

falling like stars

when i get to the jetty, just as the sky is exploding with color, gino is already there, waiting for me. he turns. when he sees me, he smiles. the light makes his eyes bright topaz. "hurry," he says, "it's starting!"

we sit on the damp rocks for a long while, quiet. we watch the glowing marsh grass, just now brown tipped in late september, just now shimmering and perfectly still. there, standing in tall reeds, a heron gazes at reflections in the rising water. starlings flutter like butterflies.

"i brought snacks," he whispers, there's something about the place, almost church like, that makes you talk softly. he makes a picnic, on the flat stone between us, he lays down a clean brightly white cloth. he pulls things from a straw bag for us to share. there is fig paste and hard cheese on little crackers, we nibble grapes, we sip from a can of wine. and when the sun sets, in a silent red suffusion, we smile.

"the best show in town," he says. it is.

he wraps my old sweater around his shoulders, the sleeves he knots around his neck. it gets cold at night now, quickly, as soon as it is dark.

we walk our way to the red inn. in the quiet of the deep west end, birds are singing a trembling evening song that seems to mourn the end of another summer. the garden, where dahlias asleep in their beds droop their heavy heads, is lit up with glowing lanterns. silvery moths shimmer dance, they play like flitting shadows.

inside, the place is warm, alive with clinking silverware and people talking.

The bar is not too full.

"hello, boys." says donnie.

we grab our spots.

we order without having to look at the menu: oysters, little necks, two dirty martinis.

we play the game of scoping out the neighbors:

it's the usual crowd of well heeled travelers.

"check out those two," he says with his first eager gulp of tito's, "they've been together the better part of a century, easy." he glances toward an older couple, who are sitting next to us.

they're eating haddock and baked potatoes. they wear matching pastel cardigans.

"did you see how much salt that woman put on her food?" says the wife in an undertone.

"who?" the husband looks around the dining room, where nothing seems out of the ordinary.

"shh-" a paper white hand weighed down with platinum and stones shushes him. "that lady at the table, with the red hair. she didn't even taste her food. how does she know she needs that much salt?"

"mmm" he says, sipping his manhattan.

"too much salt."

he rubs his fingers on the crisp napkin and neatly folds it, puts it gingerly on the lap of his tan chinos.

"i think it's a wig."

"what?"

"the red hair."

he glances over. could be, he seems to concede with a half shrug.

gino nudges my shoulder. "promise me you'll never comment on the salt consumption of strangers."

"promise me you'll never wear chinos."

we tink our glasses.

two guys on our right are celebrating a birthday. we all sing happy birthday barry. we clap when he blows out the single candle on his chocolate torte.

"how old are you?" gino is never shy.

the guy beams. "today i am 70." barry has a head of white hair that just reaches his shoulders.

his eyes are sky blue.

"you are beautiful," says gino.

so we buy them a round, and soon become chummy. "did you hear the salt lady?" barry's partner dave whispers. "i thought she was going to pop a blood vessel."

we laugh. hopefully she doesn't hear. she doesn't seem to. she's busy spearing a broccolli floret with her fork.

"what do you boys do?" barry asks.

"I'm a dancer," says gino.

"oh, how wonderful."

"he's a writer," gino points at me with his thumb.

"what an exciting life you both must have."

"oh yes."

"we're retired. banking. very dull," says dave.

"you seem happy," i say.

"well, after 18 years or so, you kind of get used to someone."

"you make such a handsome pair," says barry, "i said so when you walked in the room, didn't i david?"

"yes. both quite striking gentlemen," dave winks. he wears a square cut diamond ring that gleams in the candle light. "how long have you two been together?"

"oh, you know," says gino, looking at me, "sometimes it feels like forever."

forever.

in truth, we've known each other exactly eight days.

"well here's to us, to good health, and love, and all the good things," barry raises his glass.

"all the good things," i say.

this is our last night together.

tomorrow i go home.

eight days ago:

we met the morning of the great hangover. there had been quite a debauché, a week of orgiastic excess, and now the tab was being paid. i was mid way through my second cup of coffee, the dark roast at joe's, and about a third of my way into a book i wasn't really reading. i took a long sip, and closed my eyes. i felt the sun. I listened to the gulls in the bay, and the chatter of late morning. despite a pounding head and a mouth like a pocket of lint, i was feeling ok, considering. the coffee helped.

i heard a voice from quite close: "can i share your bench?"

when i opened my eyes, i saw the man that fortune tellers have promised my whole life: tall, dark, handsome.

as i gestured for him to sit down, i scanned the sky to see what lucky star was smiling, but it was day time and there was nothing but clear blue overhead. of course i recognized him. he's the guy i'd seen many times during my stay, everywhere- here at joe's, down at the pier, walking his bike in the dirt road lanes in the east end. he's the kind of guy you remember.

the other coffee sippers glanced over, at his short shorts, and the white shirt with frayed collar, open to expose an expanse of tanned chest amply sprinkled with handfuls of thick, curly hair.

the people at the next table looked at me, looked at him, and shrugged.

"be my guest. " i scooted over, grateful that Provincetown is one of those places where serendipity is a playful sprite, a place where sometimes the gods visit us mortals. perhaps it was the wind that came down from the dunes like a sigh, or the light, or the energy of that autumnal equinox day, but some combination of celestial, lunar hoodwinking was afoot. the tide was high.

he draped himself next to me in a way, like he'd been sitting there always. he sat like a painting you'd see in an east end gallery, a masterpiece, a portrait of a man in golden sunlight.

"my name is gino," he said. those eyes, light brown and glinting.

He pushed a battered felty hat to the back of his head. a waving forelock of black hair fell lovingly across his brow. "yea i've seen you around haven't i? you're the guy out by angel's wharf, right? I thought you looked familiar," he nodded at my blue notebook, "you write?"

"i try"

"that's so cool. i'm a dancer. you should come see me at macho bar saturday nights."

yes, i'd enjoy seeing gino dancing at the macho bar.

"what do you write about?"

"a little about life, a little fiction. I make up stories."

"doesn't everyone?"

we chatted a bit. i told him about the class i'm taking at the fine arts work center, and the book i'm not reading. he told me about san francisco, where he's from. he came to Provincetown in

the spring to find himself, he said. i came for a couple of weeks in September to write, i said, though i hadn't written anything really the whole time.

after a while like this, He leaned in.

" can i tell you something?"

"of course", i nodded. we were hardly strangers now.

he moved in closer, so close i could smell espresso and nicorette gum on his breath

"I want you to understand, i like your energy. i mean you seem like an easy person to talk to, i thought so when i came over."

"thanks."

"and i do really dig your vibe," he went on, "i've always been a sucker for the silver daddy bears, I go for your type, big time. i don't think a man is really handsome until he's weathered a few storms. older men are so attractive."

i held my breath for a beat.

" i know what this looks like, it looks like another lazy hook up, like i'm picking you up or something, but i'm not, i'm not into hooking up. "

"hmmm?"

"i'm not looking for sex, this is not a sex thing. i'm just looking for friends."

"oh right, me neither. of course not. sure, me too."

"no i'm serious. I'm completely celibate. six weeks. as of thursday anyway. what day is today?"

"it's thursday, i think."

" i've been celibate for six weeks, " he smiled again.

"celibate. cool. how is that going?" i silently cursed the universe, that minx, that winking, pranking jokester.

"it's awful. to be honest, it really sucks.. but i am on the wagon. no more dick for me. at least for the foreseeable future. i'm on this spiritual journey. i know that sounds cheesy."

"no, not cheesy."

"there's nothing more dull than hearing someone expound about their personal transformation. i won't bore you with it," he said. "i don't meditate enough, i can't sit still, and i'm always remembering that little bitchy cashier i so want to slap. not really very zen. but i'm trying. i guess that's the really important thing, right? the trying?"

"absolutely."

"don't you think being friends is nice?"

"of course." there was something sincere about him, something earnest about his presence, and then there were those eyes. i relaxed, i settled into the little bench under the dappled shade of the maples. "who doesn't need more friends?" i said. we bumped our coffee cups together, a new accord established.

"sex just confuses things. friendship is pure, unspoiled." he said. "don't get me wrong, i'm not judging. i mean, i used to be pretty slutty. a real backdoor girl scout. i gave away a lot of cookies, but it got tiring. exhausting. fucking around can feel so empty sometimes, have you ever found that? it's just two bodies clunking against each other for an hour or two, no souls touching, no connection."

an hour, or two. that sounded pretty good to me.

"plus, i thought i'd fall in love. but i didn't. i got my heart kicked around enough just the same. i was tired of feeling tired, a piece of meat, something to use. so now i dance at the bar. they can look but they can't touch. it's very therapeutic. empowering. i'm marlena deitrich in a harness and jockstrap."

that was an appealing visual.

"of course. i used to have a whip but it got a little out of hand."

"i see."

"i'm the oldest cliché, " he says, " i'm a 40 year old orphan. i'm a runaway from life, hoping to find the answers."

"what are the questions?"

his eyebrow shot up. "clever man."

and so we sat there a while longer in the warm sunlight, while the breeze made the leaves in the trees whisper, we sipped our coffees and talked. we told each other stories about ourselves. and just like that, we were friends.

the next day, we swam at race point. on a rocky spit of beach we shared a ratty towel and a joint. as he lied on his back with his eyes closed, i looked at him, his skin bronzed by weeks of sun, his beard that was growing wild, his inky eyelashes. he was still resolutely celibate. i thought to myself, more than once, more than a dozen times, what a waste of natural resources. but i grew to accept it. or i tried to, anyway.

my new pal and i made a habit of meeting each other. we sat on the deck of my rental cottage, to watch the tide when it came in and went out. we walked the wall at saint mary's, where cormorants dried their outstretched wings. he knew everybody, and everybody seemed to love him. he talked to everyone, with the same easy sincerity that was irresistible. he took me to a party up in the hills, at one of those houses perched in a sand dune, a lit up glass box that looked out onto the moors. we went to a bonfire on herring cove, a potluck in truro, a poetry reading at town hall. i went along, brought into the pull of his orbit of artists and runaways and drunks and posers. his friends were very nice, they shook my hand and murmured hello, but they all looked at me quizzically, wondering who i was, and how i got to be there. no more than i did.

and so we spent our handful of days, the last days of september.

"what about you?" he asked me once. we were in the beech forest, walking in the shade of silver trees.

"what about me?"

"you don't talk about yourself much."

"nothing much to say."

"you're a writer. tell stories."

"what do you want to know?"

"you're a runaway too"

"i guess i am." it was true. i'd come here with some faint idea to find again that something lost.

"tell me."

"not now," i said. there was no way to say how alone i was.

there was a footbridge where we stopped a while. the water flowing under our feet felt alive, green and fragrant with floating lily pads, abuzz with dragonflies.

i kissed him.

i put my lips on his. i felt his beard against mine, his body close to me.

he hugged me.

his eyes were soft and smiling.

and then the bubble popped, and we both laughed.

"i'm terrible," i said, "i'm sorry."

" don't be. it's fine. you're a sweetheart," he said.

"i guess i'm celibate too," i laughed it off.

"so tell me now why you ran away. tell me the story of when you came to provincetown."

and i did.

but i did not tell him about my first night in the little cottage, when the wind roared up with a storm, and rain pounded the roof above my head, how lonely i felt, and how cold, how i stayed in bed and shivered under the thin coverlet. whatever i tried to leave behind in cambridge, whoever i tried to forget, crept in with the damp and stayed. there was no running away.

what i did tell him, there in the green forest that smelled of ferns and mellowing leaves:

"i came to heal a broken heart, it's the same old story that everyone tells," i said.

and that was true enough, i was heartbroken.

until that morning at joe's. until that kiss on the footbridge.

until tonight, this last night.

tonight, I am high as a gull when i sail out of the harbor lounge, launched out into the evening on a wake of glenlevitt and the cigarette i split with the bartender. "where you off to?" he asks. the bay is brimming and pink, the sky swirls with whispering clouds dusky in the purple light. a breeze picks up. it smells like the sea and the coming rain. i blow a plume of smoke over my shoulder as i wave goodbye . lights begin to flicker on, the bars and clam shacks wink alive. inside, couples sit at tables with candles glowing, people drink at the bars. somewhere a piano player plays a torch song, something old and sentimental and sweet, *a stairway to the stars*. a drag queen's dropped sequins light up the pavement, a pathway i follow as my feet kick the first fallen leaves.

i want to get to the jetty before sunset, someone is there waiting for me.

when we walk out of the red inn, we are both drunk. we had started singing a song with barry and dave, that one from blue angel, and when we get out into the night we revive. we sing the same line over and over, the only one we know by heart, in deep baritone, each word heavily accented and drawn out, it seems so funny, and we roar each time:

"falling in love again
never wanted to
what am i to do?
can't help it."

we duck down along captain jack's. the wind turns cold and sharp, it hits our faces, the air is salted with rain. we stand under the gray sagging pier, where you can hear the waves smack wood pilings, and the fog horn blaring. he is wearing my old sweater, i have on a thin windbreaker, we both shiver. i reach for him, to feel his warmth. this time when i kiss him i don't stop, i grab the back of his head, crush his lips into mine.

"I'm sorry," I say again, though i'm not sorry, not sorry at all.

"don't be."

facing the water we start to sing, we pick up the old tune, we sing the words over one more time, we scream into the wind:

"falling in love again
never wanted to
what am i to do?
can't help it."

and then we laugh, like it's the funniest thing, and we stay there holding onto each other,
laughing under a starless sky.