

Sylvia

I N 1960, after two years of graduate school at Berkeley, I returned to New York without a PhD or any idea what I'd do, only a desire to write stories. I'd also been to graduate school at the University of Michigan, from 1953 to 1956. All in all, five years of classes in literature. I don't know how else I might have spent those five years, but I didn't want to hear more lectures, study for more exams, or see myself growing old in the library. There was an advertisement in the school paper for someone to take a car from Berkeley to New York, expenses paid. I made a phone call. A few days later, I was driving a Cadillac convertible through mountains and prairies, going back home, an over-specialised man, twenty-seven years old, who smoked cigarettes and could give no better account of himself than to say 'I love to read.' It doesn't qualify the essential picture, but I had a lot of friends, got along with my parents, and women liked me. Speeding towards the great city in a big, smooth-flowing car that wasn't mine, I felt humoured by the world.

My parents' apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, four rooms and a balcony, was too small for another

adult, but I wouldn't be staying long. Anyhow, my mother let me feel like a child. It seemed natural. 'What are you doing?' she said. 'Washing dishes? Please, please, go away. Sit down. Have a cup of coffee.'

My father sighed, shook his head, lit a cigar. Saying nothing, he told me that I hadn't done much to make him happy.

From their balcony, fourteen storeys high, I looked down into Seward Park. Women sat along the benches, chatting. Their children played in the sandbox. Basketball and stick-ball games, on courts nearby, were in process morning and afternoon. On Sundays, a flea market would be rapidly set up in a corner of the park - cheap, bright, ugly clothing strewn along the benches. In the bushes, you could talk to a man about hot cameras and TV sets. At night, beneath the lush canopy of sycamores and oaks, prostitutes brought customers. Beyond the park, looking north, I saw Delancey Street, the mouth of the Williamsburg Bridge eating and disgorging traffic. Further north were the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. Ever since I was a little kid, I'd thought of them as two very important city people. A few degrees to the right, I saw the complicated steel-work of the 59th Street Bridge. To the west, beyond Chinatown (where Arlene Ng, age ten, my first great love, once lived) and beyond Little Italy (where they shot Joey Gallo in Umberto's Clam House on Mulberry Street), loomed Wall Street's financial buildings and the Manhattan Bridge. Trucks, cars, and trains flashed through the grid of cables, crossing the

East River to and from Brooklyn. Freighters progressed slowly, as if in a dream, to and from the ocean. In the sky, squadrons of pigeons made grand loops, and soaring gulls made line drawings. There were also streaking sparrows, and airplanes heading towards India and Brazil. All day and night, from every direction, came the hum of the tremendous.

I talked for hours on the telephone, telling my friends that I was home, and I sat up late at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, reading, and smoking. Most of the city slept. In the quiet, I heard police sirens as far away as Houston Street. Sometimes, I was awakened around noon or later by the smells of my mother's cooking which, like sunlight, became more subtle as the hours passed. Days were much alike. I didn't know Monday from Wednesday until I saw it in the newspaper. I'd forget immediately. After my parents had gone to bed, I'd step out to buy *The Times*, then stare at the columns of want ads. Among thousands upon thousands of jobs, none said my name. I wanted to do something. I didn't want something to do. Across the darkened living room, down the hall, in the big bed with my mother, my father lay snoring.

Whatever my regrets about school – lost years, no PhD – I wasn't yet damaged by judgement. I hadn't failed badly at anything – like Francis Gary Powers, for example, whose name I heard every day. His U-2 spy plane had been shot down over Russia, and he'd failed to kill himself before being captured. Instead, he confessed to being a spy.

President Eisenhower, who claimed the U-2 was a weather plane, looked like a liar.

There were few heroes. Malcolm X and Fidel Castro, fantastically courageous, were figures of violent disorder. They had both been in jail. But even in sports, where heroes are simple, they could be the focus of violence. A mob swarmed out of the stands after a ball game, surrounded the great Mickey Mantle, tore off his hat, clawed his face, and punched him in the jaw so hard they had to take X rays to see if the bone was broken.

The odour of fresh newsprint, an oily film on my fingertips, mixed with cigarette smoke and the taste of coffee. Pages turned and crackled like fire, or like breaking bones. I read that 367 were killed in traffic accidents during the Memorial Day weekend, and, since the first automobile, over a million had been killed on our roads, more than in all our wars. And look: two sisters were found dead in their apartment on Gracie Square, in the bathtub, wearing nightgowns. A razor lay in the hand of one of the sisters. Blood wasn't mentioned. This was old-style journalism, respectfully distanced from personal tragedy. Nothing was said about how the sisters had arranged themselves in the tub. Their life drained away as the crowd vomited out of the stands to worship and mutilate Mickey Mantle. There were really no large meanings, only cries of the phenomena. I read assiduously. I kept in touch with my species.

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About a week after I arrived, I phoned Naomi Kane, a good pal from the University of Michigan. We'd spent many hours together drinking coffee in the Student Union, centre of romantic social life, gossip, and general sloth. Naomi, who had grown up in Detroit, in a big, comfortable house with elm trees all around, lived now in Greenwich Village, on the sixth floor of an old brick tenement on MacDougal Street.

'Push the street door hard,' she said. 'There is no bell and the lock doesn't work.'

From my parents' apartment I walked to the subway, caught the F train, took a seat, and was stunned into insentient passivity. The train shrieked through the rock bowels of Manhattan to the West Fourth Street station. I walked up three flights of stairs in the dingy, resonant cavern, then out into the light of a hot Sunday afternoon.

Village streets carried slow, turgid crowds of sightseers, especially MacDougal Street, the main drag between Eighth and Bleecker, the famous Eighth Street Bookshop at one end, the famous San Remo bar at the other. I'd walked MacDougal Street innumerable times during my high school days, when my girlfriend lived in the Village, and, later, all through college, when my second girlfriend lived in the Village. But I'd been gone two years. I hadn't seen these huge new crowds, and new stores and coffee houses all along the way. I hadn't sensed the new apocalyptic atmosphere.

Around then, Elvis Presley and Allen Ginsberg were kings of feeling, and the word *love* was like a proclamation

with the force of *kill*. The movie *Hiroshima, mon amour*, about a woman in love with death, was a big hit. So was *Black Orpheus*, where death is in loving pursuit of a woman. I noticed a graffito chalked on the wall of the West Fourth Street subway station: FUCK HATE. Another read: Mayor Wagner is a lesbian. Wonderfully stupid, I thought, but then the sense came to me. I remembered a newspaper photo showing the city's first meter maids, a hundred strong, in slate blue uniforms. They stood in lines, in a military manner, as Mayor Wagner reviewed them. Ergo: a lesbian. Before 1960, could you have had this thought, made this joke? There had been developments in sensibility, a visionary contagion derived maybe from drugs – marijuana, heroin, uppers, downers – the poetry of common conversation. Weird delirium was in the air, and in the sluggish, sensual bodies trudging down MacDougal Street. I pressed among them until I came to the narrow, sooty-faced tenement where Naomi lived.

I pushed in through the door, into a long hallway painted with greenish enamel, giving the walls a fishy sheen. The hall went straight back through the building to the door of a coffee-house called The Fat Black Pussy Cat. Urged by the oppressive, sickening green walls, hardly a foot from either shoulder, I walked quickly. Just before the door to The Fat Black Pussy Cat, I came to a stairway with an ironwork banister. I climbed up six flights through the life of the building. A phonograph played blues; an old lady screamed

in Italian at a little boy named Bassano; a hall toilet was clattering and flushing, flushing, flushing. At the sixth floor, I turned right and walked down a dark hallway, narrower than the one at street level. No overhead lights burned beyond the landing. There was the glow of a window at the end of the hallway. Brittle waves of old linoleum cracked like eggshells beneath my steps. Naomi's door, formerly the entrance to an office, had a clouded glass window. I knocked. She opened. With a great hug, she welcomed me into a small kitchen.

Behind her, I saw a refrigerator and stove. A half-wall partition separated the kitchen from the living room, with a gap that let you pass through. The partition served as a shelf for a telephone, papers, books, and pieces of clothing. A raw brick wall dominated the living room. The floor was wide, rough, splintery planks, as in a warehouse. It was strewn with underwear, shoes, and newspapers. Light, falling through a tall window, came from the west. The window looked over rooftops all the way to the Hudson River, then beyond to the cliffs of New Jersey. Another tall window, in the kitchen, looked east across MacDougal Street at a tenement just like this one. I supposed that Naomi's apartment, in the middle of Greenwich Village, must be considered desirable. Naomi said, 'Don't make wisecracks. The rent is forty bucks a month.' Then she introduced me to Sylvia Bloch.

She stood barefoot in the kitchen dragging a hairbrush down through her long, black, wet Asian hair. Minutes ago, apparently, she had stepped out of the shower, which was

a high metal stall in the kitchen, set on a platform beside the sink. A plastic curtain kept water from splashing onto the kitchen floor. She said hello but didn't look at me. Too much engaged, tipping her head right and left, tossing the heavy black weight of hair like a shining sash. The brush swept down and ripped free until, abruptly, she quit brushing, stepped into the living room, dropped onto the couch, leaned back against the brick wall, and went totally limp. Then, from behind long black bangs, her eyes moved, looked at me. The question of what to do with my life was resolved for the next four years.

Sylvia was slender and suntanned. Her hair fell below the middle of her back. Long bangs obscured her eyes, making her look shy or modestly hiding, and also shorter than average. She was five-six. Her eyes, black as her hair, were quick and brilliant. She had a high fine neck, wide shoulders, narrow hips, delicately shaped wrists and ankles. Her figure and the smooth length of her face, with its wide sensuous mouth, reminded me of Egyptian statuary. She wore a weightless cotton Indian dress with an intricate flowery print. It was the same brown hue as her skin.

We sat in the living room until Naomi's boyfriend arrived. He was black, tall, light complexioned. Mixed couples were common, especially with Jewish women, but I was surprised. Conversation was awkward for me, determined not to stare at Sylvia. The summer heat and the messy living room with its dirty floor destroyed concentration, discouraged talk.

Things were said, but it was dull obligatory stuff. Mainly we perspired and looked at one another. After a while, Naomi suggested we go for a walk. I was relieved and grateful. We all got up and left the apartment and went down into the street, staying loosely together, heading towards Washington Square Park. Naomi came up beside me and whispered, 'She's not beautiful, you know.'

The remark embarrassed me. My feelings were too obvious. I'd been hypnotised by Sylvia's flashing exotic effect. Naomi sounded vaguely annoyed, as though I'd disappointed her. She wanted to talk, wanted to put me straight, but we weren't alone. I said 'Ummm.' Incapable of anything better, I was literally meaningless. Naomi then said, as if she were making a concession, 'Well, she is very smart.'

We were supposed to have dinner together and go to a movie, but Naomi and her boyfriend disappeared, abandoning Sylvia and me in the park. Neither of us was talking. We'd become social liabilities, too stupid with feeling to be fun. We continued together, as if dazed, drifting through dreamy heat. We'd met for the first time less than an hour ago, yet it seemed we'd been together, in the plenitude of this moment, forever. We walked for blocks without becoming flirtatious, barely glancing at each other, staying close. Eventually, we turned back towards the tenement; with no reason, no words, slowly turning back through the crowded streets, then into the dismal green hall and up six flights of stairs, and into the squalid apartment,

like a couple doomed to a sacrificial assignation. It started without beginning. We made love until afternoon became twilight and twilight became black night.