

The Day of the Dead

In the days before Trump was elected, we were buzzing with happiness, high off of Halloween candy the the belief that soon, a woman would be president. And on top of that, Vegan Sasha, Ted's best friend, would finally be released from prison. The halfway house he was moved to, where Park Slope met Gowanus, accepted visitors after 5 pm, and everyone in the Prison Writing Committee decided that Ted should go bring him vegan milkshakes and chick'n wings the first day he could receive visitors. Actually, Ted decided that, but everyone thought it was a solid idea.

On the afternoon we were supposed to go, Ted was running late. I sat out on the front stoop to wait, and my next-door neighbor on the right, the old man who ran the piano shop, came outside to offer me leftover Halloween candy. It wasn't a street full of brownstones. It was a Polish street and we only had three steps up from the sidewalk but I made use of those steps like they were an entrance into the Playboy mansion. Over the summer I planted morning glories in old buckets and they climbed the staircase handle, and I had just taken down the Halloween decorations that I'd put up, not knowing that Brooklyn kids don't trick or treat from apartment to apartment but go from store to store on the main drag. Maybe Piano Man had made the same mistake.

It started to get dark as he stood and I sat, chewing thoughtfully on a Twizzler. Sasha hadn't even been at the protest that landed him in prison—he'd been at the ATM that very moment, with video proof and a receipt and everything. Piano Man was standing in front of his Trump sign, telling me about the importance of school. He knew I wanted to become a teacher. “Poland,” he was saying, “schools are for free. Not in the US. My daughter, she want to become a doctor, I send her back to Poland.”

“She wanted to go to Poland, right?” I said.

“No!” said Piano Man. “She want to stay in Brooklyn with her boyfriend. I tell her, you become doctor in Poland, you come back when you finish. Take tests here.”

“It’s a lot of tests,” I said. At this point I was glad that Ted was running late; he believed in every conspiracy, especially medical ones. Vaccines caused autism, planes flying low spread chemtrails, AIDS was ... actually, I always tuned out by the time he got to AIDS. I didn’t bother fighting him on vaccines. It wasn’t like we had a kid or something who needed them. Which brings to me what I did fight him on: he was anti-abortion. It’s a life, he said, the way that an egg, which he didn’t eat, was also a life. We fought and fought and neither of us budged on what would happen if I got pregnant.

Piano Man chewed on a Twizzler too. We looked out together at the darkening sky. “Hillary might make college free,” I said. “Or community college. Then your daughter could stay.” My phone buzzed before he could answer. “Hey, Amanda.” I hoped my voice covered up the drop in my stomach. Had I missed a text from her?

“How is he doing?”

“Visiting hours don’t start until 5:00.”

“Well you’re there already, right?”

“Umm ...” I looked down the street. Still no car. “Ted is on his way.”

“You mean you haven’t even left yet?” Her voice rose.

“Ted is running late. Traffic’s bad.”

“Has he at least picked up the food yet?”

Was it better to lie or not? I looked down at the Twizzler in my hand. “We have some of the stuff,” I said.

“Sasha hasn’t been able to eat *all day*,” she huffed.

What did he eat in prison? And why wouldn’t he have access to it now? Ted had told me about the visiting room, the machine that dispensed coffee and chicken soup from the same grimy spout. In pictures from prison, posted on the Facebook fan page, Sasha hadn’t looked starving. He stood in his prison khakis in front of a backdrop, arms around Amanda, leaning down so that their faces were even.

Everything I knew about prison – which wasn’t much – I had learned from Ted and his trips down to North Carolina. I hadn’t even believed in a prison photography area until I saw the pictures posted and realized, looking closer, that yes, Sasha was in his prison uniform. Sasha found God in those walls, Allah *and* Jesus. Is that what protected him from rapes and beatings? Or was he beaten and raped and found comfort in Allah and Jesus? Because of his charges, he was housed with political prisoners (though Ted would say that all prisoners are political prisoners), and they were mostly Muslim. Ted grumbled about how now Sasha claimed to be Middle Eastern, thanks to his father’s Armenian heritage, but I didn’t think there was much to grumble about – he certainly looked Middle Eastern, with his dark skin and black hair.

“Hello? Hello?” Amanda said. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you. Look, we’ll be there as soon as we can. As soon as Ted gets here, we’re hopping in the car and bringing him the food.” That part was true.

Thanks to Amanda’s phone call, now Piano Man had wandered back into his store, with the bag of Twizzlers. The lights turned on, and I could see him, glowing, illuminated, peering into the

open maw of a piano, down its spine. Why couldn't Amanda come into the city today? I wondered. Why wasn't she the one picking things up for Sasha? She was certain that Sasha would propose once he was free, a certainty that the rest of us doubted. They first started dating when he was under house arrest, before sentencing. During those months of monitoring, Sasha was living with his parents, out in the Engelwood suburbs, and he and Ted built a skate ramp in the backyard. In summer's sticky heat, Sasha rolled his skinny jeans up to show off the electronic bracelet he wore around his ankle, his location transmitted to some unknown government entity. But how could you stay with someone who you first started sleeping with while under house arrest? Amanda was so annoying. It must be Stockholm Syndrome.

By the time Ted pulled up, it was already dark. CNN, featuring Nate Silver, illuminated my living room. As he spoke, I refreshed *538* on my tablet, the Road to the White House represented as a curving snake of red and blue, each state segment sized as its number of electoral votes. 85% shot of Clinton winning, Silver was saying. Ted knocked on the door—my roommates hadn't wanted me to give him keys, and I had obliged them. “Can't find a parking spot. Can you stay with the car? I really have to piss.” Our hands barely touched as I took the keys and slid into the driver's seat, double-parked.

I wasn't anxious about seeing Vegan Sasha because I barely knew him. Ted and I had started hooking up just this past summer, two years after Sasha's incarceration. I knew him peripherally—Ted and I had overlapping social circles—but not well enough to write him a single letter. It's not like that stopped my Facebook stalking, though. Ted and I had known each other for a while, back from when I lived in Engelwood, too, and I'd wanted to sleep with him for a long while before we actually did. And who was Ted without Sasha? Their story was more of a love story than mine and

Ted’s. When they had met, Ted was fifteen, a scrawny high school sophomore, while Sasha was already in college. They bonded over anarchist politics and bank protests. Sometimes, when I looked back on those high school years (Ted and I were in the same school, but shared no classes), I wondered if Sasha used him. Getting caught trespassing when you’re fifteen carries different consequences than when you’re 23. That year, Ted released the ants in the biology lab free, naming himself a cell of the ALF – Ant Liberation Front, and I always wondered if Sasha was actually behind it.

In the pictures from prison, they lean against each other, foreheads nearly touching, almost like Sasha and Amanda.

Ted came back out and I slid over into the passenger’s seat. He gave my hand a squeeze and looked me in the eyes. “How’s it going?”

“Good. I got you some Twizzlers.” I fished one out of my purse. Misshapen, it felt like a flaccid penis.

Ted switched on the overhead light and read the ingredients, sounding out some of the difficult-to-pronounce words. Satisfied, he started gnawing on the Twizzler as we pulled out.

“Do you know where this place is?” I asked.

“Kind of,” he said. “We’ll figure it out.”

When we hit yellow lights and Ted sped up, we kissed our hands and touched the sagging ceiling of his car. Moments like this, just the two of us in his car together, I felt a little bit like his girlfriend and a little bit like his sidekick. Girlfriend: chosen. Chosen by him and therefore special. Sidekick: he would be doing this anyway, with or without me, and I could assist but never lead.

Did I want to be his girlfriend? I wasn't sure. I wanted to be *his* somehow, wanted other people to know that we were Together. But the word “girlfriend” felt sticky and unpleasant, like Rice Krispies Treats. Maybe “partner” would have been better, but that seemed appropriative of queer language. Plus, sometimes I wanted to hook up with other people. Sophomore year of college had been a slump, as they say, but junior year was shaping up well. I rented that house in Brooklyn with some other students from Hunter and we studied together and hosted parties and did things that Ted was outside of, since he had dropped out of college last year. When Ted and I were at parties with *his* friends, he was practically a celebrity. Not just to the Prison Writing Committee, but to people crowded at parties, fundraisers, punk shows in Ridgewood. But when we were with my friends, or at parties at my house, he seemed like a loser. He lived with his parents in New Jersey and didn't work. I tried, in vain, to bring out the other Ted at those parties, the Ted who lead things, who lead people, but he refused to appear.

We stopped by Foodswings and got a brown paper sack stuffed with oozing, greasy, food. The lid of the vegan milkshake, peanut butter and chocolate, barely fit on. The melting ice cream, an odd, brown-purple hue, dripped into the cup holder. Vegan chick'n wings turned the bag translucent. And the car smelled like French fries. Ted absentmindedly sipped from the milkshake, then remembered and put it down quickly.

“How was your day?” I asked.

Ted shrugged. “I worked on the website and then I did a pickup.”

“Get anything good in the pickup?” He didn't say anything. “Ted, are you sure you want me to come with you to this?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“I can just take the subway home.”

He didn’t say anything. Traffic slowed, and we crawled down 5th Avenue in Park Slope, past the boutiques. Where was the Ted who had looked me in the eye and said, *I can’t do this without you?* And why was I wasting my Friday night if he didn’t want me around? Ted did this often, became a stranger while sitting beside me, turned silent and impenetrable.

We got lost, circled the block a few times and finally found the building. The waiting room could have been lifted from any hospital, including the smell. Ted spoke to the person behind bulletproof glass as I waited on a blue plastic chair, reading the signs on the walls: minimum wage laws written in small print, an inspirational poster of a legless man swimming that said *the only disability in life is a bad attitude*.

How long had it been since things felt steady between us? Had there only been that one time? That May night, I had just finished up my sophomore year of college and a week of final exams then headed back to Jersey, where Ted had neglected to show up for his final exams at Rutgers. The Engelwood cops came up to our Food Not Bombs table, its legs stuck into the dust beside the sidewalk. We were careful not to go farther, knowing how easy it is to be arrested for blocking the sidewalk. (I’d been arrested for that once.) We stood behind the table, which was loaded with brown-spotted bananas and bread so warm it steamed the inside of the packaging, while behind us stood neighborhood men with their arms crossed. And in front of us, under the table and on the sidewalk, the children, who translated between their parents and us with voices full of pity for all we didn’t know.

The cops stood there, asking who we were, asking for our names, and I was about to speak when Ted’s hand on my arm silenced me. “We don’t need to answer those questions.”

Amanda jumped in. “Everything’s fine. I’m Amanda, this is Elaine—”

“We aren’t doing anything illegal,” Ted broke in. “This is a potluck. With our friends.”

The cop’s pen hovered above his notepad. “And what are your names?”

“Sir, we don’t need to answer that question,” said Ted.

“I’m placing you under arrest.”

“For what?”

One of the cops handcuffed Ted while the other retrieved a thick black binder from the car.

The adults behind us had vanished, but some of the children were still hanging out. I asked Marco, one of the kids, for help cleaning up: putting all of the bread in one bag, throwing out the rest of the garbage. He obliged, and his cousins joined in too.

Cops flipped through the binder. It wasn’t selling without a license, peddling, because we weren’t taking any money; we weren’t blocking the sidewalk; we weren’t disrupting the peace; we weren’t panhandling. They kept reading. The streetlights turned on. Marco and I were finished, our hands covered with dust, and I held his cousin Millie’s hand as we walked back across the street to their house—I didn’t let them cross the street on their own after dark. Millie spoke a mix of Spanish and English, and Marco broke in to translate sometimes. I knocked on the door and saw their mother. We waved hi to each other, and she glanced worriedly across the street, red and blue lights moving across her face in silent waves.

“It’ll be okay,” I said. “He’ll be fine.”

Marco turned and translated rapidly. “She wants to know if you’re in trouble for feeding people.”

“I hope not,” I said.

Marco turned and translated, then his mother spoke and he translated again. “Mama wants to know if you have school supplies.”

“When do you start?”

“Three weeks.”

“Can you make me a list?”

Across the street, silhouetted, the cops were using the empty table, the table that had held bread, to hold the black binder, and Ted was sitting on the curb, handcuffed and looking stoic. This wasn’t the time, but what else could be done, what else could I do besides make a list of school supplies? Amanda was in her parked car, calling everyone in her Rolodex, journalists, and I expected News 11 to roll up at any moment: *Local Hero Arrested for Serving Food to Poor*. She also knew the right activists, the one who could coordinate jail support. What could I do? Walk Marco and Millie across the street.

Marco and I sat on the front stoop with his mother. We were the mirror image of Ted. From inside, I heard the news. Someone was making fun of Trump for saying *Bad Hombres*. I wrote carefully on a piece of notepaper: loose-leaf, spiral notebooks, backpacks, markers. We could get much of this from dumpster diving Staples, and what we couldn’t get from the dumpster we could get from donations, and what we couldn’t get from donations we could get from shoplifting. We were never caught, though maybe we should have been worried; maybe we should have feared Sasha’s fate would be our own.

Now, five months later, in the halfway house lobby, Sasha was there, his hand on Ted’s shoulder, face turned to the receptionist, asking if the visit and food were okay, every motion restrained. I couldn’t look at him. For these two and a half years he had been an absence, the sheet

drop under the George Washington Bridge, the loss that Ted had built his life around, and we—Amanda, me—had followed. I looked, instead, at what I could stand to hold: his red ski jacket collar tucked under his chin, the way he extended his hand from Ted’s shoulder to his face, as though he were afraid of pulling him towards him. This ghost, suddenly material, this person returned to life from prison. What had he endured?

Sasha’s lips touched the milkshake, and I remembered, then, how that night only a few months ago had ended: I drove back to my parents’ house, and Ted, freed from the cuffs after some questioning, had arrived, cell phone dead, and I heard a quiet knock on the door and opened it and even before I knew who was there I was in his arms, holding him, and he was holding me and kissing my hair. It was the first time his lips had ever touched me. He was weeping, just a little bit, but I wasn’t, because I couldn’t believe he was there and that this was real. How could it be? We stood in the warm dark, slugs emerging from soil around us, crickets calling their night song, and Ted smelled of old bananas and bread and his sweat smelled of fear. I felt his body stir under me and I was afraid. But in my bed, quiet so as not to wake my parents, he curved under me like a boat’s hull filled with salt water. The only condom I had was old and, Ted claimed, not vegan, so instead I touched his dirt, his sweat; I held it in my mouth. He touched me, his whole body breathing me in until I came, silently, in the dark wet mouth of summer and all of my high school dreams of Ted returned. He spent the night, his dirty hands, his shoes in the hallway, and I knew then that I loved him, that he was before me, open, in a way that no one had ever been open before. He fell asleep first, the adrenaline dropping off suddenly, and I touched his thin blonde hair, felt the scar behind his ear.

The next morning I turned 20.

I could see Sasha, now, for the first time. Ted stood with Sasha, and I could feel their breathing, that they were breathing together. No ghost, no god, no Facebook hero. No yawning abyss. We shook hands, mine sticky with Twizzler residue, the hand that was ready to pull the lever for Hillary Clinton. His hand, warm, a felon’s hand, would never be able to cast a vote. “Thank you,” he was saying. He was saying that Ted was lucky. “Thank you for writing me those letters from the tree,” he said to me. “It felt amazing to know that someone was out there fighting for the forest.” He was thinking of someone else. I looked to Ted for help, but none was forthcoming.

“No,” I said, “That’s not me. That’s not who I am.”

“Oh, that was someone else?”

“I’m sorry, yeah.” I would have done anything for the answer to be different. To be the person who had lived in a tree and written letters. How do you even mail letters from a tree? And don’t you have to pay the government to get stamps?

But I had nothing. I had only myself.