commercial jingles from our respective youths, including one for an Italian-ice chain that I went to at the end of long summer days, where I ate gelato, drowsy in the heat. I couldn't remember the last time I'd smiled so much. She stayed. More refugees filtered through the cottage, through us, the last stop before the border, and we fed them and played games with the little ones. We got careless. The day I woke up and the air had changed, I realized it had been a long time coming. She was sitting on the couch. She got up in the night and made some tea. But the cup was tipped and the puddle was cold, and I recognized the symptoms from the television and newspapers, and then the leaflets, and then the radio broadcasts, and then the hushed voices around the bonfire. Her skin was the dark purple of compounded bruises, the whites of her eyes shot through with red, and blood leaking from the misty beds of her fingernails. There was no time to mourn. I checked my own face in the mirror, and my eyes were still clear. I consulted my emergency list and its supplies. I took my bag and tent and I got into the dinghy and I rowed to the island, to this island, where I have been stashing food since I got to the cottage. I drank water and set up my tent and began to make lists. Every teacher beginning with preschool. Every job I've ever had.

Every home I've ever lived in. Every person I've ever loved. Every person who has probably loved me. Next week, I will be thirty. The sand is blowing into my mouth, my hair, the center crevice of my notebook, and the sea is choppy and gray. Beyond it, I can see the cottage, a speck on the far shore. I keep thinking I can see the virus blooming on the horizon like a sunrise. I realize the world will continue to turn, even with no people on it. Maybe it will go a little faster.

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