

Apropos of Little Sister

Since my kid sister's train arrives in eleven minutes, I'll be brief. I'll stick to the particulars. Like first off, I'm drinking a beer in Grand Central, a stunning old terminal you'll say you've been a hundred times. Yet when's the last you really *looked* at it, from the Italian marble floors up a dozen stories of open space—dust glittering between sunbeams—to those massive arched windows? But already I'm *off-track*. (Just a little railroad pun with a thought for sister, 'posa I call her, who loves the word-play.)

My sister is 13, today, April 1st. She's taking the train into the city to spend a couple days with me and our older sister, Darla, whom I just left in Central Park with an old boyfriend. April, that's my kid sister, will not be pleased to hear this about Darla, nor will she be happy to hear that I just yesterday called it quits with my girlfriend of two years, a woman April really liked. She's such a smart kid, April is, she's got to wonder why people can't get along or stay together. Like our parents, but that's even farther off the track. And the important thing is not Darla and her relationships or me and mine, it's about April's birthday and a gift I discovered for her. What I think I really mean is: I discovered *her*.

I gulp the last of my beer and stub out my smoke because the train from Albany is due in just now. I head for Track 25, my age incidentally (Darla's 32, *old enough to know better*, April might say), and as the train approaches I'm thinking of when April was first born. Our folks were still together then, of course, but they had been going through a rough time until Mother found out she was going to have another baby. Dad was between jobs (although how could he know this—he could only be certain that he'd lost one job, not that he'd find another). Mother was finishing grad school, at 39, and they were fighting all the time. They both knew they needed something to happen, some change, and Mother decided the pregnancy was *apropos*, in the sense of (she looked it up) both *relevant* and *opportune*. Or at least this was the positive view she adopted, and planned to call the little girl *Aproposa*, a name I at 12 must admit I thought wonderful, but Dad and especially Darla laughed so hard Mother couldn't push the measure through. They settled on April, the only name in the book with the A-P-R letter beginning, and the month in which she would be born anyway.

She steps off the train now and I can't believe what a hip little woman she is, tall for her age and gangly but carrying herself like a runway model in loose-jointed confidence if not nearly defiance. Her light brown hair pulled back in a pony-tail—like a girl ten or thirty—though some loose strands flutter beautifully in front of her face, blown by the sooty underground air. In canvas high-top sneakers, jeans skirt and spring-grass-green blouse, she carries a black and red Rochester Red Wings duffel bag—a fashion portrait that of anyone else would be cacophonous. Something inside her, I think, makes this not so.

She waves when she sees me, smiling big. Under my arm I've got the rolled print that tells her identity. "Hey, 'posa," I say, taking her bag and hugging her shoulder with my free hand.

We leave the station and walk a few blocks up 4th Avenue toward the apartment of family friends—our dad's mostly now—where we're going to stay. We sit at a sidewalk table in the crazy-early summery heat at a coffee shop where I order another beer and light another smoke and April frowns and orders an iced cappuccino, *to stunt my growth*, she says.

I ask her about spring softball—she's a little basketball star, too, for her junior high team—trying to keep a casual tone. She's unenthusiastic, says little of importance happens to her. As if she'd anticipated my next subject. And so I tell her how I lost our sister Darla leaving the Guggenheim because she ran into an old boyfriend. I tell her about walking toward the park with Darla when a Miata with the top down passed blasting that old Soft Cell song "Tainted Love."

Oh, God, Aldo, she says. Aldo's the name of the old lover Darla met up with. Darla currently lives with another guy, a good one April and I both like, upstate. *Oh, shit*.

That's exactly what Darla said when she heard the song—Darla claims that she always meets Aldo when she hears that song. April reaches for my pack of cigarettes, grabs my matches, and lights one, expertly. I frown. I know, *to stunt your growth*, I say. And then I tell her about Ruth, my old girlfriend, and me, trying to make it short and not upset her. So happy birthday, I change the subject, and hand her the rolled poster.

It's a print of a 1911 painting by Marcel Duchamp entitled *Apropos of Little Sister*, and when I saw it at the Guggenheim earlier it nearly knocked me down. In the

midst of background abstraction there's a figure, loosely rendered, seated cross-legged, reading a book in her lap. Somehow relaxed, yet purposeful—I think the word *aplomb*; I tell 'posa “an apricot, no, a plum” and she giggles, her vocabulary no doubt more expansive than mine.

Our parents had taken us to that museum more than once, and this afternoon it hit me with a certainty I can't explain, that this was what prompted Mother to try and name April *Aproposa*. Mother never once mentioned such a connection, so it must have been something sub-conscious, some influence she never noticed or realized. But Mother knew, as I realized then, what my precocious little sister would become. Or what she'd always been, whether I saw it or not.

Across the café table I look, and she's—I don't know how else to put it—she's become the painting. I try to say this, clumsily, for it's a difficult idea, and I certainly can't identify myself in such a way though I sorely wish I could. And yet for all this revelation, April sits calm, her own girlish legs crossed, a slight smile parting her lips. She'd made the connection years ago.

I think this time Darla will give Aldo a real try, she comes out with then; she's always coming out with stuff like this, fully-formed and thoughtful ideas. April never played softball before this year, just *watched* it, studied it, then went out for the team and started scooping grounders like Brooks Robinson. *At least then she'll know*. April means our sister Darla again.

And you, she says, exhaling smoke in a way I bet she's tried before her mirror more than once, *you're the Gray in between*. Our family name is Gray; perfect, huh?

You're between jobs and girlfriends and schools. (She's right about one and two, though I hadn't thought about a return to grad school.) *Even between sisters.* (Right again, of course.) She pauses, and even over the city traffic noise I can almost hear her mind clicking through connections. This another gift I wish I had.

You know Duchamp painted 'Apropos' just after his more classical phase and just before his best and most experimental stuff. In-between, too, though you couldn't have told him that, I bet. My kid sister smiles again.

You keep the print, she says, re-rolling it. *Hang it and think of me once in a while,* she says like some movie from the '40s. *Think of me but not at this time now, when I'm stalled just waiting for something to happen to me for once.*

I look at her and touch the rolled print she hands me, a gift back somehow and I'm flattered and at the same time upended. In between and upside down, 'posa might say. And looking into her clean, lightly freckled face, I'm listening, hoping I might hear a song coming from the windows of that cab stopped at the light in front of us. Or looking past my sister then, to the 4th Avenue bus and the billboard on its side, wondering if the picture there might speak something of me.