

The Summer of Sam and Superman

Hello from the gutters of N.Y.C., which are filled with dog manure, vomit, stale wine, urine and blood. Hello from the sewers of N.Y.C., which swallow up these delicacies when they are washed away by the sweeper trucks. Hello from the cracks in the sidewalks of N.Y.C. and from the ants that dwell in these cracks and feed in the dried blood of the dead that has settled into the cracks. J.B., I'm just dropping you a line to let you know that I appreciate your interest in those recent and horrendous .44 killings. I also want to tell you that I read your column daily and I find it quite informative. Tell me Jim, what will you have for July twenty-ninth? You can forget about me if you like because I don't care for publicity. However, you must not forget Donna Lauria, and you cannot let the people forget her either. She was a very, very sweet girl, but Sam's a thirsty lad and he won't let me stop killing until he gets his fill of blood.

Thunk. Then, the sound of water trickling. I closed the paper and waited for ... What were the chances that the psycho I'd been reading about was somewhere in the back of the store? Another *thunk*. Ice cubes inside the soda machine. I opened to the front page. Under the banner of the *Daily News* was today's date: July 13, 1977. Sixteen days to whatever Jim would be forced to report.

I glanced out the plate-glass window at the darkening street, and caught my reflection—long, chestnut-brown hair, Ivory Soap girl looks, or so I'd been told. The “sweet” look preferred by the monster the media had dubbed “Son of Sam.”

Tell me Jim, what will you have for July twenty-ninth? The question kept reverberating in my head, though it had morphed into: “Will I be the next? Will it be someone I know?”

Something Eve had said earlier in the day now made sense. She'd come by for her chocolate-covered fruit fix, and noting my gaping astonishment at seeing her freshly bleached tresses, she'd given me a hard look and said, “Every wig shop in town is sold out of blonde pelts.”

Eve had a way of leaning on you with her eyes. The dollar bills she'd held were scrunched in her fist. “Tough choice: bottle blonde or bull's eye. I suggest you do likewise,” she'd sneered, slamming the money on the countertop, and stalking out before I could make change.

Eve was a juice girl, along with Mila and Sara. And, I'd made a point of remembering what their favorites were. Mila loved mocha frappes, Sara alternated between chocolate egg creams and coffee milkshakes, and Eve was a glutton for dried fruit dipped in chocolate—particularly the apricots.

The johns had their favorites, too. Most of them seemed to go for Mila, being a natural blonde, which was easily verifiable since all the girls ever wore at work were g-strings; but Sara's auburn curls had their own fan club, and Eve's straight black hair and supple getaway sticks made most men forget that she was topless behind that dingy bar.

Only now Eve was a blonde. Apparently, not Sam's type.

The girls served juice—apple, orange, cranberry, tomato—never booze at the bar next door. That always seemed ironic to me, considering what was going on in that nasty niche of Amsterdam Avenue. The johns, conventioners from out of town, clotted the doorway, waiting for a seat at the bar, where the girls paraded along a raised catwalk,

pouring drinks for the customers. *That must be some special juice*, I initially thought as I watched from my post in the confection shop. If I stood close to the storefront window, I could catch most of the comings and goings.

Occasionally, I'd see one of the girls leave with a customer. They'd walk down Amsterdam to the corner of 57th Street to the big Sheraton Hotel, and I wouldn't see her again until the next morning. I'd be waiting for the sluggish electric metal gate to roll up, protecting the glass front of the candy store, when her "boyfriend" would pull his big Olds up to the curb. And out she'd flounce, usually after tossing an insult his way, looking to me so much more vulnerable in clothes than she did in her g-string.

Not that the boyfriends were always assholes. Sometimes they were nice, and at times they actually acted tenderly toward their juice girl. These were relationships of far more complexity than I could grasp, even though the juice girls weren't that much older than me.

Just turned 21, I was a struggling actress with no marketable skills—such as knowing shorthand or how to wait tables. With my best friend from high school, I shared an apartment of dollhouse proportions in Murray Hill—a walk-up above a gay bar and a filthy Chinese restaurant. The previous tenants had glued slabs of two-inch-thick cork to the floor in the so-called bedroom to dampen the THUMP-THUMP-THUMP of the cavorting leathersmen downstairs. The dark brown cork was the perfect camouflage for the three-inch-long water bugs that roamed the apartment. It wasn't home—just a place to lay my head, albeit uneasily, after a day filled with acting, dance and voice classes, auditions, if I were lucky, and whatever work I could get.

The candy store was minimum wage and the hours weren't exactly flexible, but when it wasn't busy, I could practice line readings and work on character studies. And there were plenty of characters coming into the shop on a regular basis. The store was long and narrow like the juice bar next door. On the left were glass cases; one was filled with roasted nuts of every variety: macadamia, cashews, almonds, hazelnuts, Brazil nuts,

pecans, walnuts, pistachios and peanuts. These were sold separately or in various mixes. In an adjoining case were dried fruits—apricots, pears, apples, mango, coconut and pineapple, and then another section for the dried fruit dipped in chocolate. Next to that case was a freezer filled with ice cream that I hand-scooped into cones—wafer or sugar—and on the other side of the freezer were the condiments: rainbow jimmies, chocolate jimmies, nonpareils, and M&M candies. Here, the glass case made a dog-leg turn toward the mirrored wall on the other side of the store. In this section, right next to the frozen yogurt machine, were the specialty chocolates—truffles in dark, milk or white chocolate, pecan and peanut turtles—the temptations were endless. There were enough calories in that store to sustain several developing nations.

Dimitri, the owner, was a fast Greek, always with the phone in his ear making deals. But he wasn't a bad sort. He didn't care if I ate a pound of pistachios a day, and anyway, he was hardly ever around. I worked the store by myself, day or night. He'd show up sometimes to help me close; he'd cash out the electric register and take the little lift at the back of the store up to the loft where he kept the safe. That area was off-limits.

The juice girls would come over on their break for a little pick-me-up. They ignored me for the most part, not out of meanness, really, but more because they didn't have the energy to make small talk with the girl who served them their milkshakes. I always tried to be nice—remembering what they liked before they ordered it—because they were a strange combination of scary and pitiable. On their arms blossomed brownish-black bruises the size of thumbprints and their makeup never quite hid the purple shadows under their eyes.

At any minute, one of their boyfriends might screech up to the curb outside the shop and there'd be a lot of shouting back and forth. Sometimes, it would end up that I'd be left holding a milkshake that would drip condensation all over the counter until I finally threw it away. The biggest difference between them and me was the juice girls didn't need to go to acting school. They were already pros at it.

The refrigeration unit inside the ice cream display case gave an ominous clunk, emitted a sickly whine, and then returned to its usual droning hum. It had been a very busy day for a Wednesday. It seemed everyone in this part of town who wasn't hiding in their air-conditioned apartment had stopped in for a cone or a shake, and a brief respite from the July heat. All day long I'd been up to my elbows in Rocky Road and Vanilla Fudge Swirl. I'd sold out of frozen yogurt, and what remained of the ice cream selection was almost too soft to pack in a cone, thanks to the case top being open for much of the day.

I really needed to leave Dimitri a note about that noise.

As night descended, business had slowed. Instead of spending evenings in a park or on a stoop chatting with their neighbors, New Yorkers were staying indoors. Despite it being one of the hottest summers on record, the Son of Sam had killed a longstanding ritual, along with a handful of teenaged girls with long dark hair, like mine. Most of the shootings had taken place in Queens and the Bronx, but there was no telling what sewer he might crawl out of. New York City was filled with sociopaths, but this guy had ventured beyond the pale, claiming a demon-possessed dog had commanded him to kill.

In early March, a 19-year-old Columbia University student was on her way home from school when she was approached by a man who shot her in the head with a .44 caliber bullet, which she attempted to deflect with her schoolbooks. But that shooting didn't fit the pattern police had identified as early as the previous July, when 18-year-old Donna Lauria was gunned down outside her parents' Pelham Bay apartment, where she was sitting in a parked car with a friend. That M.O. was repeated with sickening ease in subsequent shootings: the latest, a couple in Bayside, who, after a night of partying at a disco, were sitting in their car at three in the morning and actually having a conversation about the Son of Sam—"the way he comes out of nowhere"—when gunshots blasted through the car, wounding them both. Two weeks later, here we were on the brink of hysteria, enduring a brutal heat wave, and pondering the dreaded answer to Son of Sam's

taunting question in the letter he wrote to columnist Jimmy Breslin, published for all to see in the *Daily News*.

I wasn't the only Sam-obsessed New Yorker. Like everybody in town, I followed the daily accounts of what police had turned up about the freak who called himself "Sam the Terrible." The whole city was hanging on Breslin's every word. But I preferred to read the paper in my Murray Hill hovel behind a double-bolted door.

The other two juice girls hadn't been by all day. I caught glimpses of them toward evening when they showed up for work. The time/temp sign on the building down the block registered 94 degrees—quite a relief since sunset. During the day, it had steadily climbed 102...103... topping out at 104.

I wondered how my parents were doing up in Westchester with no air conditioning. My mother would be covering the glass sliding doors with sheets to block out the sun, and putting out pans of ice water in front of fans all around the house to cool things off. At night, we'd bring chairs out onto the slate porch and watch the heat lightning. We'd listen to the ballgame, and the hiss of static that came with the lightning flashes. One time, during a big thunderstorm, my cousin and I ran inside to hide in my parents' upstairs bedroom. Just as we got to the top of the stairs, lightning struck the grounding rod on the roof right above us, making our hair stand out from our heads like dandelion fluff. Electricity was magic. I relied on it to be there when I flipped on a switch without any real understanding of how it worked.

The problem with not being busy was the temptation to pass the time by eating. Pistachios were my weakness, but if I allowed myself to indulge, my trim dancer's body was in trouble. I'd gone down that road before, so instead of nibbling, I passed the time selecting the fattest un-dyed shells with big splits and placed them in a half-pound box to take home. When I was done, I placed the box on top of my leotards inside my leather dance bag in the storage area where the cleaning supplies were kept. I grabbed the Windex, a roll of paper towels and a rag, and went back up front and started to clean. By

the end of the day, the cases and countertops were smudged, especially lower down by the chocolates, where the glass bore the impressions of many little fingers and noses. Cleaning up wasn't so bad; I liked the way everything sparkled.

Closing out the register was another matter. Dimitri had a system that he wanted followed to a "T"; it entailed counting all bills in order, from the largest denomination to singles, and tallying them as subtotals, which I was to notate on a piece of paper that I'd leave inside the register for him to check later that evening or the next day. The same had to be done with the change. Then I had to put the day's earnings into a cloth bag, leaving a hundred in change and small bills in the drawer, ride the platform lift up to the loft, and deposit the money in the safe that Dimitri kept next to a desk cluttered with shipping invoices. When Dimitri spent any time at the shop, it was up in that rat's nest of an office talking on the phone.

After nine, it was time to lock the front door and get started with the tedious chore of counting. I worked with the register open in front of me, laying the bills face-side showing, twenties on top of twenties, tens on top of tens, fives on top of fives, singles on top of singles, piled neatly in their own bin. I counted each row twice, and then noted the amounts on a piece of paper by the side of the register. The day's haul, minus the bank, came to \$898.65—a small fortune. I placed the wad of cash in the sack and pulled the drawstring tight.

Just as I was about to shut the register drawer, the lights flickered and then went dark. The refrigeration unit jerked to a halt. The buildings across from the shop were also dark, and when I went up close to the window, I could see lights flicker and die in a wave that cascaded down the avenue. Out on the street, someone whooped with glee at the sight of the city going black, block after block. But my heart sank when I returned to the register and tried to shut the drawer. It wouldn't close. I'd never be able to get upstairs to the safe without the lift. My mind started to race: How would I be able to leave the store if I couldn't close the metal gate? What if people went rampaging and broke in and took

everything, the cash, the candy...? Rooted to the spot in front of the cash machine, engulfed in blackness, my throat ached with a sudden dryness. I heard the faint trickle of ice cream melting in the nearby case. Soon it would all be ruined, and I had no way of stopping it.

Then, five disembodied lights, like an undulating ribbon of Tinkerbells, cut a path through the blackness, stopping right outside the shop door.

“Let us in,” a voice called. It was Mila with the other juice girls in tow, along with two of their boyfriends, all carrying candles.

They had come to rescue me.

As if they'd read my mind, they set about securing the store. Mila, lighting the way with her candle, escorted me to the storage room. She walked with one hand cupping the candlelight, which reflected off her blonde hair, making a perfect halo around her head. Eve scooped the rest of the cash out of the register and stuffed it into a paper bag; she came back with it and stood next to Sara, who was holding her light, as well as the deposit sack. The two women exchanged a smile as they watched one of the boyfriends hoist the other on his shoulders so that the one on top could pull himself up into the loft. Sara tossed up both bags of money to the one in the loft and then bossed the other one to hoist me up there, too.

“Watch that he doesn't cop a feel,” she cracked, as the boyfriend made a step with his interlaced fingers. I looked over at Mila; she was passing the palm of her hand over the candle, pausing above the flame for longer than seemed reasonable. She must have felt us staring; when she met our gaze, she seemed embarrassed.

“The Greek trusted you with the code. I don't think he'd want any of us messing with his safe,” Mila said.

Then she called her boyfriend's name, Gabriel, and handed her candle up to him so he could light my way to the safe. Gabriel turned his head aside, and I dialed the combination. Getting down was harder. Heights made me queasy. Holding me under the

arms, Gabriel lowered me down to the other boyfriend, who grabbed me by the waist and got me on my feet. Nobody copped a feel.

With the six of us pulling, we were able to get the metal gate almost to the pavement. Out on the sidewalk, I looked up to see a clear, star-filled sky—an odd sight in the city of lights. The girls ducked back into the candlelit juice bar, leaving me alone with “Gabe” and the other guy. Pretty soon, the other guy disappeared down the street into the blackness. The only lights came from the headlights of cars driving at a crawl along the avenue, slowing to a stop at each intersection to look for cross traffic.

I usually took the Seventh Avenue train down to Times Square, and then the shuttle to Grand Central. From there, it was only a couple quick blocks to home. Tonight, I would have to walk almost thirty blocks back to my apartment. I’d tuck my long hair under the paperboy cap I wore and walk fast, that way no one would guess I was a girl, and I’d be safe. That’s what I told myself.

Suddenly, Mila reappeared at the door and motioned for Gabe. She was herself again, as if the fresh application of body glitter, which covered her breasts and flanks, had renewed her confidence. They huddled in the doorway, her face tilted up to his, a finger resting on his shirt button. She whispered something that made him lower his head and smile. Then she leaned out the door toward me and said, “This big lug is going to walk you home.”

“Oh, no, no, no, that’s OK. I’ll be fine,” I stammered.

“There’s no arguing with Mila,” the lug said, grabbing my leather dance bag off the sidewalk and slinging it over his broad shoulder.

He gave Mila’s naked haunch an affectionate pat, turned and strode down Amsterdam without me. Mila motioned for me to follow him. “Stick close to him. He looks mean, but he’s really a marshmallow.”

Gabe cut over on 51st Street and loped east. I had to practically trot to keep pace. Those first blocks neither of us spoke. I was grateful for that. It was hard enough catching

my breath. Sounds seemed louder, more aggressive—burglar alarms clanged and sirens wailed all over the city. The tops of buildings looked more canyon-like in the natural darkness than they ever did in the unnatural brightness. Lights softly fluttered in storefronts and apartment windows as people lit candles. I kept looking for the moon to float into view. Men armed with flashlights helped direct traffic at the major intersections, and people stood together on the sidewalks, reminiscing about the Great Blackout of 1965.

Gabe finally slowed his pace. “So, where we goin’?”

“Around thirty-eighth and third,” I said, hesitant to let him know my exact address. “But I’m OK from here.”

He shot me a sideways look, as if he expected trouble. He had blue eyes and wavy dark brown hair, a handsome Black Irish face. A thin crescent ran from his left earlobe almost to the corner of his mouth. It made him look mean.

“You’re stuck with me for now,” he said.

I suppressed the urge to run. I’d just have to wait and pray that something would intervene so that he wouldn’t walk me to my door. Even though he seemed to be one of the “nice boyfriends,” I took Gabe for a pimp. What if he wanted me to work for him as one of his “girls”?

At Rockefeller Center a huge crowd had gathered. Christmas in July. People were milling around the Art Deco landscape like souls in purgatory. It felt dreamlike, except for the guy yelling, “Candles, ten bucks!”

Gabe started to push through the crowd. This was my chance to slip away. As I faded back, I could feel Gabe’s energy wane. Then, my arm was wrenched from my side. At the end of it I could see a set of broad shoulders, my leather dance bag bouncing, and Gabe plowing ahead like a demonic pack mule.

He hauled me down Fifth where the crowds thinned, and pulled me across the avenue to the corner 44th Street. There, he released my wrist and caught his breath. Gabe

stood for a moment, red-faced, looking at his leather work boots, hands on hips. I could see he was struggling over what to do next. Perhaps, I had misjudged his intentions after all.

“I’m sor—” I began.

“Don’t,” he interrupted, hand up to deflect my apology. “Look, I don’t like this any more than you do, but I promised Mila...”

He motioned for me to continue walking with him. We started along the empty street. I’d halfway convinced myself that he was going to try to recruit me. And, now I felt lousy for being so suspicious.

Gabe’s apparent displeasure at having to walk me home now made me feel second-rate, like the ugly duckling whom the swan-like juice girls felt obliged to look after because there was no one else to do the job—no boyfriend, no father, no knight in shining white armor. After all, I had chosen this brash existence—quitting college to be an actress in New York, breaking up with my high school sweetheart, rejecting the support system of my family, knowing that if I severed the financial tie that kept me a child, they would have no right to tell me how to live my life. This prideful gamble for my independence came with an unanticipated consequence. Under the veneer, if anyone had bothered to look, I was lonely and scared. And, I was tired of treading water.

Forty-fourth was black as a mineshaft, and I wondered why he’d chosen it over 42nd, which was wider, with more cars traversing it. If I were the leader of this expedition, 42nd would have been the route I’d have taken, for sure. As a single girl in Manhattan, I’d learned, through witnessing the aftermath of girlfriends who’d been mugged, or worse, to follow my instincts.

“Shouldn’t we cut over to 42nd,” I suggested.

“What? You don’t think you’re safe with me,” Gabe said.

“It’s safer where there are more people,” I said.

“Not always,” he said.

He must have felt me hesitate. He slowed his pace, and waited for me to say something else. Then, he stopped abruptly and adjusted the satchel strap on his shoulder. “Quit worrying, you’re almost home,” he said.

There was an awkward silence, and then he asked, almost too kindly, “Do you actually like selling sweets for that Dimitri guy?”

Flushed from heat and the forced march, my arms now prickled with goose bumps. My back was to a building vestibule, cavernous in the darkness. I heard terrible pounding, and realized it was my pulse banging away in my ears. The question was a trap. Of course, I didn’t like working at the candy store—it was boring work and Dimitri was boorish. But it was the only work I’d found so far in a city teeming with unemployed actors.

Gabe’s eyes suddenly grew enormous and menacing. He sprang, arms extended, as if he were a lineman and I was the ball. Instead of tackling, he lunged past me, knocking me to the sidewalk with the leather bag. Then, I heard the hard, hollow sound of someone’s head hitting thick plate glass; an explosion of breath, an animal-like cry, and the ring of steel on pavement. This last sound was the most sickening of all. Next thing I knew, I was being hoisted to my feet.

“Can you run?” Gabe’s breath was hot on my cheek.

“Yes,” I gasped.

We ran to the side entrance of Grand Central and then around to 42nd. When we stopped to catch our breath, I noticed that Gabe was holding me by the arm, and that I was shaking.

“Come here,” he said, pulling me toward the corner. Leaning against the building, he held me to his chest. The tears I’d been stifling for over an hour spilled onto his shirt.

“What happened back there,” I sobbed.

“Some asshole looking to take advantage, or maybe just trying to defend himself. I wasn’t waiting around to find out.”

“Did he have something on him?”

“Yeah, a big knife.”

“Oh, God,” I groaned. “I’m such an ass...”

“What are you on about?” Gabe was smiling but clearly confused.

“I thought you were going to do something bad...*to me*. I thought you wanted to make me a juice girl.”

His smile disappeared. “Is that what you think? That Mila is my whore?”

I avoided his eyes, the look on his face. “I’m sorry, but isn’t she?”

“Mila’s my girl,” he said flatly. “She does what she does. I stick around to make sure she doesn’t get hurt.”

“She’s a lucky girl then, to have you as a protector.”

“And who’s your protector?”

“I don’t really have one, I guess.”

“People with dreams need a protector,” he said.

At the eastern end of 42nd Street came a blaze of light so startlingly bright that it appeared as if a UFO had just landed. “What the fuck is that,” Gabe said, releasing me and stepping out onto the sidewalk to peer down the street. We began walking again, toward the blaze of light.

As we approached Third Avenue, what came into view I thought only happened in the movies. In fact, that’s what it was—a movie being filmed, in the midst of a blackout. At the corner of Second Avenue, a bank of generators rumbled, providing power to a phalanx of klieg lights aimed at The News Building. The landmark skyscraper, home to the *Daily News* and columnist Jimmy Breslin, was awash in a heavenly white light. Only now through the miracle of movie magic, it was the *Daily Planet*, home to Clark Kent, aka, Superman, who, at that very moment, was clinging to the side of the building, several stories above the pavement.

For some time, we watched them shoot the scene, and Gabe and I argued about whether it was actually Christopher Reeves up there or a stunt man. Then, I started to laugh.

“What’s so funny,” he said.

“Cosmic forces have aligned to underscore your point,” I said.

“And what point was that,” he asked.

“That every girl with a dream needs a protector,” I said.

Gabe escorted me up to my apartment, where my roommate was playing guitar by candlelight. We offered him a beer for his trouble, but he wouldn’t accept it. I wanted him to stay a while so I could ask him what Mila’s dream had been, but Gabe seemed anxious to be on his way.

“Good night, Lois,” he joked, kissing me on the cheek.

I had the urge to grab him by the arm and tell him that, as a little kid, during dress-up time, *I* was the one in the blazing red cape, standing on top of boulders, fists on my hips, looking for someone to save. Though I’d never see him again to tell him, Gabe’s little joke came true. Three years later, I’d be back in school studying journalism, and would become my own version of Lois Lane.

Later that night, my roommate and I went onto the roof to see if there were any lights on around the city. With Midtown spread out beneath us, Manhattan had a subterranean feel. The East River was an inky void, and along its eastern shore I could make out the silhouette of the Pepsi Cola sign, its loopy red letters a pencil smudge against the night sky.

The next morning, we heard rumors of pillaging in Brooklyn, East Harlem and the Upper West Side. Someone said Bushwick was burning, and that even Brooks Brothers on Madison had been looted.

But when the lights finally came back on at 10:39 p.m., 25 hours after Dimitri's cash register got stuck open, I felt inexplicably sad. There, in the raw glare of the naked light bulb in my miserable efficiency kitchen, I prayed for a protector.