

## A Life

The man claimed the doorway as his own. While the sun shone, eager school children and countless nannies passed through the great arch. Once the city hushed and shrank back into its chiseled stone facades, he emerged.

Every night was identical. He dressed in a battered corduroy blazer and set the same precise feast before his feet: a bottle of wine and a Cuban cigar. His shoes, now worn and scuffed, were crafted of fine Italian leather and his cap indicated the height of fashion three decades ago. Coarse whiskers covered his face and he resembled a man of the sea, yet did not seem out of place in the refined city.

She found him to be an elegant excuse for a vagrant.

He was methodical in his habits, routinely carrying his grocer's sack until he reached the step under the arch. He would sweep away any leaves or debris with his hand broom, then gingerly sit on the pavement with his legs sprawled on the steps and his back supported by the imposing mahogany doors. He would then pull out his wine, uncork it with the corkscrew his father gave him long ago, and set it softly to his left. The cigar came last; serving as the final flourish to the beginning of his evening. The scrape of the match on the rough step signaled a period of perceived bliss for the man under the arch.

The woman watched this unfold from her window, four floors above the street. She had built a nook beneath the glass pane, it was her one achievement that consistently brought her any pleasure. Most of her days were spent in this nook. She ate her breakfast there: oatmeal and one mandarin orange, peeled deliberately so the rind fell away in one sad spiral. Sometimes, she would have a cup of coffee at noon, and then half a sandwich at a quarter past. Her afternoons

were spent with a bowl of grapes, or apples, or strawberries, if the season was right. At eight she dined on vegetable soup from the large pot she made each week. If an old friend came for supper, she might roast a chicken with rosemary. She used to cook; now it was too wretched of a practice to waste on herself. She remembered too much when she cooked. She preferred to keep her days simple.

As she sat back to let her soup cool, she turned her attention to the man in the street. He trudged to his sacred step and set up for the night. She'd been watching the same scene for just over two months now. Summer was gaining momentum, and as the temperature rose, she resorted to leaving the window open after dusk. The warm breeze and ambient noise of neighbors and motorbikes was disturbing; the heat even more asphyxiating. Each sensation reminded her of times she could not resurrect, and memory bore down like a relentless drill, exhuming days she would rather lay to rest. It was exhausting and her body was tired.

The woman pondered where the man came from. They were both old, and she wondered if he had a family, or if he was languishing through this life in the same manner she was: alone. Suddenly a sound, richer and stronger than the dwindling traffic, made its way across the street and floated up through her window, careening like a serpent. It was the man. His voice, raspy and deep, sang a broken tune. The song knocked against her ears and she recognized it as "Cry Me A River." She stood with a start, nearly upsetting the warm bowl before her. The woman had listened to Julie London in her youth, and still owned that record. She rushed to pull it from the shelf next to her nook and hurried to her record player. She hoped the man could hear the song, her song. She wanted him to know she was there, across the street, listening. Registering her estranged company, he raised his gaze and nodded once before lighting his cigar and falling silent. Soon after the streetlight above him sputtered and died. The woman cursed herself for

ruining the moment so soon and returned to her soup, and the man exhaled a heavy cloud of sweet smoke, surveying the darkened street in front of him. Two lovers passed, giggling and ignoring him. A red Fiat sputtered by and the usual quadrant of armed police made their rounds. It was now nine o'clock and their jaunty berets bounced obediently in the still summer air.

These nights continued until one balmy Sunday, when the woman's curiosity finally got the better of her. She finished her soup early, slid into her soft suede shoes, and made her way downstairs. Upon reaching the large wooden door separating her courtyard from the street outside, she paused to take a good look at her hands. They were delicate and wrinkled, and she thought them unfit for tasks of importance anymore. She sighed and pushed the door open just enough for her slim frame to slip through the polished panels. The door moaned shut, silencing only after the lock finally clicked into place. She took another deliberate breath and crossed the narrow street.

The man did not notice her feet approaching, nor did he hear her clear her throat. Only after the woman tapped her foot eagerly did he finally look up from his bottle. She wished him a good evening and received a cold grunt in return, but was undeterred. She asked if he could possibly answer a question she had for him. No, he could not, not that evening. The woman understood and promised to return.

He watched her cross the street and disappear behind the heavy door. A few minutes later the light turned on in her flat and he watched as she gently drew the curtains, just enough so the breeze could still pass through. The flat went dark a minute later and he assumed she went to sleep. He had finished half of his bottle of wine, but still had all night to go. He couldn't think of a good reason why she came down to ask him her questions. Perhaps she was simply lonely, he

imagined. But he was not in the mood to talk or think so he dismissed the event and struck his match on his boot to light his cigar.

The next night he came with his usual possessions. The woman finished her dinner and climbed down the stairs to ask him her question. She approached him again and was denied a second time. This did not bother her.

Yet on the third night, the man was receptive, and even spoke first. His eyes bulged and he quickly asked her if she ever felt deserted, like the world was spinning a little too fast. He asked her if there was something greater going on that he was missing by living under the arch. He had more questions than she could have ever asked him, so they sat down to talk. After an hour, the woman stood and excused herself. Before leaving, she took note of the slender glass bottle set to his left. It was still corked.

This man kept the woman's thoughts occupied. As she entered her flat and turned on the light, she stood still for a minute before setting the kettle to boil and fetching a small stepstool. She wrung open the door to the small storage closet and located her old hatbox. Her sister had given it to her as a wedding present many years ago. Now, the eggshell colored netted creation was long gone and photographs filled the empty space. She eased it from its perch and carried it to her desk. She arranged a small notebook, lighter, crystal plate, and tea set on her wooden desk. Despite the summer warmth, she poured a steaming cup of peppermint tea and sat down to survey her objects.

The photographs smelled of damp darkness and forgotten mothballs. Most were bundled by the decades and tied up with soft yarn. Long ago, someone had attempted to arrange them in order. She lifted the top bundle and placed it on her crystal plate, quickly untying the string. She looked at the first photograph, and with determined hands flicked the lighter to life and engulfed

the corner of the photograph deep into the blue heart of the flame. Her young visage curled and sputtered in the heat, and soon her mother's face disappeared into chemical ashes and dropped as silent as snow on the crystal plate. She repeated the carnage until the stack was gone. She decimated her childhood home, her family at Christmas, the trip to the sea, and the day her father brought little cakes to her class. She never knew why he did that. As the final ashes fell, she picked up her pen and wrote.

She did not write a word about her life, for that required a will she did not possess. Instead, she channeled her energy into crafting a story for the man outside. With the destruction of each memory, a strength surged within her, propelling her pen to move forward with an astounding dexterity she had not felt in years.

Outside, the sky darkened and the man sensed something different, but the warm contents in his stomach made it difficult to ascertain the change. After midnight he realized her light was still on, and was the only light remaining for the entire expanse of the street. He had finally uncorked the bottle after she left and had reached the point in his night when each sip became sweeter and smoother, and figures were no longer menacing but inviting. The lamp light emanating from her window above comforted him, and he felt the same pang of belonging as he did in his youth, when he traced Merak and Dubhe in the velvet sky and confidently landed on Polaris. He liked the silence of these nighttime hours, for he felt the vast spectrums of life were held in a delicate balance between his weathered palms. He wished he could always feel this mastery, but he was acutely aware that the world tended to look down upon men wearing battered blazers sitting on a dark step. The presence, or absence, of his Cuban cigar made no difference.

She did not stop writing until the sun glanced over from the east. At six in the morning she finally put her pen down and sat back, canvassing the work in front of her. The woman had conjured the first decade of the man's life as deftly as she had burned the memory of hers away. She drank some water, ate a slice of buttered toast, and slid under her cotton covers to rest. The woman fell asleep under the morning sun caressing her cheek and illuminating her hair, much like the saints she had seen painted in Rome's cathedrals.

The man packed his bag and stumbled away as the street came to life. No one paid him any mind. He turned the corner and disappeared into the train station.

At noon the woman rose, made a sandwich and a cup of coffee, and resumed her task. Now, she burned her adolescence. Each ash that fell freed her from the grip of time. As she wrote, she eagerly anticipated his return at sundown.

He came as expected and she watched him over her warmed soup. She ate hurriedly, like a marionette jerked around some supreme being, one she could not comprehend but only obey. Again, she walked down the stairs of her compound and crossed the narrow street to speak with him before he indulged in his nightly drink.

They spoke of regrets, and shared their own. The woman returned to her studio rejuvenated. She poured another cup of tea and resumed her frenzied work. A new light burned in her eye as her hands became the master of the papers in front of her.

Two and a half days later, she finished. Her body buzzed and the need for sleep entirely vanished. As the sun rose above the city, she started cooking. She prepared a large paper sack with a bottle of lemonade, and by sundown had filled a picnic basket with a salmon and dill quiche, chicken salad, an apple tart, a loaf of seeded bread, and a roasted leg of lamb, complete with mint sauce in a green glass jar. She packed the basket with her finest utensils and china

plates, and gathered the feast with her papers and flew downstairs to the arch where the man would soon appear. She placed them reverently on the steps as if they were her life's greatest work. The woman crossed the street and slipped into her bed. She did not wait up for the man.

The man arrived, and surveyed the package with suspicion. He gingerly took out the food and found the stack of papers. The bundle was thick, about two hundred pages, scrawled in the woman's shaky hand. The first page simply read "To My Friend." The man bit into the quiche as he opened the marked papers.

A rebellious, salty drop gathered in the corner of his eye as he read. The woman from the window had crafted a noble life for him, a hero's life. The ink faded from blue to black and black to blue, and he sat there the whole night, reading and rereading the fragile pages under the pale yellow streetlight. Feet passed him by and he did not pay them any mind. He waited for her light to turn on, but her window stayed dark. He stared at his own boots for a good while, and contemplated the purpose of a life. He thought about the frail, mysterious woman, and her infectious curiosity. He wondered why she chose him, of all people, to give life to. He hoped she would come down to speak with him the next evening.

The man returned the following sunset with two cigars. He sat down expectantly under his arch and stared at the woman's window. Instead of its usual solitary lamp light, however, it was full of somber company milling about. The crowd was plentiful but not joyous. A deep fear gripped the man's stomach. His suspicions were confirmed a moment later as two young men walked through the gate and set a record player on the pavement. Once they returned upstairs, the man stole across the street. Julie London's record was still housed inside, with the needle lifted from the grooved black disk. The man understood. He looked down at the stack of papers in his hand, and back at the window. The meaning of a life dawned on him, and he packed up the

cigars and the picnic basket and tucked the manuscript deep in the pocket of his battered blazer.

He walked back from where he had emerged, the dark shadows of the alleyways swallowing him in the warm summer night.