

Barranco Oscuro

The sky was almost completely stripped of color and the October night was cold there on the balcony of the Secora Hotel. What remained in the sky took on a form that almost resembled color, but that would quickly fade to the other side of light and the ravine in front would come into itself as it should be; a deep, dark place. I came to the little mountain village of Firgas to get away from things, to get away from what happened with Julie Ann. We had a terrible fight, and I ended up pushing her against the wall. I was more scared than she was, she just shook her head. She shook it and that was that. Before I walked out, I looked around and saw her standing there facing me through the flames, our little household on fire, Julie Ann seeing me now as a distant thing turning from the heat.

We met two years before in a community college in a suburb of New Haven. We both enrolled in an evening literature course there. I was married at the time, but when I saw Julie Ann that evening something shifted inside me which was compounded by a realization that my life was about to become more complicated. There was a depth on her face that spoke to me; that she had been through some things; that she had felt a lot in her life. Her arms were covered in tattoos, faded blue like old bruises. She was a beautiful thing, bone thin with a pretty face, big lips and light blue eyes with curly blond hair that fell down her pale face. She had the look of a person who had spent a lot of time thinking alone in her bedroom – unapproachable, hostile even. I took a space beside her that evening, an empty place that I was impelled to fill. I thought that she hadn't paid me much notice, but I was wrong about that.

Two weeks later we were in bed together at her place in New Haven. She had a little studio apartment in the city, a small loft on the top floor and a tiny balcony lush with plants. She had

emailed me one day; she said that she took my address from the course list. In her message she was predictably blunt, she told me that she found me interesting and liked my critique of Faulkner and asked if I would like to partner with her for the groupwork which required meeting outside of class hours. Well, it was game over for my marriage then. I couldn't resist her, I knew that. We spent time together preparing notes on our presentation, the representation of idleness in the writing of John Steinbeck. We talked late, first at coffeeshops, then at bars. I was out of the house a lot back then. My wife, Sally, she seemed happy for the space, which she took for herself in the bath, for hours at a time. Her body was always clean and fresh scented when I came home late in the evening.

Lying in bed one afternoon, I opened to Julie Ann. I felt that I needed to do that. Something about her drew it out of me that hot July day. I was a little stoned; whatever Julie Ann had rolled had put heat behind my eyes. As I lay silently, staring towards her low beige ceiling, I was enveloped in the comfortable retreat of my own mind. I stayed like that for a while until I felt compelled to speak, I said. "Julie Ann, I want to tell you about my past, where I have gone and been, some of the things I did before." Her hand began to navigate the bed in pursuit of something. I could tell that my words were echoing in her head as she rooted around. My words were echoing in my head too; I was irritated for putting it so clumsily. "Oh yeah buddy? Tell me about what?", she almost said it with a vigor, as in, 'what things would you tell me that I would be remotely interested in hearing'. She found her box of matches in a crevice of the sheet and got out of the bed and opened the balcony window. She took the tiny ashtray from the tiny table, and she straightened the sheet before getting back on top of it. She was wearing a worn-out black Metallica tee shirt, and she was naked from the waist down, which added emphasis to how naked she was. She hoisted pillows up behind her back and sat up against the wall with her slim legs folded. Her vulva was fully exposed. She struck another match and lit up the small, thick joint. I took my cue and went on: "Well, I want to tell you about my life, a little bit, if that's ok. When I was much younger, I met an Italian girl, Mia,

she was the first person I ever loved. We were together for two years. I made a mess of myself then; I was a wreck; I couldn't handle it. I wanted her to be my lover, my mother, my best friend. Anyway, I ruined it. I pushed her away, you see." Julie Ann took a drag and bit her bottom lip as if she was scraping off sediment with her top teeth. She looked at me intently, her eyes were narrow and deep. I felt like she could see right through me. "After Mia I was with Sophie, she was so good to me. She was so kind, and caring, and she had these big, sweet eyes. Jesus, I can't remember how many times she cried for me out of those eyes. She would cry for me when I told her about my life or my small little disappointments. She was quite something. But she mostly cried because of me. I mistreated that poor girl." I stopped and took a breath, a deep breath which I was aware must have sounded wistful. Julie Ann was fixed on me until a small nightingale landed on top of a large pot on the balcony and we both turned to look at it there. It shuffled a bit and pecked its beak in below the rim. I wondered what it could be trying to achieve. "I was sleeping around a lot back then. I even slept with a friend of hers, well Sophie hated me for that. I found out years later that she tried to kill herself. One of her friends came up to me in a bar and she shouted at me – that I was responsible for Sophie's unhappiness. Anyway, I wrote letters, I wrote to say sorry, but I never heard from her again. Somebody said it to me years ago, the worst thing to do to somebody is ignore them, well they were right about that. The silence near killed me." Julie Ann flicked a flake of ash from her shirt and then fingered it from the sheet into the ash tray. As the ash wobbled and fell, she said, "Well, it sounds like you deserved it." Her bluntness seemed fitting. "I did, yes, I probably did. Well, after Sophie, I moved town. I was alone then for a while in this new place until I met Nina. We were both great together for a time. She left her boyfriend to be with me, and I moved in with her. Then she became pregnant, and she went and had an abortion without telling me. Well, that was the end of that." Julie Ann let out a sharp, quiet breath, like a small whooshing noise, it sounded briefly like a small wind being pushed through a keyhole. "After Nina, I met Day, well her name was Doris, but I

called her Day, or Dot. She was adopted and had all these problems, she couldn't keep it together, the poor girl, she was so jealous. I wasn't the right person for her. One day she threw a crystal glass at my head – she split my damn head open with that thing, I had to get stitches. I even stuck around for a time after that, until I left her. After that, I needed a break. I went far away again. I moved to the coast and scrambled around there for a while. When I was living out there, I met Isadora, but she was going through her own stuff. She had lived a life; I could tell. I was very lonely back then; I sat with that. I guess we both didn't want to open to the other. Sometimes life does that to you. I stayed by myself for a while then, before moving to New Haven. I was lost for a while, out in the dark, and I stayed like that until I met Sally.” Julie Ann was curious. Her eyes were narrowed now from the high quantity of tetrahydrocannabinol in her system, and they were bloodshot, which contrasted with her tight pale-white skin. I was unsure if she was particularly interested in my story, or moreover where it was going. I took a breath and looked towards the little bird again, this time it was staring in from the balcony, its eyes were dark and big. As I continued to speak, I stayed looking at the little bird. I imagined what it saw from its perspective towards me, to it, surely an obscure thing. “See the thing is, Julie Ann, I am married. I have a wife. Her name is Sally. We have been married for about three years now.” Julie Ann's head fell towards her exposed genitalia, and she laughed heavily while her head hung there. She let out a desperate laugh until she used words, “of course you are, pal. Of course you are”, she said. She stubbed out her joint and laughed again while shaking her head as the smoke ran out her mouth and little trails came through her nostrils. She stayed quiet for a long time. She stayed quiet with her head down low, until she laughed again, only this time the laugh was more of an exclamation, a clearing for talking. “Well, I think you've got some figuring out to do. So why don't you go off and do that”, she said. She left the bed and went into her bathroom to draw a bath. She didn't come out again, and I sat there for a time staring out at her

plants. Until I heard her body getting into the water and the little bird flew away, I sat there staring out at her little garden.

Julie Ann never came back to the college. Just like that, she dropped out. I felt bad about that. I knew it wasn't easy for her to be there. I knew she had to fight hard to be there. I would wait for her to walk in the door, but she never did. I left Sally three weeks later and rented a small house in Edgewood. Sally took it badly; I heard from mutual friends that she hated me. I guess I hated myself too. Her Dad, Bill, phoned me and gave me a piece of his mind one evening, but I felt that I was doing the right thing. Maybe that was my problem in the past, avoiding the hard things until they came back harder.

I graduated from the course and tried to process my life on paper. I took a job for the New Haven parks department and was assigned to a small, green plot nestled in the heart of the city. Edgerton Park, "with its sprawling lawns and vibrant flower beds". My job mainly consisted of trimming bushes and maintaining the green spaces. Each day, I arrived early, and I always had my notebook. This little manufactured place became my daily canvas. I took ideas straight from people's faces, their mouths, their eyes, and I tried to put those ideas onto paper every evening.

Two months later, I phoned Julie Ann and asked her to move in with me. She laughed and stayed silent for a while. After ten seconds she spoke, "do you have a garden?", she asked. "I do", I said, "it's small, but it's pretty." We were both talking in low, hushed tones, like lovers after a fight. "There is enough space to grow stuff, and in the evening the sunsets are nice."

Julie Ann moved in with me two weeks later. We enjoyed living together. She seemed different then, she seemed content. In the evenings we would cook dinner and do the crossword. Julie Ann grew little plants out in the garden. Sometimes at weekends we would go driving up to the Taconic Mountains to go hiking up there. A simple life, some people said. Friends started to see me

differently then, I think they could sense it. I was content for a while in that. But eventually that took a turn, that night I pushed her.

It started when she broke down. She said that I wasn't there for her feelings; that I was unresponsive to her needs. Then I broke down too. I shouted at her, something about not letting me feel pain. I needed to cool things down. I was about to drive away, out towards the coast, when Julie Ann ran out of the house. She banged on the window; her face was chalk white. She said to me "hey, you better come back in, you better not leave me now." Her voice came into the car muddled, filtered by the windowpane. I said "Julie Ann, I need some space, I need to cool off. I'll come back in a while. It won't do us any good for me to be in there." She said, "hey you better not drive off, you have to come back, please come back in with me." I sat for a few seconds, my mind was racing, all I could think of was driving away, driving far away from there and never coming back. She banged on the window, real hard thumps like. I stared forward with my hands on the wheel until the tears came. The tears continued falling from my eyes, all along the way from Edgewood out to the ocean.

A few weeks later I was in Southern Europe, I ran away again. For now, I live up in the mountains in a small village where no one can find me. These days I think a lot about the women who have been in my life, those who have come and gone. They enter my mind as little fragments. My whole life is formed by their memory and through the potency of their absence. As the dark sets in over the Barranco Oscuro I remember the ones who cared for me, the ones who held me, those that showed me something in themselves and allowed me to hold it for a while. As the certainty of night falls in over the ravine, I stare into the void. Into the stillness where they used to be.