

The Sixties

Ask me back then about intermediary metabolism, the Circle of Willis, the seven causes of amyloidosis, and I can quote you chapter and verse. But Tonkin? Warhol? Dylan? Pot? The Beats? Aware, almost ashamed, of the narrowness of my pre-med education, most Saturday mornings after Clinical Pathology Conference I hang up my white jacket, shelve my books, and head for the subway. If any place has culture, it's got to be Manhattan. It certainly wasn't, or if it was I missed it, Massillon, Ohio.

Occasionally on these outings I visit The Museum of Modern Art in midtown, and this one Saturday afternoon the fall of second year, I'm sitting on a bench in the museum's Sculpture Garden. It's pleasantly warm and I'm happy to rest up after miles of galleries. For a while I simply admire *Balzac* looming mightily in the distance, but gradually my eyes wander to a young woman sitting on a nearby bench. By shifting my weight and cocking my head, as if studying Rodin's treatment of the great writer, I can study her as well. She's wearing a flowered dress and sandals and has frizzy hair that glows like a brown halo in the reflected sunlight. When occasionally she looks up at a passerby, I can better make out her features – large, dark eyes, even as she squints; an indoor pallor that, along with defined cheekbones, gives her a hungry, oddly appealing look; and a prominent nose, slightly hooked. Aquiline, I think writers call it.

And that's the thing: she's not all that attractive, and yet she attracts me. Maybe it's because I haven't had a girlfriend to speak of since junior year at Kenyon. Maybe it's because

she looks such an authentic part of the New York scene. Maybe it's because she's alone, vulnerable, writing secrets in a spiral notebook, smiling to herself off and on as she does. Whatever the reason, when she finally closes her notebook, stands, and walks back into the museum, I get up and follow her.

She crosses the lobby and disappears through a doorway - STAFF ONLY.

It's mid-afternoon; she works there with art, has been on her break, and is writing the great American novel. Perfect. I sit down on the marble floor and lean back against the wall to consider my options. One is to enter the forbidden world of STAFF ONLY, the sort of thing I don't normally do. One is to go back upstairs and give *Guernica* another look. Another is to move on to the Frick or Guggenheim, or continue on down to the Village to a coffee house where I've seen people protesting things. Heading back uptown to the dorm is not an option. Yet.

I buy a booklet about Klimt in the museum shop, return to my station, and begin leafing through the glossy pages.

Just before five she appears. She walks right past, giving wide berth to my outstretched legs, and smiling ever so slightly, just the way she had earlier in the garden. I get up and follow her out to the sidewalk. She stops and turns.

"He wore that when he wrote," she says.

I look back over my shoulder, but it's me she's talking to.

"His dressing gown. Or maybe you knew that."

"No, I didn't."

"Not that it matters."

"No, no. It matters. That he did. Or I didn't."

She'd noticed me earlier. I go on, "He's so grand. Like his name. Balzac. I wonder if he'd look so grand if his name was, I don't know, mine. Curtis."

"Yes! Yes!" She nods vigorously, laughing. "You're right. BALZAK!" She looks up, squinting at the name exploding above us. "Wow!"

Never before – or in the forty years of patients, colleagues, neighbors, family since – has an offhand comment of mine made such an impression on a person. And this isn't just any person. This is a New York person. A museum person.

"Well," she says, her face back to baseline, "I've got to meet someone."

"Oh. Right. See you. Or not."

She turns and walks away down 53rd Street – biggish hips, slightly pigeon-toed, but a smart, directed walk – and soon I lose the flowered dress in the palette of the midtown crowd.

I head north, replaying our conversation. People frown and veer away when I mouth BALZAK, but I don't care. I said something important. I made an impression. I was funny in New York. I can see her laugh, hear her "Yes! Yes!", her "Wow!" And what's more, I have to see and hear it all again. By the time I think subway, I'm almost to Harlem.

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Second year in medical school, at least back in the Sixties, was all pre-clinical stuff - pathology, physiology, pharmacology. The only patients we saw were the ones rolled into the amphitheaters on gurneys and exhibited for their deformities and gaits, their tremors and murmurs; we had yet to engage a patient one-on-one. In preparation for that great day, I do my best to keep up with my studies, but it's even harder now. Instead of cirrhosis, endocarditis, nephritis, I'm thinking MoMA, flowered dress, "Yes! Yes!" Harvey, my dorm neighbor, and study partner, says I'm dragging him down.

The next Saturday afternoon, book in hand this time, I'm back with Balzac. When she arrives, in blouse and long skirt, I get up and stroll around the courtyard, delaying once to inspect Picasso's *She Goat*. Finally I arrive at her bench.

"Hello again," I say.

She looks up, shading her eyes. "Again?"

"Oh, right. That would be next time. If there is one."

She doesn't invite me to sit down, but after a moment I do.

"Tragic," she says, pointing to *The Rebel*, which I've positioned face up on my lap.

"It is, pretty."

"His dying."

"Oh, that." At the time I didn't know that Camus had died in an auto accident four years before. "Yes. Very tragic."

We sit there regarding Balzac's vast dark planes, voracious eyes.

"You work here?" I ask.

"I do."

"As?"

"Cataloguer."

"You log cattle."

"Yes! Yes!" she says, laughing and nodding her head. Her frizzy hair bounces; my heart leaps. "Somebody's got to."

"Even on Saturdays."

"Never on Sunday. And you?"

I'm in. I tell her about medical school and she asks if we call cadavers him's and her's or it's, and where the mind might be. She even asks me to look at a lump that's been bothering her. I take the ink-stained finger she holds out and gently palpate the swelling. Heberden's node, I tell her. Inflammation of the distal interphalangeal joint. Nothing to worry about. Tylenol if it bothers.

She nods. I don't let go.

She agrees to dinner.

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I'm in love for sure. I tell Harvey. He tells me studies show Second Year is the worst year to fall in love. What about the Tropical Medicine practical just four days off? If he gets 92 or less, he's firing me.

Hannah – that's her name – picks an Italian restaurant in the East Village, near where she lives, for that first dinner; and the next weekend invites me for stir-fry at her apartment. Soon we're spending Sundays together, reading Ginsberg on the Staten Island Ferry, critiquing walkers in Central Park, listening to baroque music up at the Cloisters. We tell each other our birthdays, former pets' names, worst movies, first memories. Early December, two months after meeting, we climb into bed.

It's a memorable night, all right, though not in the way I was expecting. Almost halfway to being a doctor, with all that implies anatomically and physiologically, not to mention authoritatively, I'm still inexperienced as Adam. I do know about condoms, and have been prepared for a couple of weeks already, but my sexual debut there in that street-lit room on that squeaky single bed is as awkward as it is fast. I immediately collapse into a deep sleep from which I waken periodically to a mixture of delicious satisfaction and dawning apprehension.

Pressed up against her from behind, my right arm draped over her torso and hand cupping her left breast, I have become aware of her heartbeat. From Anatomy and Physical Diagnosis, I know that the cardiac Point of Maximum Intensity lies immediately below the left breast, in the fourth intercostal space, mid-clavicular line. It's where the apex of the heart abuts the chest wall, and where the left ventricular systoles can be easily palpated between the ribs. Where one can all but touch another's heart.

Only thing is, the rhythmic tap of this heart against the side of my hand is not entirely regular. Every few beats a pause or skip seems to occur. Is this some post-coital delusion of mine, or have I stumbled on my first cardiac pathology? I try to improve my finger position.

Perhaps put off, Hannah removes my hand from her chest and works herself onto her back. She offers me a joint, which I've never tried before, and which I decline, not wanting to confuse the situation further. We lie there in parallel as I listen to her breathing. It seems regular enough, easy. I try to get a glimpse of her neck veins, which I have recently learned become distended in cases of right heart failure, but the light and the angle are not in my favor.

We make love again. She says it's better for her this time. Not "Yes! Yes!" better, but better enough. I'm happy. She lights up. I sleep.

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All through Christmas vacation back home in Massillon I think about Hannah. I think about wandering the Village with her, about the hours in the automats sharing cheesecake and coffee while I tell her what I'm learning and she tells me what she's writing, about seeing *The Fantasticks* off Broadway and singing "deep in December it's nice to remember" all the way back to the apartment. I tell my folks, yes, I've met a girl and yes, she's pretty. Well, pretty pretty. Smart as all get out. Dropped out of Bennington to become a cataloguer. At this really

famous museum. And she's going to become a writer. Is one I guess. Do I love her? Well, I really like her, that's for sure. Be careful, they say. It is New York.

When I take the bus in from JFK I go directly to Hannah's. It's a quick strip, passionate reunion, and the night is much too short. In the morning before I head uptown, I take her wrist as if to check on her Heberden's node. Same pulse.

In the medical library over the next few days I pore through cardiology textbooks. The arrhythmia sections, though, are way over my head, filled with obscure electrophysiology and cardiograms and allusions to conditions I can't even pronounce. Again Harvey threatens to fire me, and when I finally tell him what's bothering me, he says, "Bail, man. Before it's too late."

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It's cold now in the winter city, stinging winds howling through the cross-town canyons. We have to stay inside – diners, museums, her apartment. She reads me stories she's writing, and tells me how original my comments are. "Yes! Yes!" she exclaims, delighting me with her delight.

But is she unwell? As I watch her curled on her bed, sheaf of typewritten papers in her hand, I can't help wondering. Any minute might she slump unconscious, victim of a lethal progression of the arrhythmia I've detected? Should I say something to her about it? Ask her, casually, if she's ever been told....

Of course, maybe – probably is more like it - it's nothing. Back in my room I take my own pulse, vicariously hers. A periodic slowing, it seems now. Maybe I'm overreacting. Maybe I'm suffering from a version of medical student syndrome, that insidious condition in which one comes to regard the ordinary as ominous. I decide that to mention my concern to Hannah will only create unnecessary anxiety.

I do call Dr. Winslow Parker's office, though. Dr. Parker is one of the cardiologists on Presbyterian's staff, as well as one of our more approachable physical diagnosis instructors. Over the phone I present the case the way I've heard upperclassmen do it at grand rounds: This is a twenty two year old white single MoMA cataloguer, with no known cardiac history, who presents with a pulse.... It's clear within minutes, though, that Dr. Parker would need to actually see Hannah before offering any advice, though he doesn't sound all that concerned. Sinus arrhythmia most likely, he says - pulse variation with the respiratory cycle, more common in females. "Bring her into the office to make sure. Happy to take a look at her for you."

For you? For me? Have I then assumed responsibility for Hannah? Would "bringing her into the office" seal that? Has sleeping with her these past three months so committed me to her that I must spend the rest of my life – her life, at least – tending to a potential cardiac cripple? Would she see it that way?

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Things aren't quite the same between us after this. It feels like I've lost another kind of virginity, and a more significant one at that. After reading up on sinus arrhythmia, I work more questions into our conversations. My mother said once I'd been a "blue baby." Had she been one by any chance? Did she ever have pains in joints other than that Heberden one, "growing pains," rheumatic fever or anything? I sometimes get faint in the heat. Of course it's cold now, but did she ever? Faint? Just wondering. Oh, and your family, they're so interesting, Eastern Europe and all. Any of them, I don't know, die young?

I watch her as we climb the three flights to her apartment, looking for evidence of dyspnea on exertion. At bedtime, in the guise of foreplay I check her ankles for edema. I even watch her during sex, though without, I'm sure, the requisite objectivity.

The worst part of my new attitude, though, is that my suspicion of one imperfection has sensitized me to others. Her nose, for instance. It's not particularly attractive. I've known that from the beginning, preferring to think of it as classical, Mediterranean. Her hips are definitely on the wide side, her hair not really as appealing as the long blonde locks of the girls I'd noticed growing up in the heartland. The joy that I've had being with her, sharing her humor and zest for life and for stories, reveling in her Yes! Yes!, all gradually recedes into clinical appraisal. Have I, I wonder, ever truly loved her? Is it just being loved I've loved? And if I haven't truly loved her, does that let me off the hook? Does it permit me to take Harvey's counsel and bail?

It's not fair to exclude her from my dilemma, of course. Whether I have truly loved her or not, I've certainly given her reason to think I do. She loves me, or at least has said so. But does she? Is it my being a medical student, with such a guaranteed future, rather than just the insightful, appealing person she's made me think I am, that has attracted her? Am I her ticket out of the world of catalogues and one-room walkup apartments?

Harvey cans me. I've gone from bad to worse, as far as he's concerned. Studying alone now, watching my grades drop, I realize that my involvement with Hannah is threatening my medical future, not to mention my parents' expectations. That alone is reason to break things off. I compose a letter in which I explain my difficulty keeping up with my studies while thinking of her, and my decision, in spite of it breaking my heart, to end our relationship. At least for a while. And speaking of hearts, I add, I thought I'd noticed once a little skip of yours. It's probably nothing but you might want to ask your doctor about it.

I take the subway downtown, walk across to the East Side, climb the stairs, and quietly slip the letter under her door.

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Toward the end of my senior year, returning from the clinic one afternoon I find in my mailbox a small, flat package addressed in a familiar hand. “Dear Curtis,” the enclosed letter begins,

Please consider this note an effort, not to get you back, but only to wish you all success as you embark, as you must be about to, on your medical career. I hope you are well. Balzac and I are, and thought you might like to see this issue of *Wesley Review*. It contains “One too many mornings,” which you may remember helping me revise once upon a time.

Fondly, Hannah

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Reasonably computer-savvy now in my retirement, I often pass the time browsing the Internet, looking up information about the Sixties, say, that famous decade I took so for granted even as I lived it. Sometimes I think of googling Hannah Hershon. Would that still be her name? Might she be the author of other stories, novels perhaps? Might I be in one, the I I was then, or that she saw? I have kept the letter and literary magazine she sent me. Every once in a while I take them out and read them, though I’ve never shown them to any one else, including either of my former wives or any of my children. The story is quite a good one, about a couple lost in a city, and her letter tells me, I think, that there was never anything really wrong with her heart. Only with mine.