

A Second Coming

You couldn't tell where Sunny had just been. It seemed, somehow, superficial and beneath her to get 'dolled up' as her mother might say. In theory, this might have been what she wanted. This was the release, the push forward. It was the acquiescence to normalcy that therapy dictated, not to mention a glum promise to herself from seven thousand miles away, from a place where this man that she would be meeting at this table in any moment had probably not even read about in the newspaper. That is, if the newspaper even reported on it.

She had almost run to the bathroom to wash it away. She probably would have had she not realized that simple water and soap might not remove rouge, concealer, mascara and lipstick. It was stained to her for the evening. And what was the point of that? Even if the date went anywhere he would quickly discover that she rarely wore makeup, even the cruelty-free brands that she just bought the week before.

She might have been too picky but most people weren't picky enough. Most people settled. As she surveyed the room she could see the couples who had capitulated, exchanging the same humdrum public pleasantries that, domestically, could be exchanged for eye-rolling. And then there was the conversation spilling over from the next table. She wondered if the woman across from him was interested, busily sipping her wine and flexing her *Distal Tibias* that she would never need to worry about being ripped from her femur by panga machetes. Sunny took a breath. She needed to be a friend to herself rather than an adversary. This would take time. Wasn't she the one who was supposed to be late? Jesus, it was ten minutes now. He

was probably extending his happy hour and would show up cocksure on scotch, gloating covertly under the guise of normal conversation such as men tend to do.

If Sunny had her way, if the situation were ideal, she would have found someone noble, someone like Eric McCatherty who was *that* guy, that one who made her nerves sing with impulse, made all vulnerability of being in a foreign land in a terrible time seem to wither. He had captured the riots that descended into civil war in El Salvador and the rise of the Kumar Rouge in Cambodia. And that was when he was years younger, only twenty or so idolizing Robert Capa while his peers offered deference to David Lee Roth. Years later, in Palestine, Sierra Leone and Sudan, he rarely spoke but snapped pictures, conversant in seven languages, domestic life abandoned along with concern for himself, he let the other side of the world view his from a lens and for one shining year he had allowed Sunny to take part.

It wouldn't matter what this man about to be seated across from her with, what was this? Flowers? He could never add up to a man martyred at forty-eight in Kirkuk, Iraq simply taking pictures. Sunny hadn't spoken to him in two years but there wasn't any animus about his detachment. Because Eric couldn't commit. Work was his life.

Sunny stood to accept this man's handshake which also involved some sort of deferential half-bow causing her to nearly snicker. He was smiling as if he recognized her which could have been true in this age with the internet following everyone. She wasn't on any of those networking sites, but her work with *Global Assistance* was and they had her picture and profile public which many non-profits did to personalize themselves. He could have seen her, mud crusted up to her elbows, slogging through Shell's mess down in Nigeria where she had

helped to clean oil out of villager's drinking water. That was where that picture was taken, she thought. It wasn't as though it was a particularly flattering picture. That wasn't the point. Sunny knew she was pretty. When she was younger, in her Californian days, she practically lived in the sand, and there were offers, *paying* offers to photograph her. Some of these she obliged, the ones of her surfing at least but none that would be compromising or demeaning in any way. But that was so long ago. Had it been twenty years? Something like that. A different world away. A world she gave little thought to these days.

If she cared, she could have read more about this man, or looked for his information online. But she left that to her friend Rachel who immersed herself in the job. Finding a prospective date for Sunny had become something of a project for Rachel now that she was married and...satisfied, always regaling anyone willing to listen of the semi-newlyweds couple to the shore, mountains or high desert and and she never knew life could be like this and... It was imperative that everyone around her, especially her best friend Sunny, was also happy. And so there was Nathan, Rachel's husband's friend from work. He was Sunny's type. Whatever that was.

Sure, he was handsome, she supposed, in a brazenly Northwest, half-put-together sort of way. His eyes caught her a bit off guard as they seemed quite sincere, calculative yet earnest which she liked. And, she was sure he had a job. Purpose was a stipulation. She wouldn't pry for details from Rachel. The shirt, the button-up sun-stained flannel, mustard given way to lemon, black checks doused to grey must have had her staring because, before Sunny knew it, he was

explaining himself saying that it was an old shirt, a good-luck shirt of sorts that had been with him since he was in college.

“It’s a security blanket,” he coquettishly admitted.

And, Sunny imagined, an easy segue to conversation. She hated the shirt, hated the sentimentality and meekness that it suggested. And then he was telling her that it had been his father’s who had worn the thing overcoming lymphoma only to succumb in a boating accident five years later. Sure, this story might have been calculated for utmost effect but, as he told Sunny, how his mother wanted to throw the shirt away, how he actually dug it out of the trash, she found herself melting slightly, always a sucker for lost causes.

He was in advertising. “But it’s not what you think,” he said to the bottom of some complicated pint of opaque beer. “We do a lot of good too. A lot of non-profit stuff.”

“What did Rachel tell you about me?” Her Moscow Mule must have been strong. Her tone was regrettably pinched into something like a whine, yet she didn’t...wouldn’t let it bother her. She was more comfortable, set at ease by something more than the drink. This smile that had bloomed onto her face, her dwindling skepticism and...were these signals? She scratched the back of her neck. Hadn’t she read somewhere? Yes, she might have been flirting.

He shrugged and smiled, carefully choosing his words. “She said you’re a woman of great conviction amongst many other glowing things.”

“Great conviction?” Sunny said. “A bug up my ass, huh?”

“When you’re doing relief work on the Niger Delta a bug up your ass might not be that uncommon.” He seemed unsure of his joke, holding his breath until she laughed. “But she didn’t tell you anything about me?”

“I have my stipulations. She knows what they are?”

“And what are they?” He motioned the waitress for two more drinks.

“That you’re employed or have a general sense of purpose. There are a lot of Peter Pans out there.” She shrugged coyly. “Amongst other things.”

After two drinks, she could barely say what they ate for dinner. She remembered a cheese plate and olives but that was about all. The night ended following a nightcap at a wine bar and a kiss that she not only allowed but instigated after he had walked her home (they lived only three blocks from one another as it turned out) past the street kids whizzing by on skate boards asking for cigarettes and the harried bums, bedrolls tucked under their arms like swaddled infants. It wasn’t raining. It was barely cold, just brisk as people say. Cool spiced with cedar and she lost herself and she was thinking; that this was too easy.

Rachel’s husband Brett was British but had lived in the states for long enough to infuse American tactlessness with just enough polite charm. “Things are just peachy then eh?” He said before continuing about the decline of the Euro and the state of Greece, seemingly expectant of his wife or Nathan to back him up on the matter until he stopped short and said, “alright then, how ‘bout them Trailblazers” and took a huge drink from his glass.

It was a second date that was to be set in a bar, or pub as Brett called it, and while Sunny didn’t particularly like the idea of slugging down porter and lager, it made the date seem

natural, no hidden motive, as if they all seemed to wind up at the same place for happy hour.

“Why don’t you tell us about some of the places you’ve been Sunny?” Brett followed up on his failed topic by goading Sunny to flesh out a subject.

She felt different than she had on the date the week before. Even though they had spoken on the phone twice and Nathan had emailed her a cartoon from *The New Yorker* he thought she might like, she still found herself uncomfortable and was drinking too quickly.

“You really don’t have to if you don’t want to.” Rachel elbowed her husband.

“The last place where I went was Palestine.” Sunny lied.

“Fuck, light dinner conversation there,” Brett said.

“You asked,” His wife glared at him.

Nathan intervened, “I don’t know what the appropriate way to ask what it was like?” She could feel Nathan attempting to get close, sensing that something might be slightly off.

“It’s terrible,” Sunny said. “Terrible poverty, terrible things happening to people that would never make the news. I had a friend there whose three boys, three teenage boys were all arrested, one by one, all in the dark of night without any charges.”

“Well, what did they do?” Brett was already finished his beer and visibly trying to put off pouring from the pitcher another until she answered.

“Their father was suspected Hamas. That was all really.”

“There must be more to it than that?” Brett said.

Sunny could have blown her cool, could have lashed out. All she said was, “have you been there?”

"I don't have to go there to have an opinion about it do I?"

"And what is your opinion?"

"Whoa," Rachel slapped the table. "A bit too heavy eh? How about another drink?"

"Maybe a less volatile subject," Nathan offered.

Sunny could have spoken more but she withheld. "I've also been to Greece," she said.

"The birthplace of democracy."

It seemed so simple for men to convene over beer or, what were they drinking now?

Some clear German liquor that Sunny refused because it seemed to negate her position somehow. She had been told that she had a hard time letting go and knew this might very well be true. Rachel was telling her this even before she spoke. "Are you okay?"

Of course she was. "I'm fine," Sunny said. She breathed.

"I like Nathan," she said, possibly expectant of some acknowledgement of her work.

"I do too," Sunny said, reluctantly.

Her friend wore that expectant look, that look that clenched her lips like she had just eaten something regrettable and surveyed the room, waiting, waiting for more. But Sunny wouldn't give. Some things were hers and hers alone even though there had been nights when, after a couple Moscow Mules or lemon-drops she might slip. And that was an exercise. Nothing more than that. Nothing that could be considered a purge. And she guessed this was why Rachel liked her. She was different than the self-styled Portland optimist who traded in Kansas City Kaikis and Manhattan Brooks Brothers for faded jeans and a vintage Aerosmith shirt, able to meld into bohemia as well as any other grad school refugee and quip about coffee, salmon,

beer and the newest band who had hit the late show. Was that what she thought about Nathan? No. He didn't seek cool, didn't live for it like other men his age here did. Maybe that was what she saw in him. But Rachel, with her Fuschia striped hair and half-sleeve of interwoven ink... A second coming. That's what this all was. One's thirties redefined.

"Maybe I need to lighten up," Sunny said, seeing the men return.

Later, there was ice cream; Postachio and Sea Salt which Nathan spilt on his shirt. He might have been more upset had he not caught himself and nearly relished in the fact that rubbing at it with a napkin only smeared the stain.

Maybe he was drunk. The way the banter volleyed between Nathan and the cab driver on the way back downtown certainly would suggest this. It was exposition by cop, or by hack in this case with Nathan asking the driver where he was from (no one is from here are they?) and then noting that he had been there once, to Richmond Virginia, to test market websites on students at the University of Richmond. This was done at several colleges throughout the country in order to gain knowledge of a cross section of young people and what their proclivity slants toward using certain websites.

After the ride, when Nathan had paid and asked if he could walk Sunny to her door, she asked him what sort of websites these were and he smiled and shook his head.

"You can tell me." Sunny's eyes moved from his to the stain on his shirt. "How bad could it be?"

They were outside the doors to her building. The chance was out there, hovering, that she might invite him in, given that he say the right thing and, to her, his meekness in the admission of what he did for a living was only endearing, was only contradictory to the blustering bravado of so many others.

“Well,” he said. “That depends on how you look at it.”

But he told her, told her about working for credit card companies, offering low interest rates to college students, offering free trinkets, online gift cards, free sandwiches, pizza. “Hell, they’d probably sponsor a kegger if they could’ve gotten away with it,” he admitted upstairs, a Leadbelly record crackling over the moans of someone seemingly in the throes of death out on the street.

Sunny didn’t have any beer. He could drink wine because that was what she had and wine was good, less cumbersome, full of antioxidants or whatever she might say if he actually complained. He dutifully accepted his glass like he might be chastised.

“It wasn’t what I wanted to do out of the gate. I actually wanted to be a writer if you could believe that.” He took a deep drink as if to prove the statement and leaned into the futon, taking in the sparse furnishings: an ottoman, a throw rug hand-sewn by Monks and bought at a market in Burma, a small television precariously stationed at the edge of a bookshelf that he now walked toward to...examine. “I liked the idea of making things up and paying attention to the way people think. And so, at the suggestion of a beleaguered writing teacher who lived out of a backpack and smelled like mothballs I took a different route.”

“An English professor convinced you to go into advertising?”

“He had these study sessions at his place and it was just some old beat-up couches and a shopping cart full of these tweed suits. I think he had a bit of a drinking problem. But one day he just melted down, almost in tears, and decried the virtues of an education in humanities.”

“Sounds like he had suffered in silence for too long.”

“Yeah, well. I guess I’m not much good at suffering.”

He stopped perusing the books for a moment when he stumbled across a photo album. This might have been the only thing that Sunny had taken with her. The pictures were never extraneous. There weren’t any exhibitionist photos but, instead, people she had met and places whose memories would forever be sullied by the incidents that occurred there. She wanted to remember other aspects, better aspects of these places and so she snapped photos so she might remember the Niger River or the Guinean Forest. And there were people she met, that she knew, many of whom were no longer living.

He was interested, inquisitive, never turning back to himself while she flipped the pages like a stamp collector might their prized album, quietly intent to see into these places in her life, of eleven years out saving the world as her parents might say and now she was at a home, of sorts, and now she needed time for herself and now she needed to try to relax, be happy, live life and now he was turning to her and now she was kissing him.

It was strange to be hungry for what Sunny might have once considered to be tedium, but this was the endgame as she saw it, the rationalization for proper courtship in the first place. There were movies, restaurants, day-trips to the gorge, down 101 to Cannon Beach,

Lincoln City, Newport, out to the hot springs where they were interrupted mid-coitus by a couple their parents age who did not hesitate to step into the water with them as if nothing strange was happening at all. There was jogging on the esplanade, a weekend camping out past Mount Hood and a shared garden plot on the rooftop of Nathan's building. There were many evenings but none so eloquent as any at one chosen at random all those years ago.

Rachel and Brett were joining them as if their tribe had increased by two, a knowing deference to one another's mundane banter balanced with enough pleasantries that it was enough to believe, that this was enough for any adult, any human standing on this planet at this time. There were drinks and dinners and *Trivial Pursuit* and street fairs and Sundays at the farmer's market and second run movie theaters with microbrew pitchers and popcorn and seeing bands Sunny had never heard before and coffee shop lunches and Sunday night television shows in which she found herself hopelessly enthralled.

But they kept their own places of residence. That is, while Nathan had asked if Sunny would like to move into his condo (they could always rent storage space), she would shake her head, the last inch of separation, the last bit of herself needed to remain. And that was alright. It was alright with Nathan, who gratefully accepted his dish of lemon sorbet and took a bite as casually as if he had just asked what flavor it was.

"So," he said, a wisp of yellow sorbet painting his lip, "I've got a thing coming up in Vegas and I was wondering if you'd be into going. Brett's going to convince Rachel to go too.

"I know, I know, Vegas, right? I mean how conventional is that?" He paused here to allow his lame joke to be fully appreciated. "It's an annual thing that we've got to do. We're

supposed to go in order to stay abreast of changes in technology and that sort of thing but it is Vegas...”

“I’ve never been to Las Vegas,” Sunny admitted.

“It’s pretty much what you would expect: just a lot more of it. I figured it might make it a bit more enjoyable if we go partnered up. Safety in numbers you know?”

Surely, there were reasons to put up a fight, to firewall the idea of going to America’s playground. But, since Sunny had been employed, she had only taken three days off work. And it was April and the Portland sky was leaden, a swollen graphite morass that, by now, seemed as immovable as the spongy earth underneath.

“It might be fun,” was what she offered as affirmation.

Oddly, it was the first clear day, the first day one could loosely refer to as ‘summer’ on June nineteenth when they met at PDX and convened over bloody Mary’s.

After another drink on the plane and some Dramamine for motion sickness, Sunny found herself entranced by scenery: those splotches below like squashed gumdrops, the tract-housing quilted out in any direction to the reddened earth. Nathan had been talking to both Sunny and the two seats in front of them which were Rachel and Brett. He had rolled up his sleeves at some point during the flight and his hands and fingers were moving so much that the veins in his arms were raised. A sheen of sweat settled over his skin. Sunny couldn’t keep track of what he was talking about. He could really get on a tear like that when he was excited about something and all she could make from the tumult of words spilling forth was how great this

was going to be. And there were drinks, those miniature bottles, one after the other that Brett seemed to be producing from his sleeve and another from his pocket to refresh their drinks until everything was soft and dreamy and the carnival of slots whirring and buzzing through the airport might have been removed by a screen of some kind, distant as the cable news from Egypt on the monitors where Mubarek was being led away in a cage and Nathan was asking if she was okay even though she was smiling because this was all part of the fun.

She might have fallen asleep but chose to skip through the television channels, from a blackjack tutorial to the seven restaurant options in this hotel alone and finally to the news about a starlet's arrest on another drug charge, sunglasses over her face in and out of the limousine, and Nathan concurrently saying something snide, something appropriate. Sunny was having one more drink now that the drinks from the plane were turning caustic and the window would only open four inches or so; probably because of suicide risks Nathan said. He was changing his shirt, to the shirt he was wearing when they met. "For luck," he said upon her questioning him about it. "Did you need to do your makeup?"

"In Vegas, no one talks about anything but being in Vegas," Brett said some time later over oyster shooters. "Everything is about being here. It's sensory overload." He didn't sound so much like an elated child as he did a beleaguered tour guide having an epiphany.

"He lost a couple hundred on Craps while we were waiting," Rachel said.

“It was good fun though. Really, you have to be prepared to lose, right?” Brett slurped down another oyster and glanced to Nathan for affirmation.

“You have to pretend the real world doesn’t exist while you’re here.” Nathan took a drink of his beer and shifted the conversation toward plans for the evening, which seemed contrived enough for Sunny who hadn’t spoken much. It wasn’t that she was tired or even drunk, really. She was just split apart, several pieces of herself orbiting the nucleus of *her*. Nathan hadn’t noticed. In fact, it seemed he had taken to the new Sunny who was smiling and taking another shot, this time tequila, and was enjoying the tofu yakisoba and kimchi. No complaints. She nearly said this aloud as she wiped a smear of lipstick from her glass.

And then they were out on Fremont Street, and there was a band playing a Pretenders song that Sunny had once liked, a song from years ago, travelling to Africa for the first time, the speakers in her ears an electric current of what could be, what *would* be. And this band sounded pretty good, the singer doing a pretty spot-on Chrissy Hynde even by Brett’s evaluation. So they stopped and sipped some frozen orange drinks from plastic bedposts of some kind. Nathan was a bit drunk, not dancing really but swaying on the verge of dancing and Rachel was singing *Brass in Pocket*, shimmying her waist and mouthing “*I’m special*,” to the three of them and, for a moment, Sunny could not actually remember meeting Rachel. They had both had internships at the same non-profit, which didn’t really amount to anything. They stapled letters and folded leaflets with the best of them and, while it looked good on Rachel’s resume, it only pushed Sunny to do more and so she joined the peace corps and when that was over it was on to more serious, direct-relief organizations and then...

“What a waste,” Brett said, shaking his head. “Anyone with real talent would be out selling records right? Or at least trying to make it on some level.”

“Much better bands around Portland,” Nathan said.

They drifted to a casino, like any other, people transfixed by yipping and yawing machines, cardboard cutouts of a magician, a comedian, a lion tamer. And Nathan was saying something about Old Vegas and how things once were and glaring at some woman who was wearing a visor, khaki shorts and eating caramel popcorn by the handful.

Up an escalator, Brett led them to the center of a mirrored room, his attention invested in a smoky plastic bubble nary the length of one of the Craps tables where plastic horses, anchored to wires or poles, were jerked around a racetrack. Apparently there was strategy, Brett began to explain, pushing quarters into a slot and going on about the odds displayed in red digits boxed in on the side. Here, they all took seats, and fed the machine quarters, Nathan doing so for Sunny and it was Post Time and here came the horses tottering along the field, each jerked motion seeming the verge of mechanical calamity and out came the cigars and along came the waitress who had probably been around for the unveiling of this game, to arthritically take drink orders. Sunny ordered another drink gritty with sugared tiers of colors, and tried to focus on the game, on anything with little success.

One dollar and another and, Sunny began tuning out whatever they were talking about which could have been the conference or politics or the lack of good beers on tap and so she excused herself to use the restroom (or something) to negotiated attentions and found herself, once again on the escalator, this time down and onto the main floor.

It wasn't conscious. Nothing here really seemed to be. But Sunny found herself outside on Fremont Street, drawn toward the music a block or so down, ignoring the men who lowered tall cans of Bud Lite just long enough to slur something to her, an abbreviated come-on of some kind before snickering to friends and moving along.

The band must have been into their encore, the singer really belting out *Back on the Chain Gang* to a crowd more involved in their aluminum bottles of beer and fortified cocktails than the singer who never stopped smiling, who, as Sunny could see now, noticed her, caught her eye, and offered a wink like they shared something amidst these hundreds of people vaguely content, ready to clap or hoot or shout something to set themselves apart from one another. Sunny could tell this woman had been at this a long time, so long she probably traded in the wig and began styling her own hair in a sharp fringe, flat-ironing it for trips down to the Am-Pm for packs of smokes and boxes of macaroni and cheese. The song was ending. People were clapping. Someone shouted *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*. The singer was smiling.

She would play another song.

Sunny moved on, further down the road, away from Brett, Nathan and Rachel as if she were being dragged even though all of these places might have been the same. She didn't really recognize the casino where she landed. It might have been anywhere, and she found herself walking, walking through one bank of tables and another row of machines, ingesting just about all of it in the way a seasoned traveler might ingest the airplane ride, until stopping by a small row of machines, unpopulated probably because it was out of the smoking section, dressed in the colors Westerners might attribute to Africa: yellow, red, green. There weren't digital

screens headlining the machines like some of the newer ones, but of course they were adorned with Sphinxes, Mummies, elephants, mud huts, boulders, smiling people, sporting what could have been shorn terrycloth loincloths, balancing pottery on their heads.

Sunny found herself sitting down. She found herself in front of this machine as if she were presenting herself to it and her hand was in her purse and her fingers were in her wallet and her money inserted into its teeth. The spools spun and, just like that, Sunny had tripled her dollar by pairing some clay stones to a pharaoh and she was spinning again.

The great break in redundancy is the moment that will live through the years. When that pall comes to a screaming end and all of that mechanized selfsame motion is rewarded. It could now be construed as work. That was how Sunny might have envisioned this upcoming moment. She might have heard sirens and the frantic culmination of credits zipping to some climactic verse, like the end of a song, the epiphany, the validated outrage, the coming-to-terms, the vindication! And that was how she saw this moment, this next moment and this next one or maybe this one as the dollars turned into fives and finally two twenties she was going to blow on pizza later as a reward for putting up with this place; for indulgence. But there was only the figure, the figure balancing the mixing bowl or whatever it was on her head, matched with white space and that didn't pay off anything. That meant nothing.

Sunny ordered a drink from another waitress, this woman younger, in her twenties, still carrying a smile like it might be natural and Sunny slipped in the last of her money, that last twenty she brought for spending and pulled the lever. She barely noticed the drink arriving but managed to extract a bill for tip and keep pulling, keep pulling and she thought of Eric, Eric

McCatherty, snapping photos, firing them off until the act was a second-nature type of violence nothing passive about that at all, and all that was caught and rescued and learned because of them and she pulled again and there were the clay stones, two of them lined up alongside a scorpion which paid off a few bucks somehow. And this money meant nothing, meant as little to her as this place, this hotel, this casino, this machine, this life and so she pulled the lever again--another furtive, defiant pull, and again it paid off, two zebras and a pyramid, and again nothing and again, and she might tell herself she would remember this moment, remember the bells and whistles the siren whirring, the ticket, sliding out like a tongue, for how much money? and the man at the counter congratulating her before she saw Nathan, Brett and Rachel out on Fremont Street, and acted as though she had gotten lost and ready to call it a night.

“You got sucked into one of those machines, huh?” Nathan didn’t seem concerned, his words were boozy and then he was talking about how he won some money, at some game Brett convinced him to play since Sunny was not answering her phone. “I was worried but figured you were just wandering around the casino or something,” he said. “Aren’t you having a good time?”

She didn’t feel well. Even Nathan’s touch felt invasive, contaminated and he must have been able to tell she balked slightly. And so he backed off.

“Damn,” he said. “How much did you lose on the machines?”

She could have begun to explain but wasn’t sure what she would have said exactly. Some things didn’t need explaining. “I lost everything I had,” she said and took another sip of her drink.