

FACE OF SUNSET

ON the day we'd reached the hilltop where we could see both sides of the peninsula. The clouds, rolling in from the bay, shaped by the breeze into Spanish galleons, and pointing them out, I said to my wife: "Look the Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria." We were young, but that day, we sat with one ideal in mind, as young ambitious college students in the Eighties, we saw a world less complex, less sublime, a world shaped only by its breeze, and she, of course, looked beautiful, almost too beautiful. Her oval eyes were deep blue, dark, shadowy, and dreamy. The sails lingered. Soon they'd morph into folded table napkins, and the sun, dime-size, hung low as if suspended by the very gold chain of her necklace that hung deliciously to her clavicles. Clouds continued to flatten. The sky darkening to a bruising purple, the heavy and velvety drape of a theater stage. The lake waters, a waxed floor, a dance floor, and the sun, a bright, glowing spotlight, lowered from the sky to a narrow slot beneath the curtain. A miracle slot, I called it, where the bright yellow rays of sunlight spill out, turning evening's dusk into a florid mid-afternoon, if not for a few precious seconds, then for a lifetime. I turned to Sandy, a penchant for her news. She brushed back her plum colored hair. It shimmered, her pale skin aglow, a silvery breeze blew through the branches of the cherry orchards; a single, lazy strand crossed her chin. I gently traced my finger from her chin to the lobe of her ear. Touched her gold stud. Ran my finger around. She smirked. Swatted my hand. We were students, married too soon, but for four good months. I'd studied architecture, and she, a foreign student, studied English Lit. And it'd

seemed, for those four months, I'd held my breath, because I'd never, ever wanted to leave the peninsula, and I let out a gasp of air full of angst.

Wait, wait, I said, and we sat on the hillside, the sky, unleashing its brilliant light of sunset.

She was from Brazil—São Paulo—and we'd met attending college at Michigan State. She had a mysterious face, a mask from the depths of the Amazon, one of those unusual faces, dark and bereft of emotion, but skin, lily white full of purity, cheeks, blush of crimsons, and eyes, gems of azure. An exotic feast, and she drew me in, and yet, with so much, left me wanting. Even at the height of our romance, her lovemaking had seemed benevolent like a queen for her king, graciously holding something back, and she didn't know it, but sometimes I could see through her mask, and inside was a small, innocent girl, and I'd feel her weep as she'd breathe sparrows on my chest.

I hadn't told her, but that evening she'd returned late from clinic, I sat on the porch steps and waited for her, where I'd wept, thinking a thought of despair, a thought where we were apart; the two ends of a long stretch of the Amazon.

Later, watching TV together, a man on Carson showed a potato spud that'd resembled Nixon. Obvious I'd thought, but Sandy, seemingly less convinced, said, in her thick-Latin bravado, it was just a potato.

Just days after, I'd come home early from studio, and Sandy home, waiting, smiling, said she had a surprise to tell me. I prefer not hearing news so suddenly, and I didn't want to rush things, so I'd said, "Don't tell me now, lets go up the peninsula, and at sunset, you can tell me then."

We'd driven from our apartment in East Lansing to Old Mission Peninsula, and on the drive, it rained for the better part of our drive. It was a warm summer's rain and Sandy, in a tank top and blue jeans, was unusually talkative, but she didn't spill the beans, not then, and we'd stopped

at a roadside market before reaching Traverse City to fill our picnic basket. I bought some cherry wine. She wanted some fruit.

I'd seen faces in things: in the clouds, the bark of trees, in the intricate folds of a bath towel tossed on the floor, and one time, I'd seen the face of a flamingo dancer in a stucco wall of the DMV. That day, I'd picked up a shriveled avocado, turned it just so, and said, "Look a butler's." Then I grabbed a lumpy-spotted tomato, tossed it up, caught it flipped upside-down, and said, "The maid's." She laughed and told me to pick up some apples and strawberries.

The light on the hillside was imperial. She laid out a blanket from off our bed, and kicked off our sandals. I poured cherry wine from a jug into a plastic cup, and held the jug with one finger through the eyelet handle, pouring the wine over my shoulder, cascading into the glass. There was a beauty to not knowing the fate; the suspense and awe, and I loved how it'd risen inside me like a well of ire, and then, she said that she'd been accepted to graduate school at the University of Michigan...this fall.

I thought, great, that made two things. Her face then lowered, back lit like a Renoir, and with her hand on her stomach, she said, "And I'm not having this baby." Thought her words were spoken, they'd vanished on the sails, and I'd felt so much anticipation that I'd strained to see the sunset, not in the sky, but in her face.

Night fell as the final curtain to our day, to our marriage.

Twenty-five years later, I'd found her at Michigan. She went by her maiden name, Gonzalez. I sent her an email through the University, which she replied. We met in a coffee shop on Liberty Street, and I told her I was an architect, which I wasn't. I'd never taken the license exams, and I never pursued my dream. But I didn't want to mince words, and it sounded right saying it. She

was still beautiful. Her eyes were a bit tired but lined with black eyeliner, and all I could see was an Egyptian Queen, not a forty-some-year-old, ex-wife of mine. I did tell her that I was married, and that it was good, and that we have a lovely daughter getting ready to attend Michigan State—just as we. Two frothy cappuccinos arrived, and even at my age, I'd felt awkward and childish, sitting next to her, knees touching, conversing, unconsciously stirring coffees. She'd become a professor of English literature and dabbled in some of her own writing. I was impatient, and did not want to hear about her afterlife, but just once to feel her breath on my face, her hair through my fingers, and to smell her natural, floral scent, was enough, and if I could, I'd reach across the table, touch her lips and feel the promise once again. I'd asked her quietly, "Did you ever love me?" but it came out, "Are you married?"

"Yes," she muttered.

"Look," I said, my mouth going dry, as if sand, not words, sieved through my lips.

"I know," she replied. "I know why you came."

She told me to hurry with my coffee and she'd take me to see what I'd come for.

We walked the short distance to her house. She lived near campus in a brick colonial, and inside, we went up the stairs to her bedroom. A foreboding feeling chilled my insides; the bed, ruffled and unmade; pillows indented, lay there night after night. She steered me to her writing desk. It was cluttered like mine, no computer, but amid the stacks of essay papers, notepads and worn paperbacks, were photographs, framed and lined, and she stood with her arms folded, looking at me with, which I took at first, as a sorrowful expression. "Go ahead," she said in a voice that sounded nothing sorrowful. "Look."

I did. I leaned forward, bending at the waist. The photographs. They were all of one girl. A baby, a toddler, an adolescent, a young teen... My eyes drank up each one as if they were the last

drops of water on earth. A stranger, a high school grad, a college grad, a grown, flourishing woman...a daughter. It was a shrine, a gallery, a historical lineage, and with no aberration, I removed my glasses to assault a tear, fearing its sole presence indicated more would follow. If I weren't so headstrong, so weak in passion, I'd bawl instantly. Instead, before I'd replaced my glasses, I gave my longtime ex a merciful look, and she gave me the same look I'd seen from her some twenty years ago, on the peninsula, at sunset, when she'd told me of her surprise, and I, turning away, saying something mean, and that I'd never wanted to see her face again.

“Isn't she's beautiful,” she said.

“Yes,” I replied. “Very.”

“We can't change the past.”

“Yes, yes, we can't do that,” I said, “Nor should we mess with the future,” and returning my glasses, not wanting to stay another minute longer, I thanked her, and left, leaving her and the photographs behind.

The day after my daughter had left for college—my wife asked that the spare bathroom be made into a fancy guest bathroom. I'd joked, saying, without our daughter home, we'll have fewer guests. She looked at me as if I'd meant it to hurt. She was humorless, and I, no longer humor-filled, glanced away. We'd met a year after Sandy had left me. Those years with Sandy, years I'd never counted, not for or against were years I'd known existed but had never shared with my wife. I'd never become an architect. Never knew that I had another daughter. And had never returned to the Old Mission Peninsula, to watch the clouds curl into sails, to witness the beguiling sunsets it produces. And as for my wife, she loves me terribly, and yet, to this day, believes that I once had an affair. Maybe just an affair of the heart, or of the soul, or of the mind,

but she suffers, which does not allow me to tell her the truth, because truth comes with an ugly secret, something selectively cherished, like an heirloom because of its meaning, or a picture because of its pain. Why not an affair? And if I hadn't met Sandy in Ann Arbor over a cup of coffee, would there be any shred of reasoning to my wife's ongoing yet silent assertion?

Now, my daughter is off to school, and to keep my mind off of things, I'd started in on the work, tearing out the old vanity and ceramic splash to install a new sink, a clam-shaped pedestal, and for the floor, and I'd chosen a thin-stone tile called Sunset Rose. This morning, I begin setting the first tiles, and when I rub off the excess grout from the surface with wet sponge, the morning sunlight breaks through the bare windowpane, and rolls over my shoulder. I jump by what I suddenly see. Captured in the rose-colored tile, the stone as if carved by the water, swirls of faint clouds, and yet, not a face I recognize—the eyes not quite right—the smile, too sparing, too thin-lipped, lacking the upward curl and two unmistakable dimples—but the water and sunlight bleed and I'm graced with this one, brief image. Dropping to my elbows, I kick the bucket nearly spilling the water. My face inches from the tile floor, I see what I could never see in my dreams, or had seen on the bay. I see the face of sunset. The eyes sparkle like light on water. The face soft and florid with life, and I choke up, my fingers gently squeezing the sponge as if kissing the lips. The secret's revealed, and I slosh the sponge across the stone tile as if going through the motions—for I don't want my wife to find me weeping—and for her not to see the loss in my face, the grief I'd carried for my own redemption—a thirty-year discourse in waiting for some kind of miracle, and with the morning light rushing in, I wonder what season it was, for if it is a season of joy, then I don't feel it, which seems astonishing, given this vision reduced to a water stain on the bathroom floor, maintained long enough for me to enjoy, if not see the last perilous drop of sunset.