

DIRTY GIRL DIARY: MISADVENTURES OF A SEXUAL ANARCHIST:
NELLA THE CHEF

“She went her unremembering way,
She went and left in me
The pang of all the partings gone,
And partings yet to be”
— Francis Thompson

This rarely happens anymore, but from time-to-time I see someone that looks
T peripherally like her. When we initially broke up, I’d swear I’d see her walking
down the street or rounding a corner. A familiar carriage or gate, possibly her
profile of body or face. It’s a funny trick your emotions and memory can play on
you – the slightest brush with a familiar characteristic and all of your past
shared experiences come rushing back as if it were the present again. I’d
fantasize that she was showing up to surprise me on a late flight from Florence or
would call me to meet her at Blue Water Grill for oysters or even more far-fetched that
she’d just show up at the door of my apartment one day. She swore oysters were an
aphrodisiac (not that I needed any prompting) and were one of the most sensual and
erotic things to share with a lover and there were times when she’d actually cab it from
JFK airport straight to the restaurant where I was to promptly meet her.

Our relationship began initially without much hubbub – a sum of the
mundanities of everyday life incarnate. But I was wrong, like misjudging a wave while

wave-surfing. Not thinking much of a wave, estimating that it won't end up turning out to be much, and then it ends up growing and increasing until it capsizes and takes you down into the undertow and sends you reeling and almost drowning. Like most things that end up changing the course of your life, it is barely even noticeable or remarkable at the time that it's transpiring. Nella and I met while renting rooms in an Upper East Side brownstone. She was inordinately shy, demure and unassuming and I'm rather the opposite — my name is Francesca, but most people call me Fran, but she used to call me the "obnoxious American" in an affectionately sardonic way.

My father was dying of cancer at the time and I would stay up all hours of the night not unironically 'coping' by smoking out my 'window' that faced a three-way brick wall. It essentially functioned as a chimney and an echo chamber rather than a window. I could hear the phone conversations of other tenants, couples fighting and laughing and fucking on the other floors of the building. What a view, and frankly that's how his impending death made me feel as well — boxed in with bricks coming closer like trick walls. I was slightly numb and there was nowhere to go, like dying itself might possibly be. Incessantly and compulsively repeating game after game of old school solitaire with actual cards on a physical not a digital desktop.

In retrospect, passing the time between my monthly visits to his deathbed in Michigan, playing this childhood standby of non-virtual solitaire, seems an apropos subconscious albeit slightly neurotic coping method. Nella would come home at even odder hours than my 24-7 advertising studio hours. Leaving at ungodly early hours for prep work in the kitchen, at a time only farmers rose while I was still up all night or returning back home from work in the wee hours of the morning when even the city that never sleeps was at least cat napping and eerily quiet except for the cycles of garbage trucks. That's the audible cue that you are up too late in NYC. So perchance, we got together based on my dying family induced insomnia.

My room was situated at the front of the railroad apartment — it was a long hallway with alcoves for rooms. She always fussed with the lock for an inordinate amount of time, jingling and jangling her keys, in an obvious awkward struggle to open the door, no matter how many times she'd done it previously. She always rode a fine line between gangly, awkward misfit and sophisticated, highly educated world traveler — somehow being both opposite and distinct things at the same time — another manifestation of her business. Gaining my attention with her antics and then gently knocking on my door and requesting me to bravely walk her to her bedroom at the back

of the brownstone because she was afraid of the mice scurrying around due to a rodent infestation in this elegant place we called home.

And this was typical NYC – overpaying for an outwardly high brow address in a fire trap multiple code violation interior. And that’s even before factoring in the sexual harassment of the crotchety old German or Austrian landlord that shared our kitchen but with any luck, not our quarters.

He would shamelessly dotter back to our fridge in his underwear, down the apartment building open hallway, to store unidentifiable “body parts” as my other roommate Gretchen – the comedienne / temp secretary – called them. The fridge, a thinly veiled ruse to come to the apartment of four young women in different states of undress. He’d given up on real relationships after unsuccessfully marrying and divorcing five times, almost the same exact story as my 88-year-old neighbor in Florida, Bruce’s doppelganger. He may have thought he was increasing his odds or betting on the desperate student paying off her rent in other ways. He usually chose isolated international students. Gretchen and I were the American exception, which we made up for in good looks and potentially exploitable naivete. He had countless reports filed against him but somehow he still let rooms for a living, a retired professor or academic

and sex offender.

All of us girls were so different from one another, but all, not coincidentally, good looking or for the plainer ones at least having nice figures. Rosa was from Peru — a tiny dark complexioned woman with a straight and sharp bob, a peculiarly beautiful woman unhappily overworked in insurance or a travel agency or some such droll business — a mini Cleopatra without the riches and prestige. She had the cheapest and most precarious hallway “room” with blankets and rugs over a clothesline demarcating her space. And this is the mildly and vaguely dehumanizing deprecation of cheap living in an inordinately expensive city. And she was a relatively educated professional.

Nella the chef hailed from Florence, Italy. Currently living in this rented room, our pretend “home,” like a fellow transient, and like Rosa, our resident pseudo-Cleopatra, Nella clearly looked like misplaced royalty in the midst of this disrepair. I later found out that she actually was royalty of sorts in her own right, by family renown, prestige and money. She was here, on her own volition, earning her stripes on the battlefield of American French and Indian Fusion restaurants to return home to run the very masculine kitchens of one of the most generationally famous culinary families in Florence. She had to prove her stuff beyond her culinary pedigree. In the home —

women can rule the kitchen because it doesn't pay, but as soon as it is lucrative, it's a man's world — exemplified by the Italian restaurant business. Her tentative lesbianism could have been a mild form of controlling the chaos of the gender paradigms of her culture or more likely a form of rebellion against them.

Partially she was in NYC as an excuse to be independent and shirk the robe of inheritance and to avoid, if only temporarily, the familial responsibilities she must at one point take on because of the tenets of her culture. Kind of like the Amish have their year of debauchery — I was her Rumspringa — and then she headed back to her community, perennially the properly reared, dutiful daughter. She was indeed raised well and wore her familial and social responsibilities on her shoulders like the Mandarin Duck backpack she never took off.

After being stuck in a basement kitchen working an early morning shift deboning fish or baking bread during the 9-11 terrorist attack and only having a Spanish radio station to listen to for information and walking home from Chelsea to Washington Heights over 160 blocks. Her father, who rarely visited this country, I think out of a distaste for it, borne out of a belief that anything that life offers is in Florence so why bother leaving it? A belief that after you've visited there, you may come to agree with.

He came over immediately and without delay brought her back home. “Full stop” — one of her favorite phrases, which always reminded me of a telegram. That should have been the end of our love affair, full stop, an end to our tentative foray into playing lesbian house. But the question of when to end a relationship is just like whether or not to start one. Sometimes, in retrospect, certain decisions weren’t the wisest for either party, but I can’t imagine doing anything differently, if given the chance.

Some endings are ill timed — some are too early and some too late — and some beginnings are ill fated. Just like some affairs that never should have begun like the pharmacist or the delivery man. Sometimes I wish life had a do over button like a board game and that you could play a “Do not pass go” card. It’s not so much a statement of regret per se — meaning I wish we hadn’t continued on or I hadn’t had certain relationships — but its an admission of wistful recollections that things could’ve gone differently if certain alternative choices had been made or levels of knowledge, insight or experience had been more equal. Just like Shakespeare’s free will within the bounds of fate. There is a point of no return when the choices get out of hand and it culminates and accelerates to its ending. That moment similar to when you know a relationship is going to begin, just as when you know one is going to end.

Nella had recently graduated from the French Culinary Institute and was exploring the different styles and approaches to back of the house dining. A self-appointed, but family approved, journeymanship of sorts, with their financial backing, to bring her findings back and apply her learning to her family business back home. Sometimes we would go together to get pastries at what she called “the porno bakery” because it was named Hot n’ Crusty or some such name that she thought was bordering on pornographic. Her sensitivities and proclivities always embodied this paradox of nunnishness and finding the absurdity of the obscene in mundane things. She was exceptionally sensually indulgent despite her reservedness — mainly this was expressed through food and erotic thoughts but also in the bedroom. She said that my pussy tasted like mirepoix, an aromatics stock base, a mixture of onions, celery and carrots. An interesting attribute of her, is that her fingertips always smelled like garlic or onions or whatever scent of what she had recently been chopping up, wafting off of her fingertips, and the smell would never wash off. A trait she held in common with my rebound love, the sous chef, Cesar.

I didn’t know all of this then, in fact she was reticent and it took me years, decades really, when we were together and also after we were separated to suss and

sleuth all of this information out. Because I've learned that relationships, when they are the earth shattering, major loves of your life breed, will stick on you limitlessly or at minimum stay with you for years, and potentially hauntingly, your entire lifetime.

Curious by her skittishness I asked, "what instrument do you play? And where at, so late?" She explained, "it not an instrument at all but my roll of German kitchen knives."

I thought that was a pretty bad-assed thing to carry around on your shoulder for a delicate and petite woman with a lithe swimmers body. She'd later take me to Broadway Panhandler to shop for proper culinary utensils and supplies. And gifts for my birthday or special occasions would usually involve extravagant meals and creme brulee dishes and a torch or some such endearing and chef-related stuff.

She had the most delicious accent on her English. She would formulate some words and slide them around in her mouth like she was rolling gelato around with her tongue — the pronunciation so elegant I will never forget some of them. Pure poesy and music, there was something in her speech patterns and pacing that was unusual but so lovable and endearing. Sometimes it's the simplest and most uncomplicated features of a person, that make you fall and stay, madly in love with them. That moment when you look over at them while stirring your coffee while waiting for dessert to be served that

you could absolutely spend every waking and living moment with this person because they are so exceptional to you. When she spoke in English she was quiet and understated but when she would call home and speak to her Babbo, she'd pace around the apartment wildly gesticulating and emphatically speaking. An entirely different personality when she would jump between languages. It was remarkable and fascinating to behold. It irked her when I inelegantly brought this up. Because she wouldn't just switch languages but entire cultures. She had an Italian passport and an American one — very symbolic of her identity. She wasn't just bisexual, she was biracial and bicultural. A very curious person, and that was what was so lovable and endearing about her. Very reminiscent of the Roman god Janus, with a double face, one in both directions. Just like our love, transitions, changes, doorways, endings and time.

She was a perfect storm of qualities and characteristics. No one like her in all of the world. I know people say this all of the time, especially with one of the first great loves in their life. But part of me will always, always, always be in love with her.

Whether I'm thinking of her or not. It's been over a decade, since we were full-blown and full-time lovers but our experiences will stay with me. And whenever we meet up again, from time-to-time, it's like no time has passed between the last time we were

together, like a pause button being released and we are back on. And it's not in a still-holding-a-torch-for-her-way, it's just the reality, admittedly. She usually sends me a crate of prosecco for my birthday, usually late, like she is always running, but she introduced me to prosecco for the first time in TriBeca, at a little place on a mild Saturday afternoon we spent tooling around the city together. It's served at the beginning of the meal, like a palette opener. Ever since it's sort of always been our thing. And now that I know to add St. Germain's Elderflower liquor to it, I can never turn back, it's my drink of choice for life. Pick your poison and stick with it I suppose.

The culinary things she taught me far outlasted the length of our full-time relationship, and I remember one time, maybe after she'd already started her emotional affair with the pastry chef, so maybe this purchase was out of guilt, but she would ordinarily and repeatedly buy me tons of extravagant gifts from the airport gift shops, and I remember once noting and saying boldly, "this sampler of French perfumes will probably far outlast the time of our relationship." And wistfully I remembered this blurted out comment, everytime when I would use this perfume, until it was used up. It would sting but the perfumes were beautiful and the variety of 12 containers suited me, because I could mix it up and wear something new everyday.

I didn't realize from her submissive, slight, and tentative approach that this was the beginning of our steady but unpronounced courtship. Later in the relationship, I'd buy her a t-shirt in the West Village that read: "I'm not gay but my girlfriend is." And a key chain that said: "Nobody knows that I'm a lesbian." My wry sense of humor about our tacit closetedness. Which incidentally, even her and I in private, we never overtly discussed, it would vaguely come up when a guy was pursuing one of us and maybe a little bit too persistently. But I'm convinced that if the t-shirt did make it as far as the airport in her luggage, out of her perpetual politeness, it ended up in a state-side trash bin, after I'd left her at the airport. She thought I was bourgeoisie for any political statements or activism — as something of the past, belonging in the 60's. I always admired her staunch opinions whether agreeable or irrational.

The humor of the t-shirt statement was a play on the fact that we are both bisexual. But a little less on her part. I always joked with her that "you're gayer than all the lesbians in Henrietta Hudson's" — a popular girl bar in the West Village. And also a rib on the ever closetedness of our affection. But I never hemmed her in with those beliefs either, if she chose me or another woman or later men, her sexual identity and orientation was fluid, like most. We went to dinner with her parents when they came

over for a visit while she was still living here and she was visibly alarmed when I'd lean down for something in my purse and my hair would make physical contact with her person in front of them. Yet she introduced me, in a very formal and traditional way, almost as her fiance. Her father was a short but handsome man with salt and pepper hair and santa claus rosy cheeks. He didn't speak a word of English, and interestingly, he would talk to me in full-on Italian, emphatically, while repeatedly pouring me more and more wine to underscore whatever it was he was saying. He was jovial and social if not completely unintelligible to me. It was a ridiculously humorous interaction if I hadn't so dearly wanted to understand what he was saying, and through my association with his daughter, how warmly partial I felt towards him.

Woody Allen once humorously said, "Bisexuality immediately doubles your chances for a date on Saturday night." But he forgot to mention or even allude to the complications it can bring to that evening. I'm no anthropologist but sex is the riches everyone is democratically born with, from dirt floors and no running water, to the park avenue penthouse and the tippy-top of skyscrapers. The freedom of uninhibited sex — the personal is political — unencumbered by religious, political or social mores, couched in a particular place and time, with some personality and temperamental

influence, is a natural born right that only some people take full advantage of. I like to hover in that sexual equivalent of the airport – that liminal space – of no country or nation – I suppose everyone travels with their ethnic and cultural ideologies but my world view is imposing an unwilling freedom on the world. I think it's unfair and unrealistic for a new lover or relationship to expect your heart and body to be a clean slate. This is what I've learned through my journey through my sexual anarchy.

Everyone has a history, some more varied and sundry, and colorful than others. But it's a building up – like layers of fossilized rock, that established a multi-layered experience we all bring to each new experience.

As expected she side-winded up to me. I'd 'courageously' walk her to her room. Her gender-bending approach even from the start. Me, the uber-femme, being her chivalrous knight in shining armor. Every night she'd noncommittally stand in my room doorway, never entering, chatting with her knives on her shoulder. Formally, politely and ceremoniously like we were making conversation over tea and crumpets, as if she was waiting to see someone for an appointment. There was a tentative, waiting it out speed to it. I of course already in a hovering state of mind with my around the clock work and visiting my dying father monthly, so I was 'waiting' for him to die as

well. It was a two-fold waiting that lent a thick looming presence to our light-hearted conversations. Like the air when you primally know it is going to rain or storm without the assistance of technology to tell you something was about to happen. I knew, she knew and yet that powerful presence of the unspoken said it all in the meantime we said nothing. And sometimes words only to break the spell.

After the appropriate courting period, we took our chats outside the apartment on mini semi-dates. Interestingly, even though she didn't drink we would frequent the Trinity pub. Not far from our apartment – a few short blocks and a couple of long avenues away. Whenever restaurants would send us complimentary pairings for each course, because her name was flagged in the system because of her family, she would give hers to me, to graciously accept and share, because of the two of us I was the only drinker. So the pub was my suggestion, because at the time I drank black & tans, half-harp and half-Guinness, only sufficiently satisfying when properly poured by an authentically brogue-enhanced off-the-boat Irish bartender, tasting differently at the back of the pub, sitting in pew-like, U-shaped padded benches, far too close for friends next to her elbow, below this amazing painting. Again, this will happen to me time and time again. The initial attraction and early days of an affair, the cliches of everything

being impossibly beautiful and food tasting better and the world looking fantastic when you're in love or at least lust.

Additionally, the place resonated with my fine arts background in oil painting, and lent an old world, historical charm to our dates. She had something anachronistic and out of time about her aura, just like the bar. From snack selection to clothing details she was a throwback. Not as far as Florence in its heyday or the glory of the Roman Empire or Emperor's of China but much more out of time than you'd expect of someone so youthful. I can still see, like it was this morning, her face break into a smile, like a flower blooming at dawn, the way her nose would get rounder and her lips softer. The Trinity pub had this amazing duo tone painting at the back of men imbibing Guinness pints, in the home country. And though the pub was frequented by hip and hipster Upper East Siders, it gave an air of authenticity to the ambiance, irregardless.

Ages ago, in my teens, when I learned to draw the proportions of the face in anatomy and figure drawing, Eskimo and Native Americans have different distance between nose, chin and forehead as well as eye distance. So when I first met her I presumed she was Eskimo, from her features, her wide but pert nose, her almond shape eyes that when warmed by affection looked like milk chocolate chips melting in a

double boiler. Instead she was part American-Chinese, maternal family from Hawaii, her mother married her father on a college trip to Florence. She was a compendium of the characteristics of the East meets West cultures.

She had pin straight hair, that somehow constantly still managed to look tussled and unkempt. Hence my knee jerk reaction to brush it away, because she was so buttoned up and tightly knotted in every other way imaginable. The rebellious hair, defying gravity in all it's straightness. She embodied these counter qualities – the uniqueness that make all of us so specially individual, I suppose. I'm always flabbergasted by all that goes into making a person who and how they are – socioeconomic and educational background – and how they manifest these things.

Randomly, smoothing her hair one late evening at the Trinity pub, I leaned in and simply, sweetly and unaggressively kissed her because my instincts, true always, knew she wanted to but never would, in a million light years. So even as the femme in the lesbian but hetero-based-paradigm, I'd still had to make the first move, otherwise I'd be added to the endless queue of almost-was and the-one-that-got-away relationships she had chronically had, a repeating cycle and pastime her entire life. Usually someone, a teacher, a friend or otherwise, in love with her from a distance or simply

unconsummated. That is part of her dire catholicism or at least nun-like virginal essence. The first time we ever spent the night together it was more like a slumber party. She invited me to be her guest at a friend's wedding in Ronkonkama, NJ I stayed in her hotel with her, and she ordered me a roll away cot bed, always the picture of propriety, even though it was her intention to seduce me that night. We stayed up all night talking and chatting in bed. Ever evading exactly where we both knew and agreed at this stage this affair was going.

She was the epitome of androgynous and it was so comfortable on her, it hung off of her temperament, like her finely tailored Italian clothing or a cologne scent that so perfectly suits someone you couldn't imagine them freshly showered and without it on. It wasn't even a construct of gender identity or a strata of the gay and lesbian community. It was just her and a compendium of the choices made by her strong will and character. She embodied her own identity that was so unique and particular like an electrical force.

By American standards she seemed a push-over in her over-developed politeness and straight backed propriety. But she was steely underneath her marshmallow exterior. In another era, she'd have been an uptight Englishman in a bowler hat,

studying at Oxford or a rich land owner running an estate in South America somewhere. Again, time out of mind, as the saying goes. She always said American woman, and me particularly, don't realize how seductive they are portraying themselves as, because it is ingrained in the

And when she made love to me, it was both guttural and at the same time elevated. At the beginning it started very slowly. We were exploring one another and this new experience. In this way we couldn't have been more opposite, her with her chastity, I'm not sure of any of her past loves, unrequited and near misses, if she'd slept with anyone at all, and me with my basketball player numbers, I'd lived with a woman for years. But even the first time I ever slept with a woman, when I was 19 and living with the grad students, in a polyamorous relationship, I instinctively knew what to do. I'd never crossed the line touching a woman before,

Even with my history it was all sincerely new and fresh with her, as if I was experiencing this for the first time as well with her. That may have been the budding of love and then it transforms and transfixes an experience with someone. She left me for the pastry chef that worked in her kitchen, close as two carabinieri, was the way the news was broken to me. But we had years and many trips together to explore each

other erotically first. She would never go to the sex shop in Chelsea with me – far too improper for her, but she would stay on the phone with me to help make selections.

There was this very sleazy toy shop in the teens by union square. I would go alone and stay on the phone with her requesting purchases. I don't know why we didn't just order online, like most people, but I think there was a certain urgency when the vegetables failed us.

With heterosexual sex as our paradigm we needed toys. We fell into that routine without discussing as it fell under the category of too base to discuss. I'm a lipstick lesbian (read bisexual) so even with a woman I'm always a girl in the sack. We eased into it with vegetables as she was a chef those were her fantasies. I would later repeat the experience with an impotent man I slept with years later. Again, always their idea. Obviously I'm game to try it and do it so I'm not against it, but I'm a bottom in the sense that I will go along with suggestions, but the ideas don't have to be mine to explore them wholeheartedly. She used to have this role playing fantasy that she was literally a guy, with the toy in her boxer briefs, waiting in bed for me, reading the paper or a book and that I would come into the bedroom and seduce her. I found it erotic because it was such elaborate fantasy on her end and interestingly she liked watching

male-on-male porn not woman-on-woman porn, with her imagining role playing as the man. Again, I found the reach of this and the difference between this and any of the ilk of my fantasies that it turned me on because I found it so far out.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not that vanilla, unless it suits the mood. And I've probably had kinkier sex than most of the population of non-sex workers. I understand and sympathize with voyeurism, in concept, I'd rather watch couples in person than on tv, though that usually is more complicated to arrange initially or process afterwards, than pressing play.

4,922 words