

The Americana Hotel

“I heard that, you know, hookers hang out in front of the Americana in midtown,” Jay said, his springy red curls bouncing all over the place. It was the last day of the semester, and he whispered the word hookers in case anybody was listening. “We should check it out, but it would be really cool if we got drunk first, whattya think?” He also whispered the word drunk. My problem was that outside of class I didn’t think much at all back then. Books I could handle, real life was another matter. I was just floating free and praying that a late-stage growth spurt would absorb the extra 20 pounds I was carrying around like a guilty conscience. So, I scrunched up my eyes and looked at him as though he was proposing a visit to Mars. “Sure,” I said, “how about Saturday night? I guess we could take the train into the city.”

“I got a better idea, we’ll stay over with my Aunt Shirley and Uncle Hy in Queens, they live a couple of blocks from the Forest Hills subway station and whoosh, we’ll be in Manhattan before you know it.”

I just shrugged.

“Where are you boys headed?” Uncle Hy asked as we dropped our backpacks behind the couch and quickly headed for the door. “The movies, Uncle Hy, we’re going into the city to catch a movie, “Bonnie and Clyde”” Jay replied barely looking up at his father’s brother.

“You can’t go yet, Shirley is making dinner, Kasha varnishkes. Eat first and then go. No one should take the R train on an empty stomach, trust me.”

“Tell Aunt Shirley we’re sorry but we’ll be late for the movie,” Jay said grabbing my arm and pulling me out the door. “Back early, I promise.”

“I made a beautiful pineapple upside down cake, fresh today,” came Aunt Shirley’s flat, nasal twang from the depths of the kitchen. “You’re giving that up for some fakakta movie? You kids! Well, stay away from 42nd Street, I hear it’s terrible. You shouldn’t know from what goes on down there. If anything happened to you boys, what would I tell your mothers? I couldn’t live with myself!”

“They seem nice,” I said to Jay as we got into the elevator; above our heads a tiny crystal chandelier rattled and I could hear the cables groaning as we descended floor by floor. “I guess they mean well,” he replied. “But Hy kind of creeps me out.”

“Why?” I asked as we reached the lobby which was decorated in grand Louis XIV style with velvet couches and a fake tapestry depicting Versailles and a few scrawny peacocks.

“He’s a Mohel,” Jay said.

“A what?”

“A Mohel. He slices the foreskins off babies, it’s some religious shit. His license plate says “snip it””.

“Well, at least he’s got a sense of humor,” I replied, shouting above the traffic noise on Queens Boulevard.

It was hot and stinky in Times Square and the gloomy bar we stumbled on, The Naughty Kitty, was dressed all in black. The walls had been abused over the years—smashed beer bottles probably—and it showed; patched, lumpy, trying to hide under a shiny coat of paint and nicotine.

“So, what’s your pleasure gentlemen,” the lady bartender asked sweeping into our line of vision dressed in a black body suit and tights accompanied by fuzzy little cat ears, a perky curled tail

and a name tag on her left breast that read Marsha. “This place is just like the Playboy Club,” Jay muttered, “only with cats.” Looking back on it now, I’d say it was more like the Playboy Club after filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. But I was too busy trying to appear like I fit in to pay much attention. “Where are your whiskers, honey?” Jay said, his eyes trying to catch hers.”

“So, are you boys gonna order now or just keep saying really dumb things to piss me off? Your choice,” clearly Marsha was not amused.

“I’ll have a Rheingold,” Jay said turning red faced.

“And what about you little man, name your poison.”

“Oh, just a scotch and soda for me, on the rocks.” I heard this ordered exactly the same way on a TV show once, so I thought I was home free. I think it was 77 Sunset Strip.

“Will that be well or top shelf, sweetheart?” She asked twirling her tail just a little.

I sat there with my mouth hanging open and a desperate, trapped look on my face. Did alcohol come from a well?

“Look, how old are you boys anyway?”

“We’re eighteen,” Jay piped in. No kidding. We got ID and everything, but we forgot them at home.”

Marsha just rolled her eyes and went off to get our drinks, her tail swishing from side to side as she walked.

Before long I was eight scotch and sodas in; Marsha poured one on the house after number seven and pretty soon everything was bathed in a blurry, whiskey-colored glow. A lady bartender dressed like a cat bought me a drink! Manhood was just within my grasp, all I had to do was

reach out and wrap my fingers around it. Unfortunately, I wasn't really the grabby kind and anyway I puked soon after that and fell asleep in the bathroom so the whole thing was pretty much moot at that point. The taste—a combination of vomit and cheap whiskey with just a hint of industrial disinfectant—stayed with me for days. Jay had to wake me up by banging on the stall and throwing cups of water over the door. I was just a kid OK, and maybe a baby drunk in training.

My little nap was not all that refreshing and worse the world was still out of focus after I came to. All I remember was stumbling through the streets with my head down. I saw quite a few curbs and sewer gratings along the way, a soggy page from the Daily News with a headline that read 'City Hall Stormed by Landlords' and possibly a dead rat, but not much else. Somehow, we arrived at the Seventh Avenue entrance of the Americana Hotel in one piece; lucky for both of us that Jay was in better shape than me and a pretty good navigator. The glittering hotel, all 51 floors of it, reared up in the foggy drizzle of a charcoal gray night. Cars sped by throwing out a dirty mist.

"What do we do now?" I said to Jay, lifting my head long enough to prevent another wave of nausea from hitting me in the gut.

"We wait. They'll probably just show up pretty soon and then we'll, we'll...see what happens. I don't know."

"Oh honey, you will definitely see what happens, I can promise you that," came a voice from out of nowhere, out of the mist.

"I think I'm gonna be sick again," I said.

"No, no, no sweetheart, that's not going to happen. The cabby won't like it, trust me."

Slowly, bits and pieces of reality revealed themselves--bright glowing lights, wet pavement, blonde hair and dark skin, the smell of gardenias. It was like a painting by de Kooning or maybe Jackson Pollack, not that I knew then who either of them were. Don't puke in the cab, that's what Petal said, and I was doing my best to make her and the cabdriver happy. In the front seat Jay was engaged in what seemed like a similar conversation with a shadowy figure that I could only assume was a woman but that was just a guess.

"Where are we going?" I mumbled to Petal. "Uptown baby, we're gonna have a good time just you wait. But first let's get the business out of the way. That'll be \$20 each, in advance, no kissing, no rough stuff and if you even try and put your tongue in my ear I will cut you and push you out of this cab in a very dark alley."

"OK, sounds good," I replied.

Harlem, as it turned out, was a pretty lively place at 3 in the morning. A trash can fire lit up one end of the block and there was quite a bit of hooting, hollering and jeering when we got out of the cab, apparently me and Jay were the night's entertainment. Petal's flat, in an old brownstone with R&B album covers stapled to the walls for decoration, seemed like the only escape.

We pooled our cash and Jay handed it to Petal before we went inside. "Here you go sweetheart," he said, trying to act braver than he felt.

Petal did a quick count and abruptly stuck her face right into Jay's. "You boys are two dollars short and I don't take any loose change. "You can keep that for the train ride back to your mommy's house," she said, throwing the quarters and dimes at him, "you'll need it, if you want to get out of here in one piece."

"I guess any hope of a romantic evening is pretty much out of the question then?" I asked.

“Honey, the best you can hope for is quick and dirty plus directions to the nearest subway station,” which is exactly what we got.

“Oh my god,” Aunt Shirley moaned as we stumbled in at 6 am with the sun creeping over the Manhattan skyline. Squeezing us both so hard that we could barely breathe, she smelled of lavender talcum powder and Aquanet. “I’ve been frantic like you wouldn’t believe, didn’t sleep a wink. I was just about to have your Uncle Hy call the police. Come into the kitchen you bad boys, let me fix you something to eat. I’ve got lox, nice fresh bagels and I’ll whip up some potato pancakes, it won’t take me any time at all.”
