

LOST HOURS

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Talia. Talia. Talia. A name comes leaping out at me from the college years.

How did she find me? I have almost forgotten her.

“I heard someone read your poem,” she is saying over the phone. I am trying to measure the years in her voice, which is still very sweet to me.

She heard it on National Public Radio a while back. Yes, I reply, I remember it: “A Vision: an architectural proposal in verse.” She says, It inspired the World Trade Center Memorial, didn’t it?

She is flying into the area for her cousin’s birthday party. So far for a little party, I ask her. Life is too short, you know. I imagine her drawing up her shoulders in that timid shrug I’d teased her about. She hesitates a moment. Would you come see me?

Yes.

After the first year at the university, you come to accept the fact that beautiful women are rarely found in the engineering school—it’s one of the great mysteries. Talia and I have had the same departmental engineering classes for two consecutive quarters. We might have exchanged nods. She carried too many books. I didn’t know her name. She sat in the front rows, I dozed in the back.

It escaped my attention that we liked to slave over cryptic texts in the same coffeehouse, a faux gothic place, with stone façades and stained glass windows. We must have been there months. She had asked to borrow my lecture notes. Sometimes you can’t truly see a person until the proper junction. Somehow, there is an instant—if you’re looking—when the curtain lifts. It is still as clear to me as a photograph, the distracted second when I looked up from my books. There she was, not five paces from me. She sat at a window table, legs crossed at the ankle, toe-points resting on the floor. The whole of her was hallowed in the rose-colored light of the tinted panes. I

saw her in profile, angular but soft. It's like a quivering, it cannot be seen crossing a room, but suddenly it's in your ribcage.

There are singular moments in life when your fears melt and give way, and you step through and up to opportunity entirely unprepared but secure in the knowledge that you will have, at the very last, precisely the right thing to say, however inelegant.

"If you cancel those negligible secondary terms, you can reapply the previous fluid equation," I said, looking over her shoulder at the assignment.

She sat up disconcerted, putting on her glasses. "Are you sure?"

"Sure."

"You've done this problem set?"

"No."

"Then how do you know?"

"I don't understand any of this. I'm only good at making two sides of an equation match."

A natural predisposition for symmetry, they say, is an attribute of those born under a double Libra sign. In other words, I could sometimes see things very clearly, though never those concerning me. That day, she wore, as she often did, blue jeans and a loose, gray cardigan, her hands lost in those stretched sleeves. I'd seen her habitually drag the cuff across her nose. Only now I noticed that she had high cheeks, strong and smooth as river stones, skin the color of caramelized coconut, so rich, dark, you could almost taste it, the smiling eyes of a child. There was something entirely unspoiled in her. Like a bargain hunter coming upon something priceless at the flea market, I was afraid to expose my hand. She must not know. Would she believe me?

"Like a carpenter?"

"Or a seesaw." I smiled, taking a chair.

She did not protest. "Why become an aerospace engineer?"

"It's where failed Top Gun pilots, astronaut hopefuls, and dreamers go."

"Really," she laughed.

"But I imagine myself as an artist."

"Me, too."

Later, she would admit that she had seen me sleeping in the bowel of the library, buried in the stacks. She had caught me reading whole novels standing in the bookstore. I would come to know that

there was someone else in her life, temporarily absent. I was not one to court a woman already spoken for, but I could not distance myself from beauty. All I could do was pretend that we were friends. When we sat, I knew the proximity of her body to mine. I always stayed downwind to catch the scent of her skin.

She put herself through college with the oddest jobs. She did middle school homework for rich brats. An elderly woman gave her a room above a garage in exchange for chauffeuring service. Two nights a week, she house-sat addresses in Bel-Air and Beverly Hills, neighborhoods of movie stars, record producers, and corporate presidents. Sometimes, the cold, empty wealth spooked her, and she would entice me with “mansion-cooked” meals. On gold etched china, we ate canned ravioli in candlelight at an expansive teak table. Once she served a bucket of takeout fried chicken in a thousand-dollar crystal bowl. We were inseparable then. We swam in indoor pools and slept together fully clothed in giant, mirrored beds. I never touched her.

“He’s a good man,” she said of her fiancé. Talia had brought a single photo to show me. By her parents’ wishes, she had been betrothed since she was seventeen. It would be a very traditional Indian wedding, replete with dowry, jewelry, and many fine dresses.

We were sitting on the bed of a Beverly Hills doctor, atop a fluffy white down comforter. The windows were thrown open to the spring night, yet the house was as silent as a vault. The room, cast entirely in soft, sunny colors and pale wood, was feminine, a faint lived-in scent of cologne and potpourri. His wife had expensive but conventional taste. There were abstract paintings and fresh flowers in large vases. Oversized picture books that no one read. You could find this room in any interior decorating magazine.

She took an engineering text from her backpack and opened to the place where the photo was kept. He was a tall, handsome chap, with an athletic look to him. It was his graduation, two years before. They were standing outdoors, a foot apart, her slightly behind him, arms at their sides, smiling big for the families behind the camera. They looked good together, wavy jet-black hair, mocha complexion, both from the same upper caste, though her family’s fortunes had fallen. He was a Yale man, completing his MBA far away across the country so he could take over the family’s company. She seemed pleased with his accomplishments in a sisterly way.

I did not know why she showed me this picture. I did not ask to see it.

I would never understand the women in my life. Either they confess everything, or they act as if they had. And now that you supposedly understand the whole of them, the reasons for all their virtues and faults, you should behave accordingly, make allowances.

Although in the following weeks we would have many arguments about cultural differences, filial obligations, stymied passions—of course, it was all about her loveless engagement—that night she held my hand as she fell asleep.

The school year came to a close, and she stepped from my life like the last day of a season. You didn't know it was gone until a new day, full of the new cycle, devoid of what you cherished, arrived. Her father wanted her to come home, change her major, study at a small obscure college; her education was unimportant to him. He wanted to safeguard her for marriage. She would not give me her home number. We never kissed. She was gone from me.

The estate is in the Fremont foothills where the new money of Silicon Valley has found a foothold. I'm smiling; these are the sort of homes Talia had once house-sat. From this height, I could almost see a gaudy strip of boulevard, only a few miles away. I would have loved to take her there to watch the young, eligible Indians and Pakistanis, properly chaperoned, go "cruising" in fineries, diamonds, and Mercedes. Like everybody, we would eat chicken tikka in greasy diners, sip mango lassi in Hindi movies filled with singing and dancing and a handsome hero who never failed to rescue his damsel from fat, evil men. I could not resist this place for the food. I could not come here without thinking of her.

The hosts are newly minted multimillionaires of Silicon fortunes. The lawns are lit, the long driveway packed with large shiny cars. Inside the house, the guests laugh beneath gleaming chandeliers. Waiters with silver trays glide across polished floor of softwood. Good wines, a long linen buffet, huge centerpieces. I've catered parties like this.

"Andrew!"

Talia takes me into a shoulder embrace. She is sheathed in a long, slim dress of deep violet. Around her neck is a platinum necklace, just below the hollow of her fine throat, a staggering diamond

solitaire. I recognize her and I don't. She is radiant, as women in their early thirties sometimes are if they have weathered the trying years intact. She is more beautiful than I remember, more graceful than I had perceived, but I had not imagined a worldly heaviness in the corners of her eyes. One could never conceive the heartbreaks to come.

The hosts are introduced. A glass of red wine is placed in my hand. Talia is pulled away by other friends, and I am left in the company of smiling, nodding strangers. A rush of faces, names I don't care to know. I am only wondering how she found herself in this world. Was marriage her grand entry to this? I am overwhelmed with a sudden sadness I can find no excuse for.

I wander the party for what feels like a very long time. Chatty women are discussing the thousand-dollar rosebushes they bought. Men standing with a drink in one hand, the other hand in their trouser pocket, talking about investments, the merits of corporate headhunters. One couple has taken a week-long guided trek in Nepal. Oh, so barren, the woman is saying. The food, she brushes a vague hand across her face, Don't remind me about the food. Her male companion: I'd say you're better off doing the Rockies. They have confidence in a reducible world. We are feigning enthusiastic interest in each other. It's the whole point of cocktail parties.

A mustached man asks me, "What do you do?"

"I do fine, thank you."

"Funny. Your job."

"I'm a consultant."

"What sort? Financial, managerial, or technical?"

"Life."

"Hmm."

"Hmm."

There's a sense of hopelessness, impatience. I've been here, all this I know. What's the point of repeating things? It makes no sense to go back. Yet here I am.

She is across the great room, talking, moving her glass in vague gestures. A man speaks intently to her, making his case—it matters not, the subject. A beautiful woman, in spite of her intentions, commands the attention of a legion of men. There's a whole, lurking queue of them, waiting.

I steal Talia by the elbow. "One moment, I'll bring her right back. I have a surprise for you, Talia."

She gives him a helpless look, and we are into the long hallway, her in tow, the busy kitchen where another party is going on, people rolling over a good joke. I grab an opened bottle of wine. We step out onto the terrace. I take her cold hand, as an old friend might. We stroll down the dark path and sit on a bench in the gazebo of a Jacuzzi at far end of the yard.

She turns to me, expectant, “Well, what is it?”

“You’re looking at it.”

She chuckles. “We should get back inside. They’re bringing out the cake soon.”

“We’re not going anywhere until we finish this bottle.”

“You’ve gotten pushy, haven’t you?”

Sometimes, when the course is half run, and life unreels onto the floor too fast for a second look, there’s no point in games. I smile.

“Talia, it’d be easier to avoid me if you didn’t invite me.”

She seems flustered. Something in her gives. “I read your book. It was you and it wasn’t you. So much I didn’t know about you.”

“I know nothing about you.”

In slow awkward bits, we begin to talk, trading histories. The triumphs are unimportant, it’s the failures that bond. Paris, Florence, Greece, Prague, Cape Town, Buenos Aires, she has been everywhere in style—all the places I yearn to know, though not in the same manner. She has been shown and chosen the upper world, even now with her marriage unraveled, the single child shuttling between two homes. There is money from the divorce, enough, she shrugs, for more than one lifetime. So I suspect she is reflecting on a dormant curiosity of a past turn not made. We are worlds apart. It doesn’t matter. I’m drunk, we’re drunk. Inside they’re singing Happy Birthday.

“I was very much in love with you.”

She smiles. “You’ve learned to talk.”

“Stephanie taught me that.”

“She must have been a special woman.”

“She is.”

“I’m learning myself.”

“It’s the sort of skill that can atrophy.”

Her eyes still have some of what I remember. Inside the moderate guests are beginning to leave, but the party will go all night. Talia places her hand over mine.

She leads me up to the mezzanine. It is dark in the spiraling

stairwell. I don't know this new Talia, but I trust the sway of her hips, her calves taut, elusive. My fingers brush them briefly. We stand in a tiny alcove, our foreheads leaning together. She perches her fingertips in the palms of my hands. In the slanting rafters, an expansive skylight shows frosty constellations of stars. Here at the junction of two instabilities, I am thinking of destiny, the looping nature of time. The music below drifting away. Angry voices rising to the glass ceiling then peppering down, but I feel only her presence. How precious a touch could be. She is tender against me, my hold on her as buoyant as air. She looks up, sees me watching, then she closes her eyes as though she needs to forget and presses her face into mine. There is great need, a fear in her. I want to tell her that I'll catch her if she falls, but promises are like flowers to a beautiful woman, she receives them by the dozen.

I try to say something else. She hushes me with a finger to my lips, whispering, Sadness is for later, there's time for that. We are here now.

In this light we are of the same skin, there can be no transgression between us. Missed opportunities, obligations, the currents of unspoken words light-years behind.

We are collapsing into each other. Below they are dancing, their conversations flaking into insignificant bits. We are wine-dark, at last, in an orbit of two, shredding ourselves against ourselves. Her nails in the nape of my neck, my back. My heart in her flesh. The samba beating through the floor. We are gasping, drowning. She smells of perfume and strangely rich of spices, a piquancy of womanhood. The floor is piney, recently mopped. Around us the construction of love, the spring fresh scent of an orderly home, neatly shelved books, well-tended plants, the tale-tells of happiness.

Could we be greater than this?

Flushed with the warmth of contentment, I am thinking I have found something, or I have rediscovered something. I do not know she will leave in the morning without a word.

That is how we should leave. Abrupt, final.

I will not look for her. I will not wait.

Who can offer us again these vanishing hours? ■