

## The Fall of New York

We walk into a telephone booth attached to the outside of a closed resale shop, dial 7, enter the bar, and are submerged in smoke. On stage, a singer croons into a microphone and the upright piano's pitch sounds slightly flat. Couples clasp each other, hardly swaying, heels scraping the black-and-white checkered dance floor. Flimsy bistro tables have been placed too close together, the crowd is mostly early thirty-somethings, and red lighting fills the cloudy room, making the faces around us both shadowed and out of focus.

"We're never going to get a seat," Richard yells over the jazz. "Let's get out of here."

Richard is always impatient; a stockbroker, he's one of those people who's practiced in sliding a fifty into the palm of a maître d' or bouncer to skip the two-hour wait. And I'm the guy behind him straightening my tie, checking my email, looking at my watch, pretending not to notice, willing to have waited at the bar just like everyone else.

"Relax, man," I say. "We just got our beers."

He grunts, nodding towards a couple three tables away. "Looks like the saddest bitch in the bar is almost done with her drink."

Richard's right, the girl does seem upset, with her too-thick eyebrows furrowed and jaw muscles taut like she's going to cry. Her lips, thin and bare of color, move slowly as she reads off a piece of paper on the table next to her gin and tonic, possibly vodka tonic. Her date has his back to me. He pulls out his wallet and grabs a bill. Is he even listening? She tucks her straight brown hair behind her ears and then picks up the paper, folding it carefully. She lights a cigarette, her hands shaking. Pathetic. Pretty, but pathetic.

"I've always hated this goddamn place." Richard's voice jars me and I finally look away. "Who listens to jazz anymore? We're not in the fucking prohibition," he grumbles, taking a long drink of beer. "At least you can smoke."

I resist reminding him that coming here was his idea. He had read that this was one of the “Best Five Jazz Joints!” in *New York Magazine*. Richard likes pretending to appreciate culture and the arts, but really he just uses art exhibitions and film festivals as an opportunity to get drunk and meet women. That’s actually how we became friends. It was about a year back, at some opening for a restaurant in the West Village. I was there helping a food critic take notes-- a little out of my job description as an editorial assistant, but the writer had specifically requested me-- when Richard confronted me in the bathroom and asked if I was “screwing that Twiggy chick with the notepad.” No, I wasn’t, not yet at least, but I could tell by the way she was downing those cranberry cobbler cocktails and biting her bottom lip that she had sex in mind when she asked her editor, my boss, for some assistance on her next piece. Her dyed blonde hair was slightly greasy, her black dress emphasized her nipples (rudely pointing in opposite directions, to distract me even more so from her face) and she rambled on about her desire to write “some fucking serious stories for once. I don’t even like to eat.” I could remember thinking, how can someone be so hot and so repulsive at the same time? When I told Richard that the writer was fair game, he bought me a beer, I helped get him laid and got myself the rest of the night off. The writer, who no longer looks at me as she passes my cubicle, probably doesn’t even notice the difference between the men that take her home.

“You’ve never even been here before.” I laugh. “And you don’t smoke.”

“Yeah, because I knew I’d hate it. Any other bar in Midtown is better.”

I could tell this was the kind of place where old couples come to feel new, and where new couples come to feel Old New York, the romantic Fitzgerald fantasy, a nostalgia for what they never knew, and I am reminded of a Portuguese word I can’t pronounce, which is why I’ve never used it. *Saudade*. Wistfulness for what never was and what never will be. Read it once in some article and it stuck in my mind; not because I could feel its meaning, but because I could fathom it. An unborn child, a lost culture, the wedding band you always wanted, your perfect past life as Billie Holiday,

before all the bad stuff. It was a female condition, men were too practical, too unimaginative. No doubt that the men here tonight were dragged by their wives or girlfriends, or they chose the spot to impress their soon-to-be sexual partners. The whole bar is drenched in *saudade*, and, I admit, there is something about feeling like you've stepped out of the present and into a different time. But, as Richard said, this isn't that idolized era so pretending is pointless, hopeless. If you perceive the past as better than the present, then, of course, it is.

I scan the crowd slowly. There are no women alone here. Soon Richard will realize that he made the wrong choice. To him, sex was second only to money and maybe time (I saw the way he nervously ran his hand over his developing bald spot). We won't be here much longer, but I don't want to go. It's almost nice not to worry about meeting someone. Maybe now is the time for me to just get a girlfriend already. Put an end to this divide and conquer ritual with Richard. My eyes move instinctually towards the girl.

The scene has changed; in the span of Richard's whining, the paper disappeared. Her head is bowed towards the table and her cigarette is burning away between her fingers while the man speaks with his arms flailing. What the hell was she reading? A letter? A confession? Whatever it is, she's a coward mumbling her dramatic monologue to an empty audience. I want to see her fight back, hurl his drink to the ground, spit in his face, do something else than just fucking sit there. I wish I could tell her men don't respect weak women, but instead I direct my eyes towards the stage. No one, apart from a shrink, gives advice to strangers in New York City.

The singer's voice begins to slur, not in a stylistic way, as he sings about his eyes dripping gin. The house lights are dimming as the spotlight widens and brightens. He clenches his eyes to shut out the light. He looks like he's in pain.

It's hard to tell if the couples on the dance floor are even moving or if they're just sleeping upright. Actually, the whole room seems motionless—no one sways, lights a cigarette, or raises their

hand to summon a refill—except for that one table. Everyone is entranced by the drunk singer, but the sad girl and her friend must not be there for the music. It's all a pretense, like Richard and me. Nothing else to do on a Friday in Manhattan, so here we stand.

The song concludes with a pounding of piano keys, the singer's mouth is open so wide on that last note he's nearly licking the microphone, the crowd is released and movement resumes with the clapping of hands. The dancers reluctantly strip themselves apart, now two separate wholes instead of one dark mass, and the singer takes a bow and a sip, motioning to the piano player, who tips his bowler hat.

I look back again. The girl has her eyes closed as she's downing the rest of her drink, then winces. Rising from the table, she glares at me and I am startled by the blue. I can almost feel her shot's aftertaste in that look. It's so dark that even the bar is blurry, but still, could she have seen? Did she feel me watching? Without glancing down at her date, she walks out of the telephone booth and into the night. The man chases after her and Richard lunges for their empty table. He'd been watching them like he refreshes the page on his Blackberry, waiting for stock to rise.

Richard replaces the man, leaving me to the girl's warmth. As I take off my jacket, I notice the paper under her empty drink. Richard turns to find a server and I take the opportunity. The paper clings to the bottom of the glass as I peel them apart, like the reluctant end of a kiss. Did she leave this for me? Is it possible? Unfolding the paper in my lap, I see that the lines, written in sloppy cursive, are short. A poem, she's a poet.

From a distance I hear Richard ask, "Why are you staring at your crotch?" but I ignore him and begin to read. *Looming over the lost/ the lover's prayers/ liar witch whore/ the tenth muse.* Another song, slower and sadder this time, starts but it's the woman's written presence that fills my head. *Music blares with the band/ and I've lost you/ in the mass. The bridge shakes as it expands/ the cord snaps and/ I am free.* It's almost over now and I don't want her to stop. Her words are covering my eyes like the layer of

smoke lingering just below the ceiling and I can see her clearly now, cruel lips spilling red. She towers over me, screaming her last lines, *The queen falls/ and with her New York City*.

“Take your shot already, asshole.” Richard says. “What are you doing down there?”

“Sorry,” I look up, shaking my head to brush away her image. “That girl, she left her poem.”

Richard holds his hand out and I pass the paper to him. He laughs while reading the poem aloud, and I swallow my shot of Jameson. I wonder why the girl ran away, and if the man caught up with her. I hope she realizes her poem is lost, alone now in a cab. I imagine the city reflecting in her eyes as she stares out the window.

“Crazy bitch,” Richard chuckles, putting the paper down. “She thinks she can bring down New York?” He takes the poem literally, as I should have guessed he would. “*The queen falls and with her, New York City*. Jesus fuck. Somebody needs to tell her. *Kings* run this motherfucking town.” He spreads his arms like he’s bringing the city to his chest. “Am I right?”

He’s right, of course, so I nod. I noticed that the singer and the pianist have left the stage, and Frank Sinatra is now singing from the speakers. Couples are talking, lighting each other’s cigarettes, kissing. The women seem to be significantly more attractive than the men next to them.

“I do like that she calls herself a whore though, that’s pretty hot.” Richard slides on his sport coat. “Come on, we’re going to Tribeca. That new sake bar. Tiny Asian chicks, man.”

I panic. Shit. Shit. What if she comes back for the poem? I could be here, waiting. She’d run in, hair disheveled and damp from the snow, blue eyes desperate, scanning the tables, trying to remember where exactly she’d been sitting. As in the movies, the music would mute and everyone else in the room would freeze mid-sip, mid-sway. Then I would move, calmly, towards her, place the poem in her palm and smile as relief and confusion replaced the desperation in her eyes. I could tell her that I didn’t understand the poem, but I’d like to. She would let me buy her a drink-- definitely a

gin and tonic-- and after an hour or so, I would take her home and kiss her outside of her modest brownstone. Walking home alone, the city would look different because of her.

What is wrong with me? There's no Richard in that equation, and he's already standing up, dropping cash on the table, running his hand over his bald spot again. I have a few seconds to decide whether to wait here, making myself susceptible to Richard's jokes until the New Year at least, or, do what I would usually do, and just follow his lead. I sigh, slipping on my coat as well. She wouldn't come back anyway. And why would she, just for a poem? She's somewhere far away now, and even if I had met her... I imagine myself in Richard's seat, sitting across from her, watching her run away and letting her go.

I stand, follow Richard through the smoke, and there's Sinatra singing *love was just a glance away, a warm embracing dance away*, the city looming beyond the telephone booth, and the poem laying open on the table, still.