

Lost Day Due To Lost Night

Saturday night Jesse and his family stayed over. Jesse, one of my oldest friends, his wife Terri, and their two children, Marcus and Cicily, were in town for Jesse's father's 80th birthday at some club in Midtown. It was strictly a family do. I was not invited.

On Sunday, Cicily, who is eleven, announced that she needed, absolutely needed, to go to the Statue of Liberty, because her sixth- grade class was doing a project on "liberty," and it wouldn't make any sense not to visit this most obvious symbol of freedom.

It was spring, and the dogwoods in the park across from my East Village apartment, were in bloom. There was a sense of excess in the air, a sensual excess as the blossoms fell thicker and whiter, then pinker, to the ground each morning. I took my friends into the park to see the curve of the paths and the new buds on the trees, and the occasional homeless person. Marcus, just six, was restless.

"But I don't want Jewish food!" Marcus whined, moving so far away from our group that Jesse had to go after him. "This isn't Rhode Island, son. You can't just wander off." I wondered if I had ever heard Terri call her son, *son*, the way Jesse had.

"I don't remember the city being so filthy," said Terri, although it was a crisp blue day with clouds flying by, and she had been admiring the air. Not in the way you would at the ocean, where you take a breath down into your lungs, but in the way that you marvel at the brilliance of the light on everything.

"I don't want Jewish food!"

"They have all kinds of food, Marcus. They have eggs and pancakes and waffles *and* Jewish food. It's a cool place, you'll love it."

"What *is* Jewish food, anyways? asked Cicily, taking my hand.

"Blintzes, perogies, bagels," I said.

"Pastrami," muttered Terri. "I loves me some pastrami."

“Well, I don’t want that *either*,” said Cicily, showing me the gap in her smile. Jesse looked over at me apologetically. He didn’t need to. I’m around a lot of children. Many of my friends and all my siblings have children, so I know how it is. I know how *usually* they are much better behaved and how *something’s* gotten into them: sugar, need of a nap, the rain. It must be tough to try to explain the complexities of a family’s watchwords when, really, children don’t need to be explained. They just are.

We walked the whole perimeter of the park, looked at overflowing garbage, and my apartment windows up above. As we were approaching the playing-field I felt a little tug of recognition. Sometimes it goes to the heart. Sometimes, the stomach. At that moment it was both, plus. There was a group playing ball: throwing, catching, drilling. At first, I thought they were a men’s ball team, because they looked so tough. I should remind myself in future to pay more attention to the tug. It was quiet, and very private, and that wouldn’t happen looking at a bunch of guys playing toss. Right there, fifty feet away, her short blonde hair gleaming in the sun, was Chickie, the woman I’d been seeing.

I tried to control myself, but I could feel the shake start in my fingers and my lips. Because she sees me naked in the light, I guess. Because she knows she can control that part of my life. I waved to her across the field and she took her glove off and tossed it up into the air in what seemed like slow motion as if to say *whoopdeedo* or something like that. She walked over and I introduced her to my friends. Cicily was instantly interested in Chickie, and Chickie bent down to show her her well-worn orange glove. Her skin had seen too much sun already; in the season and in her life. But I liked that. I liked knowing that if we looked into our individual mirrors, we would see the age and we could not dismiss it in each other.

She had two sleeveless tops on, one tighter than the other, both clean white, and a pair of navy shorts on her brown legs. I could see all the way down the valley between her breasts to her stomach and I felt so good knowing what I knew: the creases around her eyes and her occasional tears, and her stomach, barely hidden at that moment, from the world. The sad thing is I also know there comes a day when you walk away and feel nothing, numb, quietly empty. I pushed

away that sad thought and let myself daydream, right there in front of everyone, of the next time Chickie would make love to me in her tiny rent-controlled apartment.

We took the long way through the park, Chickie waving us on. The tulips were multicolored and thick.

“Look at those gorgeous tulips,” Terri said.

“Jesse,” I asked, “What’s nicer than roses on a piano?”

“What?”

“Tulips on an organ.”

Jesse made me repeat it. Cicily looked up at me and I thought how sweet growing up looks when you’ve passed through it yourself.

Then, right at that moment, Tiger came to me. I should say she passed through me like a piece of something shot by the wind. She would be seventeen now and unavoidably adolescent. She was, however, irretrievably gone.

“That’ll be his favorite joke for like a year, now,” Terri said, filled with that pitiful pride people have for their spouses. That fake exasperation. That, *only I know my man* look, *and he’s such an asshole*.

Jesse had borscht, two cheese blintzes with sour cream *and* applesauce, potato pancakes, compote and three cups of coffee. He became very full. “I can still feel that wine from last night’s party,” he said, frustrated. The children had garden variety pancakes with lots of syrup and I had a croissant with butter and jam because Chickie and I always do on Sunday.

“You might have quit after the fifth glass, Jesse,” Terri said with raised eyebrows.

“Who was that blonde in the park?” Jesse asked, leaning across the table toward me, ignoring his wife. We used to have no secrets, when years ago we lived in Yonkers and worked at the same restaurant. He drove us to work every day and I never thought to offer him money for gas; I was that young.

One morning he chewed me out. I never arrived empty-handed anywhere again, and my apartment is always open to him. He visits when a medical conference is in town, two or three times a year, and now that my ex and I are through, he tends to stay longer. She never approved of him sleeping naked on the couch with her cat.

“Chickie.”

“So?” It’s interesting how old friends retain that intrinsic intuitive extrasensory knowledge.

“She’s an ex of an ex.”

“And presently...?”

“Nothing special.”

“Lie like a rug,” he muttered under his breath, looking over toward his kids. “You two... well, it’s obvious.”

The night before, after the big birthday party in Midtown, while his family lay sleeping in my living room, Jesse and I talked until early morning, sitting under the dining room light sharing forbidden cigarettes. I could smell the rank haze of red wine as it first emanated, then evaporated from his pores and his breath. His lips were red, even his teeth, stained. I remembered the days when Jesse and I would stay up late drinking shots of Aquardiente, followed by Heinekens, and I would always have to drive us home, since somehow, even so much smaller than Jesse, I could drink more.

“Terri and I went to a counselor through our church. The minister asked me, ‘How much sex do you and Terri have?’ I said, ‘Not very much, usually twice a week.’ Later he asked Terri, ‘How much sex do you and Jesse have?’

‘Tons,’ she said, ‘Usually twice a week.’

“That’s funny.”

“You women think sex is about intimacy, but it’s just as much about a physical need.

“Thanks, Jesse, I know.”

“Hey, I’m a doctor.”

“Hey, I know.”

“I’m just saying, enjoy yourself. You don’t have to get *married*.”

“It’s not an option afforded me, Jesse.”

“Oh right.”

Then we went to our beds. I was glad to roll into mine, alone, under my comforter, and dream.

I used to drink. I used to be a drinker. That was before the accident. I was only going 19 miles-an-hour and it was in a terrible snowstorm, and very late, but that doesn’t matter, because I *did* hit the other car, and the little girl — Tiger was her name — died. Her father pulled out into the blindness of the storm. But other than that, I can’t say anything but I’m sorry.

Tiger would be seventeen now. She might be out in the park, playing ball. Sometimes when I’m with Chickie, I think she could be Tiger. Tiger reincarnated. It’s like a chance to love her, to say I’m sorry. Because there is one thing she never knew – me. Me, she never knew me. The one who took her out. Guilt or love? I never knew her, only of her. And that *her* stopped right there, right then. By me.

That’s a long time ago now — eleven years — but I’m shamed each and every day by it. And the price they say you pay... *you pay*.

The night I watched Tiger die was the night I quit. It was as if I quit everything that cold white night. And what I haven’t quit, has quit me, or stands just out of reach. Food lost most of its taste then, and that remains true. The only two things I can enjoy for long stretches of time is air and sex. If it’s sun or water or skin against my skin, I feel emptied and whole all at once.

I feel sorry for anyone who hasn’t experienced the complete annihilation that results from a pivotal point. They still think life has potential. And pan for gold.

I started therapy because the courts strongly recommended it and I stayed for ten years. Doctor Lewis helped me to savor those moments in life that I still could. I think she saved my

life and I feel closer to her than anyone I know. Even though, of course, I don't exactly know *her*, either.

I used to feel that close to Jesse. Until that night. And now Jesse has a family and a big full job. The family unit is this private club in which all the members say, "Aren't we cute, aren't we smart, aren't we something? Isn't my boy brilliant!" Secrets are not revealed. There is no way in. You can only be that spinster aunt and hope that you are interesting enough that the kids notice you.

We took a thrilling cab ride downtown, all of us packed into the back seat. I love when other people drive fast, and I held Cicily tightly on my lap. When we got down to Battery Park the sun was high in the sky. Two men tried to sell us Rolex watches out of a suitcase they closed each time a police officer came near. Jesse and I stood in a long ticket line of people from every nation, nicely dressed in their cultural best, lots of pressed jeans and khakis. Lots of cameras; a calypso band collecting coins for songs.

"You seem better every time I see you," Jesse said to me and wrapped his arm around the small of my back.

"I think I am." I said and meant it.

Between us there was always this thing that bound us, this white night, the sound of metal. But we didn't always speak of it.

"Is there ever a day you don't think about the snowstorm?" "Never. You?"

"The kids help a lot."

"I guess they would."

But it was I who was driving, not Jesse.

Chickie has a long-standing girlfriend, a woman who is nearly six feet tall. They have an arrangement, the rules of which I am not privy to, but I know how to slip through the narrow

slats enough so that what Chickie and I do is permissible. I don't ask. I just do. Doctor Lewis encourages sex that is sage and non-degrading.

Chickie is out of work right now and has been for two months. "I got fired," she told me, "for being a smart aleck." She sits in her apartment window reading alphabetically through authors that interest her — she's up to Truman Capote — watching the park's surfaces, until a game starts up. It doesn't matter which game, although softball is her preference. Times are hard so Chickie can't get her two front teeth fixed, the ones that got hit by a hockey puck. But I don't notice them anymore. Like me, Chickie is a little bit beat up.

My ex, who is also Chickie's ex, said that she heard that Chickie was into junk. I've seen more of Chickie's body in a shorter time than I've ever seen anyone's, because she wants it that way, and there are no needle marks. We've talked about the past. She knows I don't drink, haven't in a lifetime and have no desire to do so. She respects that and gets high — in whatever way she does — on her own time. The most she'll ever say is *lost day due to lost night*, and I know just what that means.

This thing with Chickie has been going on for a while now - through softball season, through soccer, hockey and basketball, and now back to softball. When I watch her play I respect her and when she takes a break along the side for a cigarette I see the smoke through her long thin fingers and feel tenderness like I do for a child who has to unravel everything yet and has no idea what's to come. That's why I like to go to bed with her, because she's so simply young. And I, so much older, in so many ways.

We circled the majestic Liberty and her pea green body. There is still some hope in her copper robes. Tears actually filled my eyes when the officer from the National Parks spoke to a group of us about her history. About the French, the long process of her coming alive; that her arm is 42 feet long.

Cicily insisted that we climb to the top and the officer told us it was about an hour to the crown, which is the halo-like hat she wears from which emanates seven spikes which represent the seven seas and the seven continents.

I know now that *about* is a very important word in the semantics of *Libertas* and her kind employees. We stood in line for two and a half hours, slowly ascending the damp, dark stairwell which got narrower as it went. I had anticipated a brisk walk up the 354 stairs that would leave my thighs trembling in the morning, but the general pattern was - walk up two stairs, stand for ten minutes, walk up one stair, etc. And for someone with a fear of small spaces, this was torturous. Jesse, Terri and I had plenty of time — as our feet began to swell — to catch up on old friends, work and summer plans. When Jesse told me about the death of Valerie, the dog he loved so much, tears ran down his face.

“I’m so embarrassed about this,” he cried, much to Cicily’s annoyance. “She’s been dead now six months and she was only a dog.”

“Yeah, Dad, she’s been dead six months!”

I reassured him as best I could, thinking of my old Georgia, a dog who was not *only a dog*. Terri said, “Jesse, honey, I think you’re preparing for the soon inevitable death of your father.” Jesse didn’t seem to like that. I wondered what Doctor Lewis would have said, and I watched Cicily and Marcus dance and twist and knock into the persons of every race who were crammed there in the stairwell with the five of us. I think I always reminded Jesse of death.

The crown of Liberty is about as big as a two-seater outhouse and for its own special kind of claustrophobia you must wait many hours. There is a slight, greasy view through the small porthole windows out to the water and the boats sailing freely in New York Harbor. Many people try to fit in the small area before blowing out a stream of disappointment, making nasty remarks, and descending the stairs.

“And I paid how much for this!?”

When we reached liberty out in the air again, the sun was even louder and the sky even bluer, as if someone had turned up the miraculous. We walked all around the magnificent lady, Goddess of Liberty, reading the information signs, looking into the vast view and feeling our hair blow. The Statue is so beautiful and gentle that I wanted to touch her and run my hands over her powerful robes.

Jesse asked Cicily what she would tell her class about the Statue of Liberty.

“Not to climb to the top,” she said and gave us all a withering adult look.

“That it’s a big boredom,” said Marcus.

“And what is liberty, anyway?” I asked.

We passed a prolonged bed of tulips.

“Oh, what beautiful tulips,” said Terri.

“Jesse, what’s nicer than roses on a piano?” I asked.

“Tulips on an organ,” I heard a voice say. It was Cicily, who tossed the answer over her shoulder as she gazed toward the shiny grey puzzle of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge in the haze.

“God,” said Terri, and surreptitiously gave me the finger. But Jesse winked at me, just like I knew he would.

We sat on a bench while Jesse bought ice cream sandwiches from a vendor. I was ready to get back on the boat and into my own life again. Somewhere in the park I might find Chickie playing. I would sit on a bench with a newspaper and wait until she saw me, and when she did, and if the coast was clear, she would come over to me, and we would make a plan. There was still plenty of sun left. And, I hoped, a whole night of love.

I took Cicily onto my lap and smelled her sweaty sunny girl skin. She twisted and turned the way children do.

“Why do you only have one arm, again,” she asked me.

“I lost the other one in a car accident a long time ago.”

“Oh. Right. Is that why you don’t play softball?”

“I guess. Plus, I’m not very athletic.”

“You can’t get married, you know,” she said to me very, very seriously. And very slowly.

Against my better judgement of my rights, my own worth, even Dr. Lewis, I felt my heart start to pound and a prickly feeling of both anger and shame.

“And why not?” I managed to ask pleasantly.

“Because you don’t have anywhere to put the ring!”

That was not at all what I had expected her to say. I was washed with her innocent relief.

She stared at the stump of my left arm for a moment, touched it, and then reached up and put her hand on my cheek.

“Do you like me?”

“I like you so much,” I told her

“If you had a girl, just like me, what would you call her?”

“I’d call her Tiger,” I said, without thinking.

“Yeah!” She squealed. Then she jumped up and ran off, loping into the jungle.