

Janine Liked Roses

Clara Preferred Lilies

1958

Clara never knew about the other woman who walked into her living room to pay a Shiva call to the grieving family. For fifteen years, everyone who knew him thought Arnie left work early on Wednesday evenings to attend night school. Not a single employee ever questioned his lack of degree or the need for so much education when he already had a thriving factory of his own. On Wednesdays Clara dined without him, leaving a plate warm in the oven for his return. Those who wondered, his brother for instance, knew better than to ask.

In fact, Arnie was spending his Wednesday evenings with a pretty Irish showgirl he met while previewing one of his theatrical investments. Most nights, they spent in the small two-bedroom apartment he rented for her not far from his factory, close to the theatres. Sometimes, they took in the fights at the Garden, taking the slight risk of being seen, though he knew no one in his other life who enjoyed the sport.

Arnie died unexpectedly just before the Jewish holidays, his heart exploding by the side of the West Side Highway on his way to work one inky blue morning. No other lives were lost; he must have felt the crushing pain just in time and had the forethought to pull the car over to the side of the road. His fear and agony were most likely brief. No one had a moment to wonder or worry which is just the way he would have wanted it, although the shock for his family was severe. Just the night before, he spoke to his daughters, confirming their attendance at the holiday dinner, and only moments before

the attack, had kissed his wife Clara good-bye. It was a fortunate confluence of events that abundant food was already prepared for the Rosh Hashanah meal. Clara's brisket was resting, the chickens roasted. Her plum and apple tarts were cooling on the windowsill when she picked up the phone to learn the news. No friend or family who stopped by to pay respects would leave Clara's house hungry.

Nattily dressed in a custom suit, Arnie entered the white brick building on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue where he spent his Wednesday evenings. By the time he crossed the lobby, his tie was loosened. By the time he reached Janine's door, his jacket was already off, and his shirtsleeves rolled. The small apartment was nothing like his own spacious pre-war with the upright piano in the foyer and the Oriental rugs on the floors, that he came home to every evening. Janine's apartment was stark and modern with large plate glass windows that rattled in the wind tunnels of the wide avenue.

Nor was Janine anything like his wife. Clara, who Arnie had known since her grade school days as a gangly child with long flaxen braids, had grown into a stout and sturdy woman, the braids now grey and coiled around her head. She was proper and restrained, a physical reminder of the responsibilities Arnie shouldered. Clara made him want to suck in his gut and do the right thing. Janine brought out another side of Arnie. She was red headed and freckled, joyous and girlishly giddy. When he visited, she greeted him in lingerie or sometimes nothing at all. She made him feel much younger than his years and brought out the dimples in his cheeks and the twinkle in his eyes. Each woman welcomed him with a smile when he walked through the door, each so happy to see him and share his life, and, in his own way, he loved them both. Not a

Friday Shabbos dinner, nor a Wednesday evening rendezvous passed when he didn't arrive with a large bouquet in hand. Janine liked roses. Clara preferred lilies.

"Oh, did you bring me flowers?" Janine asked demurely every time, never ceasing to be pleased by the ritual. She would receive the flowers eagerly, sometimes teasingly putting a stem between her teeth. Arnie gave her a smooch in a manner that he always presumed would offend his proper wife, and more often than not, dinner was delayed. At home, there were other rituals. Clara also waited eagerly for Arnie to arrive. The crystal vase waited on the end table, already cleared of last week's wilting stems. She also received her flowers graciously. "How was your day, dear?" she asked as she snipped the flower's ends and arranged them in the vase. The standing rib roast, blood-red, awaiting him was predictable, but he ate heartily just the same. Between Janine and Clara, his every need was met and Arnie was a happy man.

Though the same could not be said of Janine.

Arnie, there for his Wednesday visit had just finished making love to Janine. Frank Sinatra was on the radio and he whistled along. He followed Janine from the bedroom to the kitchen, grabbing the old woolen robe he kept hanging on the back of the door as he passed. He whisked Janine, both of them barefoot, around the room.

She smiled up at him. "Come. Sit. You should eat before you leave." She didn't know that a second meal awaited him at home. She broke their embrace and he sat down at the marbled Formica table in the kitchen. He picked at a plate of cold rotisserie chicken and Cole slaw from the delicatessen downstairs. He drank a beer.

"Did you ever think I might want more?" Janine asked.

“Where is this coming from?” Arnie put down his drumstick, surprised. “Don’t I keep you in style?” He rose from the table, nuzzling up against her. He put his arms around her, trying to offer comfort.

“That won’t solve everything, you know.”

“Don’t I keep you in furs and jewels?”

“That won’t solve everything either. Arnie, I’m getting old. Old enough to settle down. I want a regular life. A house in the suburbs. A family to fill it.”

Janine saw the confusion cross Arnie’s face as he struggled with his reply. “I never promised you more than what we have here.” He took her hand and led her to the small loveseat in the living room hoping to distract her.

Though she allowed herself to be led, she persisted. “A fella can change.” She paused hoping that Arnie would agree. “Can’t he?”

“I thought you liked things the way they were.” He tried to cuddle close to her, as if to prove his point, but she shook her head and pulled away. It was her turn to respond with silence.

“Did I ever have a choice?”

“You knew I was married.”

“You don’t have to be so blunt about it.”

“I never said I would leave her. You always knew that.”

“I know, I know. They’re your real family. I’m just. . .” she hesitated. “I’m just what, Arnie? What am I to you?”

“Janie, baby, do you even have to ask? You’re the love of my life.”

“I guess I thought maybe that would be reason enough to change your mind.”

Janine remembered this conversation, their very last, though similar to so many, and too frequent of late, as she waited for the elevator in the lobby of Arnie and Clara's building.

Finding the front door open, Janine stood, both proud and lost, amidst the rented red velvet folding chairs, for all to see. She was dressed discreetly, in a plain navy sheath, hoping to remain unobserved. But the way her shapely body filled it, and her bright crimson hair, made her stand apart from the more matronly woman who filled the room. She saw the daughter, Nina, whom she recognized from Arnie's photographs, across the room. Janine watched, observing the attention Nina was receiving and the familiar manner in which she removed and replaced the trays of food. She was hesitant to leave the protection of the chairs.

She didn't have to. Nina crossed the room to introduce herself. "I don't believe I know you," she said.

"Why, you must be Nina," Janine replied. "Your father told me so much you." She held out a hand that was manicured and small.

"And you are?" Nina asked again. "I didn't expect to encounter strangers at my own father's funeral. Are you a client of his?"

"I'm a friend of your father's. I came to pay my respects," she said. That was all she meant to say, but Nina pressed.

"Thank you for coming," Nina replied. "How did you know my father?"

"I'm an old friend. I loved your father very much." Janine felt uncharacteristically shy in her declaration. Was it right for her to be here, she wondered again? She had

asked herself this question so many times. Putting on her dress this morning, and finding it too snug, she burst into tears and almost changed her mind. But yes, she finally decided, she had nothing to be ashamed of. She had every right to say good bye.

“Yes. Everyone loved my father very much.” Nina looked around the room at the friends, family, factory workers and business associates who had all come to pay their respects to Arnie.

“I don’t think you understand.” Janine hesitated. Again, Janine considered how to proceed. Did Nina need to know? Did Clara? Arnie had done such a good job of shielding them from his mistress, but that was never the way that Janine wanted it. His secrecy made her angry. If Arnie wanted her, Janine wanted the world to know. Now she had her chance. She looked around the room at the assembled mourners. This was the world she wanted to be part of.

“What exactly should I be understanding?” Nina asked.

Janine decided then and there that she had been the outsider long enough. She was the one Arnie loved best. She was the one who knew him better than anyone else. She deserved to be recognized. “I’m a very good friend,” she said. “Your father and I have been seeing each other for fifteen years.”

“Seeing? What do you mean? He sees lots of people. Saw.”

“We were special.”

Nina reached for the table beside her to steady herself, but made no response.

“Can I get you some water?” Janine asked.

Instead, Nina took Janine by the elbow, somewhat roughly, and hurried her into her parent’s bedroom; an unfortunate choice, but the only room unoccupied by

mourners. Passing through the living room, she caught her sister's eye, and signaled for her to join them. Sensing Nina's urgency, Sylvie excused herself from the elderly aunt she was comforting, rose from her chair and followed her sister and the unknown woman into her parent's bedroom.

Sylvia closed the bedroom door behind her. Nina turned on one of the silk bedside lamps casting the room into a rosy glow. Instinctively, she smoothed the quilted silk bedspread beneath which her parents had slept for almost fifty years. The sisters sat down in the two tufted chairs by the window, where her parents shared their nightly schnapps, but neither offered Janine a seat. She stood before them looking sad and proud, prepared for her inquisition.

"This woman was apparently our father's mistress," Nina said to Sylvia by way of introduction.

"And you come here why?" Sylvia asked.

"Girls," Janine began.

"Don't call us girls," Sylvia said.

"You're practically our age," Nina added.

"Fine. I came to pay my respects just like everyone else who is here today. It was a bad idea. I realize that now. It's just that," she reached for her handkerchief. "He was a very good man, your father. I loved him very much."

"Oh, no. You don't get to cry. You are not his wife. You are not his family," Sylvie said.

"We didn't need to know," Nina said more gently. She shook her head as if that would make the information disappear. "We could have gone our whole lives not

knowing. Why would you want to hurt us like this? What purpose does it serve?" Nina was now in tears herself. Janine handed her the hankie, but Nina pushed the woman's hand away.

"And why today? What do you intend to accomplish? Don't you think you could have announced yourself at some more opportune time?" Sylvia asked.

"This is a family gathering. We don't want you here," Nina said.

Janine backed towards the door. She thought back to her original intention, to arrive and depart unannounced, and wished she had adhered to that plan. But her unexpected discomfort, and now, the girls' blatant cruelty made her more brazen. "I thought I had as much right to be here as the rest of you, but I can see I was wrong."

"I think it's time for you to leave." Sylvie moved toward her, took her by the arm and hurried her through the house and out of the apartment before her mother could see her. Before questions were asked.

But the red-haired woman did not go entirely unnoticed. Sharp eyes observed the rushed manner in which the sisters escorted Janine from the room. There was a rustle of whispered questions as the door closed behind her.

Later that night, declining their mother's invitation to share the double bed in the extra bedroom, Nina and Sylvia sprawled across two queen sized beds at the St. Regis Hotel across town. Wearing nothing but the plush robes they found in the closet, they leaned back into the plump down pillows, sipping at a superior single malt they never bought themselves. By the time each of them finished their second little bottle, they were ready to explore their confusion.



“Do you think he loved her more?” Nina asked.

Sylvie saw the sorrow in her sister’s face and wanted to be kind. “More than mom? What do you want me to say? Mom could be kind of stuffy. Janine looked like fun.”

“So that makes it okay? All these years, I thought we came from a happy family.”

“I didn’t say that.”

Nina sighed. “Was it all a lie? I refuse to believe that.” She pulled back the covers and buried herself deep underneath.

“He loved us all. Just differently.”

“I wish I didn’t have to know any of this,” she said burrowing even deeper. “Why would he do this?”

“Nina, you’re being naïve. You saw her. You know exactly why.”

“Maybe he thought he was being honorable not telling mom.”

“More honorable would have been having no affair at all, but yeah.” Sylvie cracked open another little bottle of scotch. “Maybe he thought he could have them both.”

“I think he was trying to protect mom. I mean what was his choice?”

“Making a choice. He could have left her,” Sylvie said.

Nina poked her head out. She looked surprised. “Mom, you mean? Do you think she would have liked that more? I can’t even imagine her surviving on her own. He had to know finding out would have destroyed her.”

“And finding out now will destroy her. She can never know.”

“I have to think Dad was trying to be a good husband. The best he could be under the circumstances,” Nina said.

“He created the circumstances. Why are you defending him?” Sylvie asked.

“I’m not. I’m trying to see his side. Obviously, he decided no one needed to know and no one would have if, this Janine person had not decided to pay her respects in such a public and selfish way.”

Everything changed for Nina and Sylvia after that. Their father’s pristine image, his boyish charm - people used to compare him to Jack Kennedy, a fact that now proved sadly prescient. The devoted marriage their mother believed she shared that was only entered into fully by one. Now it was their burden to keep his secret. And they were more than willing. Why spread pain unnecessarily? They both agreed their mother didn’t need to know. They wished they didn’t know. And it could have stopped there.

But on a cold, March morning Nina, Sylvia, Clara and Janine were summoned to Arnie’s attorney’s office for the reading of the will. He was a longtime friend of the family and could have avoided the direct confrontation between the wife and mistress if he so chose.

Sylvie arrived early with her mother. She made Clara comfortable at the conference table, and then excused herself to confer with the attorney.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked the lawyer. “Does Janine need to be here? It seems unnecessary.”

He nodded. "Certainly, it would have been better if Arnie had the time to make certain preparations before he died. He was too young to die. And you know your father, he thought he was invincible. I'm sure he thought he had lots of time to figure all of this out."

Nina arrived to join the conversation moments later. "Surely you could have orchestrated a more humane way to make his bequests."

When the lawyer did not respond, Sylvie considered his reluctance. "Maybe he did figure everything out," she said to her sister. "Maybe Dad wanted them to meet."

The lawyer did not respond.

"Why would he do that?" Nina turned to her. "You think Dad wanted them to meet? He wouldn't be that cruel."

"We can't ignore that possibility." Sylvie turned to the lawyer for confirmation. "Coward's way out, but still. He must have felt he owed Janine some acknowledgement."

"But what about mom?"

"He gave her everything. He never left her. Maybe this was his way of letting her know he could have. Maybe he saw it as a kindness. Letting her know he chose her."

Janine stepped through the doorway, silencing the group's conversation. The attorney motioned the women toward the conference room where Clara waited. The stout widow found herself face to face with the sparkly showgirl she had failed to notice during the crowded Shiva in her home just weeks ago. She noticed her now.

"Do I know you?" Clara asked.

Nina observed the two women in Arnie's life. "I hope no harm comes of this," she whispered to her sister.

"I was a friend of your husband's," Janine replied. "I was invited to be here," she added.

"Did you work at the factory? I thought I knew all the girls." Clara often stopped by to pick up Arnie at the end of the day for a dinner or theatre in town. She smelled perfumed and powdery as she crossed the upstairs office to reach her husband's office. As she passed, she smiled at the secretaries and they smiled back at her, flattered to be singled out by her affirming nod. She was treated with the deference and respect appropriate to the boss's wife.

"No, we met in the theatre world." Janine smiled. "Arnie was kind enough to back one of the shows I was in."

"Oh, so you're an actress then?"

"No, just a chorus girl."

Clara was aware of this aspect of Arnie's life. The house seats always available to the most popular shows on short notice were just one of the rewards. She looked at Janine carefully, noticing the false eyelashes and manicured red fingernails, the neckline inappropriately low for a lawyer's office.

The lawyer cleared his throat. "I see that everyone has met," he said. "Good. Shall we begin?" He read the expected bequests. Most everything went directly to Clara. There were separate amounts designated for Nina and Sylvia. Trusts for the grandchildren. "And for Janine Fox," he began.

“I never got your name,” Clara asked turning toward her. “Are you Janine Fox?”

“Why are you here?” Clara said.

“Janine, would you like to explain?” the lawyer asked.

“I am a friend of your former husband’s,” she said.

Clara nodded, rose and left the room.

Clara lived for many years beyond Arnie though there never was another love. Arnie’s picture remained on her bedside table smiling the boyish, dimpled grin, she always believed was just for her. But she refused to be buried beside him, leaving him to disintegrate alone somewhere in a cemetery in Queens.

