

American Venus

I

Every good photographer is chasing an ideal. We want to record a flash in time and somehow imbue the image with emotion and physical sensation through our own lens. Most of us will spend our careers falling short of this, but I am lucky enough to be among the few who have found it, even if I did so by accident. It happened many years ago, but the moments remain fresher than any other event in my life. I would like to share my remarkable story with you.

II

In the year following my graduation from college, I mostly waded around aimlessly in anticipation of everything falling into place in my life. I still lived in my college town surrounded by current students, fraternity brothers, and other recent, directionless graduates, tending bar a couple nights a week to pay my expenses. The rest of the time I spent behind the lens of my camera. I sought inspiration in the unremarkable. I half-believed I was doing something truly poetic, all while working hard to suppress the growing realization that every photo I took was juvenile and uninteresting.

It was May of that year that I was invited to spend a weekend at my friend Lena's cabin up north. I suppose we were more acquaintances than friends; I forget our exact connection. Maybe she had dated a friend or a roommate or was someone's sister. Nevertheless, I knew she came from money and assumed this cabin would be worthwhile to see and maybe photograph. I drove up on a Friday afternoon and arrived just as the sun was beginning to set. It was more country home than cabin with its stone exterior draped in lush, crawling vines and wide windows that looked out onto an expanse of fields and hills. Several yards to the right of the house was the edge of a vast wood that at that moment was glittering gold from the setting sun. I pulled out my camera to make the wood my first subject of the weekend.

The party that night unfolded like any other. I chatted with some people I hadn't seen in a year while working quickly through a few beers to put a buzz on. Some drinking games took up in the dining room among some of Lena's friends I didn't know. I watched an eager couple sneak up the stairs. Someone called for shots and we partook. It was when I saw three girls snorting lines of coke that I decided to step out for a cigarette. The back of the house was completely open to the surrounding land. It felt wild and safe at the same time. As I closed the backdoor, my ears tuned in to a muffled laugh. I turned and noticed a small bonfire surrounded by a few people. As I approached, it appeared there were a couple groups, one, the laughers, the other, some mellowed-out smokers. I joined the latter and lit my cigarette. To my right sat a woman whom I could only

describe as serene. I offered her a cigarette but she declined. She sat silently for another moment, then, “so, is it getting a bit rowdy in there?”

“Yeah,” I gave a gentle laugh. “It’s nice to get some fresh air.”

“For sure,” she said softly, still staring into the fire. I took a long drag on my cigarette and blew toward the fire’s smoke. My companion then tilted her neck back and sighed with satisfaction.

“Man, don’t you wish you could just...” and she drew both thumbs and forefingers together in a box in front of her eyes. I followed her gaze. The deep purple sky seemed to burst with stars. In the center of her imaginary photo, rising directly above the wood, was a muted perfect crescent.

“Yeah, I do... I’m not very good at taking photos at night, though.”

“Oh, are you a photographer?” She turned and looked squarely in my eyes.

“Uh, let’s just say I’m interested in photography... I’m pretty amateur.” I suddenly felt sheepish in her gaze. It was then that I noticed how remarkable she was with near-translucent skin, almond eyes of piercing blue, and a mess of loose auburn curls. She wore an affectionate expression but I still could not help feeling foolish.

“Well, if you like to take photos, I know of a place nearby that’s pretty incredible. It’s a short hike to get there, but the view is completely worth it. I could take you there tomorrow, if it’s not too forward,” she suggested with a timid smile, turning her eyes downward.

“That would be great!” I did my best to remain collected.

“We would have to go in the early morning, though. The light is best just after sunrise.”

“That’s fine. Thank you for taking me, that’s very generous of your time.”

“It’s no problem, I probably would have gone there anyway. It’s a special place for me, probably the most beautiful place I’ve seen.”

“Wow. Okay. So, do you live near here then?”

“Yeah, um, I’m a neighbor...” she stammered.

“Your house must be pretty far away, we’re kind of in the middle of nowhere here.”

“Yeah, it is.” She was vague, but I was entranced by her positive, creative energy. I longed to trap her in a photograph.

I knew that if I stayed much longer I would start to embarrass myself. I took leave of her and returned to the house as the party raged on. I found a spare bedroom out of the way and lay down. I wanted to be as rested as I could to meet her again in a few hours.

III

The next morning I woke as the sky began to lighten. I splashed my face with cold water and dressed in a t-shirt, sturdy pants, and hiking sandals. I sat down at the small desk in the room and rolled a hasty joint, leaving crumbs for someone to sweep up later. The rest of the house remained sheltered by the stillness of pre-dawn and I did my best not to disrupt as I crept down the stairs and stepped outside, armed with my camera.

I turned right toward the corner of the house. I rounded it and lifted my gaze to find that she was standing at the edge of the wood that bordered the property. For a second, I did nothing but look at her, taking her in. She wore a pale pink dress that fit her loosely and fluttered in the early morning breeze. More striking, though, was her long, wavy hair, a contrast against her pale face. I jogged across the large yard to where she stood, past the fire pit still decaying from hours earlier.

“Good morning,” she smiled warmly.

“Good morning,” I returned, catching my breath.

“How did you sleep?”

“Well, you?”

“Just fine. Let’s go.” She turned and started into the wood. I waited a few moments before saying anything else. My mind was still morning-hazy.

“So, this place... I’m surprised Lena never mentioned it.”

“I actually don’t think she knows about it. She doesn’t seem to be interested in exploring the area around here very much. I think she just likes to come up here to have parties.”

“Could be,” I chuckled.

We walked mostly in silence for twenty more minutes, each of us making the occasional comment on our surroundings or sharing observations from last night’s party. Suddenly, the wood ended and a stretch of grass revealed itself. What lay beyond shot energy throughout my entire body and for a moment I was paralyzed from wonder. We were standing on the precipice of a vast valley bordered in the distance by tree-lined hills as far as I could see. A hundred feet below us stretched a sea of soft, pink flowers that glowed like embers from the touch of dawn’s light.

“Wow.” It was all I could express. She smiled and watched me revere this place she considered sacred. I finally remembered that I had my camera with me and I took a few shots. Afterward, we sat down near the edge. I pulled out the joint I had rolled earlier and lit it, taking a hit and offering it her way.

“No, thank you, though. You go ahead.” I nodded and took another drag and watched as my exhalation floated into nothing over the valley.

Moments of silence passed as I finished the joint. Then she spoke: “Every time I come here, I end up having Phillip Glass in my head. Don’t you think some views deserve a soundtrack?”

“Sorry, I don’t know Phillip Glass.” I was embarrassed, of course.

“He’s a composer. He has a particular style. His work can be very powerful.” Now, years later, I have become devoted to Glass and his furious, repetitive pounding. His work, for me, stirs an indescribable combination of emotions that are linked to the awe of the valley and the mystery of that day.

IV

As we left the valley, she suggested she show me a nearby pond, where there could be some wildlife to photograph. I accepted; I think I would have followed her anywhere.

We walked back into the wood for about ten minutes until we reached a small clearing. Just beyond, I could see the green-blue of the water through the trees that grew thinner and thinner as they approached the bank. She stopped and looked up. A patch of cloudless sky was visible through the twisting, knotted limbs and healthy leaves. Her eyes remaining fixed on the heavens in an otherworldly stare. As if in meditation, she asked, “do you ever feel an undercurrent of a parallel realm?”

I was perplexed by this. Before I could ask for further explanation, she continued, “like a vibration coming out of the grass and the earth?” She closed her eyes but kept her head facing upward, as if she were letting the sun warm her on the first warm day of the year. At first I thought she might just be high and in the groove of nature. Then I remembered that she had not accepted the joint at the valley. I responded to her warily, “Um, I don’t think so, but that’s a nice thought.”

She continued as if she hadn't heard my answer, "I feel it now." She beamed at the sky ecstatically.

V

Finally, she broke from her trance and we ambled down toward the pond. As we reached the bank, she turned to me and spoke. "Would you like to photograph me?" She asked with such confidence that I wondered if she read my thoughts. I looked into her eyes and exhaled, *yes*. My chest pounded from the inside and I took a deep breath. I was a hunter about to catch my prey, and I wanted to do it perfectly.

I examined her every movement as she removed her sandals and tip-toed into the water. She waded toward a boulder and climbed up, a legged mermaid whose dress was now wet on the bottom. Her blue eyes never strayed from the lens of my camera. Her stare was so vivid, almost unnerving. She sat motionless as I kept shooting; with each click of the camera I captured her again and again.

Suddenly she rose and I lowered the camera from my face. Without the lens to shield my eyes, my body felt overpowered by her fierceness. I held her gaze as she bent to reach the wet hem of her dress. Swiftly and easily, she pulled the dress over her head, revealing her naked body underneath. I inhaled and exhaled in an attempt to calm the power of this erotic moment. I started to speak, but she raised a hand in protest. "Don't stop," she encouraged.

I again brought the camera before my eyes and peered through the lens. She faced me squarely, her hands at her sides, her weight slightly in her left hip. The breeze tousled her hair around the curves of her waist, but left her porcelain face untouched. With one click, it was over. I put my camera at my side and looked back at her, willing her to rejoin me on the bank. She emanated ripples as she glided back.

VI

And then she was there, just a few inches from me. The distance of our separation decreased quickly. The strength of our gaze grew more intense. My left hand rose to meet her right hip. As my fingers drew closer, I felt an electric current radiating out of her. Suddenly, a multitude of flapping wings lifted from the other side of the pond. In unison, they danced against the cloudless sky, weaving and swaying, their borders fluctuating through shape. Firm in my left hand was the curve of her hip as I watched their performance. I turned back to her, but there was nothing. No pink dress, no auburn waves, no blue eyes. She had vanished.

VII

It has taken me years to come to terms with the confusion I experienced in the moments, days, and weeks following her disappearance. I felt uncomfortable and afraid, that perhaps I had come too close to something I shouldn't see. Months later, I finally summoned the courage to develop the photographs I took that day. The shots are beautiful. The trees beam in the sun's departure. The valley vibrates a hum of pink and dark green. The photographs seem to move ever so slightly if I stare at them long enough. Most enchanting is the last shot of the day, the one of the inexplicable creature I met up north. She stands firmly on the rock, a pink and white nucleus surrounded by nature's cool greens and blues. The movement in her photograph is slighter than in the others of the series. The sky is still, the water is still, the trees stand still. Her eyes penetrate, but remain unmoved. Around her body is an outline, only so thick as if I had traced her borders with a pencil. The outline pulses at me, changing colors with every glance. In my years of staring into the photograph, I have only been able to describe this movement as energy.

Once I saw the photographs fully developed, I made a decision to not share them. Part of me felt that this was the right way to honor the mystery and keep the secret of the force I met that weekend. The other part of me wanted to have something of my own, something that could help define me and my work without the input of others. The success of my career in photography has grown from my perpetual search for movement in nature. I have come close on a couple of occasions to capturing again what I saw that day, but never have I seen the same perfect union of earth, aura, humanity, and the uncanny.