

ONCE UPON A TIME AT THE KIEV

ONCE UPON A TIME at the Kiev, on the corner of East 7th and 2nd, soup with two slices of challah bread and a glass of water was a buck ninety-nine, and they left you alone. Sunday potato pickle, Monday matzoh, Tuesday barley.

That Wednesday, black bean. There were only two other regulars in the place: the mopey Hasidic guy and the redheaded *artiste*. You flipped over the newspapers and read the sports sections of the *News* and *Post*, the *Times*' Arts & Leisure. You ignored the floating flakes of ash outside, the swirling sheets of paper.

You never ate at the Kiev with anyone else, except once when Mary Ellen visited. She had taken in the chain-smoking Ukrainian waitress, the homeless guy eating a knish, the girl with eleven eyebrow rings and said, "You *eat* here?"

After soup you went back to your apartment and lay on the couch, surrounded by Wyeth prints. Taut, weathered women, all named Helga. New England wind, wailing and grating. A white so angry it was gray. All galed and spare, the opposite of sex.

You kept the windows closed.

Back then, you worked at the St. Mark's Bookstore. That Friday the store opened back up for business, even though lower Manhattan was a ghost town, even though the stench was everywhere. You had one customer, a young woman with jet black hair, enormous eyes, and a black leather jacket. She gave you a sad smile and headed towards Fiction.

To pass the time, you bet your friend Peter that you could find a grammatical error in any book. And you did, in one after another, until Peter grabbed one by William Safire.

"Who cares about grammar anyway?" the black-haired woman said as she handed Peter *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz*. Peter nodded in your direction.

“In these crumbling times,” you said, leaning your elbow on the counter and pointing to her book, “we don’t need no *realismo magico*. What we need are things of order, precise language. Carefully selected nouns. Well-placed adjectives. Active and appropriate verbs. The fate of the free world hinges on what we say next.”

Peter nodded in your direction as he counted out the woman’s change. “My friend ought to know,” he said. “He is fast becoming a dangling modifier.”

On Monday, your day off, you visited your mother in White Plains. She chain-smoked in the kitchen, watching the President on television: *Hide and burrow in*.

Your father had died four years earlier, from cirrhosis of the liver. No one had ever known he’d been drinking – not that much, anyway. Coors Light while watching the Jets games, martinis at restaurants and weddings.

The enemy knows no borders.

“How could you not know?” you asked. You were sitting at the gray kitchen table having tea. She had been telling you about the advanced cancerous condition of Fungus the Cat, whose actual name was Fergus.

Your mother sucked in her cheeks. The ash of her cigarette crisped.

When I was a kid . . .

She exhaled a locomotive breath. “These things don’t announce themselves,” she said.

. . . dead or alive.

You wrote poetry. Tuesday morning at Lil’s Diner you handed Peter your latest, titled “Coffee Spoons.” You still have this poem. The diner wasn’t called Lil’s — it had been the West Fourth Street Diner when you first moved to the city, and it had since changed to the Violet Café — but Lil had been there forever, and she always knew what you wanted. *Morning, sweetheart*. She had long charcoal fingers, bony wrists. Sometimes while sipping your coffee you drew a sketch on your pad, or wrote a poem, and showed it to her. One day she put down the coffee pot and tapped the back of your hand, her long fingernail scraping your knuckles. “If you ask me,” she said, “poetry should be direct. Look right at the truth. No metaphors and such.”

You had almost laughed, looking at Peter for confirmation, but Peter was nodding in agreement.

On Tuesday the pat was maternal, just after sliding over the ketchup and cream, the *sweetheart* more bell than buzz. “Missed you last week,” she said. She shook her head, her voice clouding. “Saw a white man covered in ash, looked just like you. Thought he was the livin’ dead.”

Two eggs over easy, wheat toast and home fries: \$1.99, \$2.11 with tax.

Peter handed back your poem. “You’re hiding behind allegory,” he said, keeping his eyes on his coffee cup. “And Prufrock’s been done to death.”

You used to make chili. An art form, you called it. *Multeity in unity*. All those ingredients at a low boil, congealing so slowly you didn’t even notice. When ground beef went on sale at D’Agostino’s, really on sale, like ninety-nine cents a pound, you’d buy a family-sized pack, fry it up with onions and garlic, and dump it in a spaghetti pot with kidney beans, peppers, tomatoes, the works. All those things cost money but in the long run it was a good investment. Because you cooked that chili all night long, sometimes waking up to stir it, then had it for lunch and dinner all week.

Tuesday night in the meat section, holding the 89%-lean ground beef and gazing at the rib-eyes, you pictured the second airplane, you heard the endless peal of sirens, you felt the quake of your apartment floor. You pictured the faces taped on telephone poles all over the Village, plastered on the arch at Washington Square, clinging to the fences of Union Square:

Nicknamed “TJ”
Turquoise dress
Gray suit pink tie

Then two days later:

Chain tattoo on left arm
Black pumps with holes in bottom
Perry Ellis glasses

And after a week:

Gold tooth

Seashell earring

Wedding ring inscribed "L♥S"

If found, call Janna: 212-538-9971

If found, call Michael: (914) 677-0082

Call me 718 248 3872.

You put the beef into your basket and headed towards check-out, but in the middle of Aisle 4 you doubled over, you dropped the basket, you fell to your knees.

The next morning you lay in bed, thinking about the black-haired girl in the bookstore. Eyes so big she had taken in all of you at once. Klaus von Döngen eyes. Eyes like white serving trays carrying black pearls. Black hair, too, the color of her leather jacket. Blood-red lips that wanted to swallow you. Skin like coffee with an exact measure of cream. But her eyes, her eyes had almost drowned you.

"I'm lonely," your mother said to your answering machine. On your dresser was a picture of her, taken before she had married your father. In it she wore a v-necked sweater, her hair so blonde it shimmered even in black-and-white.

"Please don't hate me," she said. "I did my best with you." A muffled croak, then a few hacking coughs. "I think I'm dying," she said.

You used to paint. One of your favorite paintings was a field of sunflowers blooming under an oyster sky near Silver Lake in White Plains. In it, a Ryder truck idled on a hill between Saint Anthony's Church and the deli where you used to get bread for your mother. Most of the flowers yearned toward the sun, but one turned away, arching its blossom—the brightest yellow, the blackest core. You called it "Defiance."

Back then, Christine's, on 1st Avenue, had an all-you-can-eat special: kielbasa, pierogies, knockwurst—everything and anything for \$9.95. The Polish waitresses wore miniskirts. On Wednesday night after finishing your third plate you sat back, hands on your belly, and told Peter a story:

One evening when you were in high school, your mother had baked a chicken and fried some potatoes, but had given you boiled broccoli instead. She brought the plates into the living room so you could all watch the local news while eating. “You need to avoid oily foods,” she said. She pointed to your chin, which at the time hosted a colony of pimples that, after you had shaved them with your father's razor and dabbed them with your father's Brut, had turned into a tiny colony of scabs.

“Oil!” your father had said, laboring over the *Post* crossword puzzle and ignoring the plate in front of him. He found the word he had skipped. “Three-letter word for slick.” He lifted the paper close to his face, scratched the word in with a pencil, and looked over at you. “You've got a lot of three-letter problems, champ,” he said. “Oil. Zit.” He pointed at your stomach. “Fat.” You curled your shoulders, sucking it in. “And cat!” he barked, plucking Fungus off the footstool and tossing him onto the floor. He laughed, slapped your knee, and took a swig of Miller High Life. “I'm just giving you the business,” he said. He rustled the newspaper and leaned over. “You mustn't take life so seriously,” he said, giving you a playful punch in the ribs. “Not everything's so black and white.”

You stood up, leaving your food untouched. You wanted to ask your father something. You wanted to ask him when he had decided that sitting on the couch would be his life.

“What is it,” your father said, leaning away from you. “More money? Don't bother, you just piss it away.” He held out his stubby arm, pointing at you. “You have to learn to be *frugal!*” He lurched out and tried to grab you as you left the room and vaulted up the stairs. “Don't be so morose!” he called out. He lumbered over to the bottom of the stairs, rustling his newspaper. “Sad!” he yelled up the stairs. “There's another one!”

You acted out the story to Peter, swigging your beer as other diners glanced over. But you left out what happened in your bedroom. What happened in your bedroom was that you stripped, stood before the full-length mirror and stared at your eyes: dark, deep-set, angry. At your hair: abnormal, reddish-brown. At the scabs on your

chin. At your concave chest. At the rolls of your stomach. At your shriveled genitals. Then you tiptoed to the bathroom, made yourself throw up, and returned to the mirror, checking for improvements.

“You do your father so well,” Peter said. “It’s as if you were born for the role.”

Thursday morning, a week and a half after the attacks, Mary Ellen called to propose moving in with you, even though her parents were going to hate her for it. She was willing to do it, for you. For the relationship. “It’s been hard for all of us,” she said, “even upstate. We can’t keep putzing around like this, visiting each other once a month. Like shit or get off the pot, right? Life’s too short.”

You looked around at your tiny apartment. You didn’t have a picture of Mary Ellen. You heard her say that her parents might not be too upset if you lived together, so long as marriage was in the long-term plan.

“You don’t sound so sure,” she said, after you agreed.

“No, that would be great,” you said. Outside your window, a lost flake of ash hovered in the air.

“Good,” Mary Ellen said, pronouncing her exhale. “Whew. I’ll tell them. Mom will be furious.”

“Oh well,” you said.

“Easy for you to say,” she said. “You’re not the one taking a risk here.”

During your lunch break, you saw the black-haired woman from the bookstore walking toward the NYU classroom building, her red skirt flouncing about her strong legs.

“Rosa Flores,” Peter said. “Now there’s an allegory you can hide behind. Grad student in Comparative Lit. Likes Garcia Lorca, Chilean wine, and long walks in *la luce de la luna*.”

“It’s as if I’m destined for her,” you said.

“Destined,” Peter said. “Active verb, or passive adjective?”

When you didn’t answer, Peter called out to her. She stopped walking and looked up, cradling her books.

“I’m picking up Mary Ellen on Saturday,” you said. “To move in with me.”

“From Penn Station?” Peter asked.

“From Syracuse,” you said. “Can I borrow your car?”

Across the street, Rosa smoothed her skirt, then fluttered it in a girlish gesture. Peter pointed with his cigarette. “Trust your instincts,” he said.

What your instincts told you was to dash madly across the street and fling yourself at Rosa’s feet.

When you did nothing, Rosa shrugged and continued on into the building.

Hours later she walked right into the bookstore, strode past New Arrivals and stood in front of Self-Help with her arms crossed. You were squatting by Deepak Chopra. When you looked up, she raised one eyebrow.

Friday night in SoHo. Rosa wore a dress that was all white. White like a high-school prom queen. White like a sixteen-year-old at a town-hall wedding. It had *lace*. But she wore it with no bra, no stockings, nothing. The rolls of her flesh were shameless and alluring. You, you wore a gray linen jacket with black chinos and a gray shirt. You kept your gut sucked in. On the line to the ticket booth at the tiny theatre, Rosa took your arm and said that you had sad eyes that made her want to take care of you, and when she said *take care of* it sounded like *fuck*.

The play, off-off, was the only one that had opened back up after the attacks: a campy gay version of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. All you remember from it is that the drunken father sang a song called *I Coulda Been a Contenda*. That, and Rosa’s hand squeezing yours after you put your heads back and laughed.

At Veselka’s, where you had the Ukrainian stew with a side of mashed potatoes and beet salad for only \$8.95, you couldn’t stop smiling. At what? Hard to say. Possibility. Potential. Your own capacity for lightness and whimsy, even in the midst of such stench, such terrorism. Afterwards, when Rosa suggested you take a cab to her apartment in Queens, you felt yourself blush—the fare would cost more than dinner—but what the hell, you only lived once.

Inside the taxi, she leaned back against the door, lifted her leg over yours and pressed her calf into your groin. As the taxi burrowed into the Midtown Tunnel, the whiteness of her dress illumined in pulses: in one, the bend of knee, a revealed thigh; in another, lips, full and open; in the next, shadowed tresses fanned against the window. In the dusked throbs between punctuated light, only the white dress, a glimmer of teeth, the cabdriver’s turban.

On Borden Avenue you kissed her, keeping your eyes open as the street lamps tolled, but her eyes swallowed yours, you could see only one at a time, so you leaned

back and tugged down the top of her dress. In half-notes of lamplight her breasts arched toward you. In quarter notes of asphalt bumps her bared thigh throbbed against your leg. You saw, or thought you saw, the cabdriver's eyes in the rearview mirror, looking exactly like your father's.

Vernon Boulevard: \$11.90.

Hunters Point: \$14.35.

The following Monday, you and Peter walked over to Pane e Cioccolato for a bowl of spaghetti: \$6.25 and all the bread you could eat. A lean woman dressed in black, her eyes drooping from the weight of her mascara, took your order with a look of blank resignation. The restaurants had been empty for two weeks. The whole world loved New York, but nobody was willing to say so in person.

"So she's all moved in," Peter said.

"Already got a job," you said, carefully curling spaghetti around your fork, then sliding it into your mouth. "Teaching a Pilates class even as we speak."

Peter put down his fork. "I'm going to pretend you didn't just say *Pilates*."

"As I loaded her stuff into the car," you said, "her mother sat by the window like Mrs. Bates. When I kissed her cheek it felt like ice."

"You kissed her *mother*?"

You poured some beer into your glass and took a careful sip. You checked your watch. You took another forkful of pasta, only so much as your mouth could manage. You wiped your lips with a napkin. Nearby, a table of students burst into laughter.

"We fight a lot," you said. "On the phone, in person. Even Saturday, our first night together."

When Peter asked about your date with Rosa, you stared at your piece of bread.

You had taken the subway home that night, rehearsing the phone call to Mary Ellen that you knew you would never make. By the time you got to your apartment, it was time to get Peter's car and head north. During the six-hour drive, you calculated the cost of being with a woman like Rosa Flores, and concluded that you couldn't afford it.

Peter bent his head and said something to his bowl of spaghetti, like the downbeat of a prayer.

The next morning in the Fiction section, the squared-shouldered back of her. Black hair, the color of her leather jacket. She was reading, but shifting her weight from one foot to another. She held up a Borges paperback as you approached her from behind. "Such a sad man," she said to the air in front of her.

"Dead," you said.

"You said you'd call," she said, turning to face you. "I thought it was good." Her eyes were even bigger now, as if revealing to you all that you were denying yourself.

"I'm sorry," you said. "My mother." That's the first thing you thought to say. "I had to go to White Plains."

"Your mother what?"

"Sick," you said, looking at the floor. "Very sick. Almost died."

You kept your head down as Rosa Flores walked out the door, the book still in her hand. The alarm sounded just as the store manager walked in.

On Wednesday morning, you and Mary Ellen walked past Lil's on your way to the Waverly Café, where you could get a fresh-baked bagel with cream cheese and a bottomless cup of coffee for \$2.75. When the waitress refilled your coffee, she put one hand on your back and brushed her breast against your shoulder. Mary Ellen's eyes turned to ice.

On Thursday you received the twenty-eighth rejection of your poem, "A Terrible Beauty is Born." The editor had scribbled, *While beautifully written, this is a terrible poem.*

"You haven't stopped by this week," your mother croaked on the phone. When you promised to come the following weekend she said, "Next weekend? I'll be dead by then."

So you took the Harlem Line to North White Plains, walked into the house and kicked Fungus out of your way. A migraine had seized hold of the back of your neck. The house smelled like an old man's tee shirt.

She wore a white bathrobe, yellowed with age, in dirty folds. She didn't get up from her seat at the kitchen table.

"So Mary Ellen moved in with me," you told her by way of news.

She leaned over to flick an ash into the saucer, stopped midway and attempted to hook a stray hair behind her ear. "The gray ones grow straight out," she said, holding

a strand between her fingers. “They’re dead, so there’s no curl. And they keep growing after you’re dead,” she added, as if to herself. You calculated her age: *fifty-nine*. In one year, you would be the age she was when she had given birth to you. “You’ve got a few yourself now,” she said, pointing to your temple. “Starting to look like your father.”

On the floor were strands of gray hair, gray flakes of cigarette ash and gray flecks of Fungus.

“I asked her to marry me,” you said.

She looked up, her painted eyebrows arched. “The Catholic?” she said. “Looks like a piece of straw?” She leaned back, her skeletal wrist hanging over the arm of the chair, her cigarette dangling. The cylinder of ash was about to cascade to the floor. You had forgotten that she had met Mary Ellen at your graduation.

“Come on, Ma,” you said.

In the baby picture hanging on the wall behind her, your face seemed no longer cute or innocent, but doughy, pliant. You imagined taking that picture and taping it to the Union Square fence: *Missing*.

Zits on chin.

Below-average penis.

If found, call Peter.

If found, call nobody.

“I guess it’s the best you could do,” your mother said. She waved her cigarette like a wand, arching disdain. A wisp of smoke wafted across the table, and when it reached you, you inhaled it into your lungs.

The next morning, you walked over to Lil’s before work. The acrid smell was starting to dissipate; you realized that you would miss it when it was gone. Peter was at the counter by himself, reading the Op-Ed page of the *Times*, wiping egg yolk from his plate with rye toast, extra butter. He didn’t look up as you sat down.

“Good morning sir,” is how Lil greeted you. She waited, holding her pad, until finally you ordered. “Whole wheat or white?”

“You know,” you said.

“White,” Lil said, tearing the order from her pad and slapping it on the counter between the serving area and the kitchen. She picked up a pot of coffee and turned to face you again, shaking her long finger. “You found some other breakfast place?”

The other customers looked up with accusatory stares.

She sighed, put the pot down with a clink, laid her hands flat on the counter and looked at you as if you were in a hospital bed. “Listen, sweetheart,” she said. “You’re smart, creative . . .” She clicked her long nails on the Formica. “Why aren’t you *doing* something?”

Peter snorted out a laugh.

When you didn’t answer, Lil straightened up. “Know what I did?” she said. “The cook left, but the girls and me, once we found out what had happened, we kept the place open. We gave those poor people some *coffee*.” She put her hand over her mouth, her long fingernails stretching almost to her ear.

“Coffee?” you said. You pictured it: all those people coated in ash, putting cream and sugar into their coffee.

“That’s right,” she said, lifting her chin regally. “We had them masks on.” She motioned as if handing a cup to a ghost. Then she stood tall and put her hands on her hips. “And what did you do, Mister *Artiste*?”

You watched television.

You had just gotten out of the shower when you felt the odd movement, as if the air had changed. In the sky over the building across the street, you saw only a piercing blue, a light cloud. But then: a bending billow of black.

People gathered on the street—your neighbors, apparently. A woman screamed from the roof.

That’s when you turned on the television.

Soon afterwards, sheets of paper billowed by, chunks of ash. A page stuck to your window screen—an invoice, unpaid and overdue. You shut it tight, put a wet rag over your mouth and dropped to the floor.

You should have gone to White Plains.

You should have called Mary Ellen.

You should have gone to Peter’s, to see if he was okay.

Instead, you stayed in your apartment. You stayed there for two days, until you ran out of food, and that’s when you went to the Kiev.

One night you lay in bed with Mary Ellen, flat on your back. You had banged your head repeatedly into the headboard when she told you to *Fuck off*, when she screamed *You need help* and refused to speak for a half-hour as you tried to get her to take 50% responsibility for the argument. Mice scratched at the old newspapers in the broom closet. Dirty air drifted in through the window. A spider web in the corner shimmered red from the fluorescent bar sign across the street. Music and voices burst out as somebody opened the door to the bar, then muffled again as it closed. Two people clacked their shoes right under your window.

You wondered if Rosa Flores would ever go out with you again.

“Maybe we should call it quits,” Mary Ellen said. Her words floated to the ceiling and hovered above you. You sucked in your stomach, closed your eyes and felt the scrape of Lil’s fingernails on your knuckles.

You’re gone, is what Peter had said over his bowl of spaghetti. *Goodbye*.

The little finger of Mary Ellen’s right hand, and that of your left, were almost touching.

Christine’s is now closed. Pane e Cioccolato is closed. The Waverly Café is closed.

The Violet Café, formerly the West 4th Street Diner, is now a Starbucks.

The Kiev is closed. A sign on the window says *For Lease*, but it’s been there for a long time.