

The Purple Canyon

I

I was 31 years old, and I worked in a stressful editorial office at a very modest salary. My closest coworker was promoted and replaced with a woman to whom I was introduced as I crouched in front of a stack of backlogged proof, “galley alley.” Even after I had stood up, she appeared very tall and large of bone, stylishly balanced on the edge of heaviness. She used an oversized handbag that was like an expensive leather mail pouch. Without arbitration, she inherited the window desk opposite my dark corner and placed pots of African violets over nearly half of it. Much later, she told me the first thing she noticed about me was that my old glasses frames were held in place by tape. She convinced me to open a checking account, and she reacted with intelligence and enthusiasm to everything I said, like someone gingerly inflating a brittle, damaged tire. Christine became the favorite person in my life.

The violets did well, and artistic disclosures marked our daily chatter, rarely breaching the confined but intense boundary I gave to it. My alienation and rueful dreaming became a colorful subset of her larger world. I told her the stories from my young life without embarrassment: of excellent after-work watercolor sketching and second-rate antique wristwatches, of first-edition novels and late Beethoven string quartets, of postponement and frightened avoidance—a purple canyon.

Once, I described sitting home in the evening inexpertly, passionately, modifying a pair of vintage trousers. The disheveled nostalgia of my wardrobe, earnest and personal, was a joy to her. It was then that Christine told me about her best friend. Gary also sewed and

collected, and spent many evenings alone. Gary lived in Boston, and it was quickly agreed we would lengthen an upcoming weekend to make the trip north together, and that I would meet him.

* * *

Friday before dawn, waiting for Christine's car, I sat down in our tiny kitchen and wrote out a short note to Jose, who was still asleep. In nearly five years spent together, I had never left him. We had traveled together, to his home in Argentina, to New York City, through a snowstorm to my grandmother's bedside as she lay depleted of potassium and incoherent, and—so many times—to my mother's tiny, cold apartment in the suburbs.

Jose rebuilt a neighbor's 1965 Dodge van that had been covered with graffiti, donated to us like a hideous sofa. It took us everywhere, for a while silently quitting in mid-gear, an electrical narcolepsy Jose corrected by holding some wires in place as we drove. Showing off for my mother, we put her in the solitary car seat behind the engine and rode her around the lime quarries and steep hills, crowded with flowering dogwood trees, of Valley Forge Park. As the engine coughed up one narrow road, the transmission wary, I heard my mother's voice from the rear moan out "Oh, God," with the husky tone, half bitchy and half laughter, that seemed the perfect synthesis of her life's attitude. A dreadfulness that was mostly mockery, loving the humor in misfortune. She too was a pioneer, in a different and never-disclosed territory, and she approved of our machine.

Our trip together had ended here, in a walk-up apartment on the dangerous edges of a

big, new city. Once again I had failed to comprehend what lovers have—or to care—absorbing the soothing momentum of a relationship as assurance my own life would not stall. On my own, though I memorized compliments and carefully budgeted the heat of attention I sometimes drew, indifference stung me, and I could only accept, never win, another person's regard. Jose's commitment opened a long, easy summer in my life, a kind of childhood. As telephone calls from half-friends and Saturday-night partners quieted down, I let go of the lonely, excessively adult world of my early twenties with gratitude.

Life together in Philadelphia had marked the richest period of my life.

* * *

Two weeks after we met we moved into an apartment six blocks from where I had first lived after college.

At 26, the walk out Baltimore Avenue, back two years, seemed like a journey of impossible length, though we sometimes rented videos or fueled the van within sight of my one-time home. The large front windows were still curtainless and faced out toward the street lifelessly, the eyes of a grocer's fish. Behind with rent, I had left the apartment quickly, selling the contents of the three rooms for \$75 to a junk dealer on the opposite block. My things filled his display window quickly, so that, sneaking back after a few days to pick up mail, I saw my chairs as if on a stage, rearranged and extravagantly priced. This would not be the last time, my self removed from the situation, the detritus of my life—even the results of my own creative activity—would increase in value, or find beneficence elsewhere. Nor

would it be the last I would feel shame for running away.

The warmth of Jose's kitchen filled my life, fencing off the loneliness of my old address. New foods put weight on me—empanadas, Milanesas, cannelloni—and a new language, with its lovely sounds and the comfort of its orderly grammar, absorbed my attention. In a large loose-leaf tablet, Jose wrote out the conjugations of verbs, page after page: Yo amo, tu amas, el ama. I picked up the language easily, enjoying the peculiar national enunciation of certain phrases (“ahora mismo”) and reproducing it perfectly. I spoke it aloud in my sleep.

Nights in downtown bars gave way to furious pencil sketching and ambitious painting. I bought fruit and arranged it on a large oak drop-leaf table. Every evening, from just after work until late into the night, I reproduced the shapes, colors, light, and shadows until my subjects softened irrevocably. In a year, I had filled four sketchbooks, two watercolor blocks, and I had stretched and primed dozens of makeshift paper canvases.

The humble objects sitting around the apartment were addressed as foreground subjects against a background of very free pencil cross-hatching or broad brushstrokes of thinned burnt sienna paint. Cigarettes angled in ashtrays, pottery, chairs, a dish of paper whites in bloom, and, once, a portrait of Jose reading. The effect was of a household Ingres.

In spring, I quit my proofreading job, and in the sunny, cold afternoons I read everything I had not had time for in college: *War and Peace*, *Lear*, Coleridge, *Bleak House*, and James Merrill. I composed about 20 poems and fragments that now, so many years later, still

retain the same excitement and sheltered confidence as my florid sketching:

*On such a morning
There is justification in letting things lie
A morning's story of what really happened
While we slept.
An imperiled choir of breakables stacked end on end.
The paper's official rhetoric attempts the day
And one or two before,
Then just slurs around the chair.*

At the end of the summer, the apartment emptied of all the unlikely sources of my inspiration, we moved to Washington, DC. A few neighbors stood on the uneven brick sidewalk to see us off, and as we pulled away from the curb I was sobbing miserably.

II.