

In the late afternoon, Janet returned to the studio. Carlos was up and impatient, beard bristling with energy. The music, not loud, was an ancient Rod Stewart record. Under the skylight, a white tablecloth didn't quite cover the wooden table. On it were plates, wine glasses, perfectly placed silverware. Carlos poured the wine. Silvery white dew gathered on the clear glasses. Janet was hot and it was cool. Carlos hugged her.

"I cooked you my simplest and best dinner," he said.

"Mmmmmmm," Janet felt the big hands around her waist, finding the skin under her t-shirt.

"I want to watch you eat it," said Carlos.

"Carlos, you'll make me self-conscious," she reproached him. She pulled away. "Except I'm too hungry to be self-conscious."

"Good."

Looking at his dark, hairy face, Janet always expected a deep guttural voice coming somewhere out of middle Europe. His mother had been Mexican, his father Romanian. But Carlos had the most ordinary American accent. His voice came from his chest, resonant and clear. But it seemed cultured, as if he had developed it, grown it in a greenhouse, like a plant. Janet knew he never paid any attention to his voice, never wanted to perform, or act, except with his hands. In making himself, with his hands so to speak, his voice had followed. It wholly reflected his intense, quiet power. He didn't speak a lot, so his voice, coming from a well of silence, had the flat clarity of a shaman.

From a pot on the stove, Carlos lifted a dripping artichoke and held it high while the water ran out from between its leaves. He placed one on each white plate and brought them to the table. Under the skylight the artichokes were dull green, a hint of steam rising off them, though they were no longer very hot. Carlos had been waiting for her, Janet realized. Beside the spiky vegetables was a round loaf of sourdough bread, a butter plate, a dish of mayonnaise, lemon slices. From the fridge, Carlos brought a plate of cracked pink crab. Janet marveled. Where had he found these things in July? All delicious, messy things you ate with your fingers.

Besides shopping, dinner had taken Carlos no time at all, though the table was set carefully. No packages or words were visible, except on the wine bottle, which bore its label proudly. Janet sat, the guest, the one for whom the small feast had been laid, watching Carlos. She knew that he didn't love her, that he had blocked from his heart deep personal, exclusive love, but moments like this were art for him. He loved beauty and time, made one from the other. This was what he gave her, a moment of his time, shaped by his mind and hands.

Carlos poured more wine, gravely sipping it, not waiting for her. A drop of it clung to his mustache. As Janet watched, the pink tongue reached out, licking the drops. She smiled. The wine was fruity, sparkling, a white Zinfandel. Rod Stewart's smoky voice stopped. Carlos did not get up to change the record. Janet was glad to have only their words in the room. The chairs were makeshift, one a desk chair, the other rattan. But the table with its cloth, its white cloth napkins, looked as if it had been dropped down through the skylight, a magical table with glistening silver, sparkling wine, drops of chill on the wet bottle, steam rising from the artichokes, mounds of pink crab shell.

Janet was reluctant to touch anything. "It's so beautiful," she said.

"Eat," commanded Carlos. He broke a leaf off his artichoke, dipping it in mayonnaise.

Janet took a crab leg and cracked it in her teeth, then broke it with her fingers. She squeezed lemon juice over the cold white crab meat. Her fingers were dripping. She licked them, tasting lemon and fish.

"Let me lick them," said Carlos. Janet gave him her fingers across the table. He bit them gently like a fish. Janet felt this bite deep in herself, as if his tongue were licking her down below, tasting her salty sweetness. She looked at him steadily, telling him with her eyes.

Janet tore a chunk of bread off the round loaf. Breadcrumbs were everywhere. The artichokes tasted delicate, pure plant. "It's lovely," she said. "All these tastes together." She drank wine, leaving fingerprints on the glass. "But what a mess we are making."

"That's the point," said Carlos. "Do you know why I made these things for you?"

"Yes," said Janet. "You want to excite me, and watch me."

"I want to see whether your sexy crooked teeth leave crooked marks on the artichoke leaves," he said.

Janet laughed, showing her crooked teeth. The artichoke leaves lay in front of them, on a platter, rows of them, leaf on leaf. Carlos picked them up, one at a time, examining them. He shook his head. Then he looked at his own. His mouth was big enough for his even white teeth, but Janet had not had her wisdom teeth pulled soon enough to prevent the front teeth from crowding. Two of them stuck out, overlapping the ones beside them.

"Yours look just like mine," Carlos decided, disappointed, which made Janet laugh even more. The laughter and their voices seemed to echo in the big space.

The pile of crab shells grew beside the leaves. Janet did not want to speak of anything mundane, so she didn't, waiting for Carlos to say something, watching him. "What are you thinking?" she said then. "I want to know what you see."

"I'm thinking that I wouldn't notice you in a crowd of people, but that you are really quite beautiful now, close up," he said.

"Carlos, how sweet of you."

"Perhaps I can see your new freedom emerging," he said.

"You certainly never noticed me beside Marie," said Janet.

"Oh yes," he said. "I did. I wanted you then."

"You never told me."

"No," Carlos looked away.

"Marie was hard on you," said Janet. She remembered Marie presiding at the dinners they used to give. Sometimes Carlos had been there. She wondered if Carlos had left San Francisco to get away from Marie.

"She was hard on all of us. She was just being herself. On you too wasn't she?"

"A bit. But I was willing. I learned so much from her," said Janet. She had lived in Marie's orbit in those early years, like a planet traveling around the sun. It was a sophisticated, intellectual crowd. When Rodger had turned up, blown in from Britain, Marie had married him like the queen of Camelot, her dark red hair full of ribbons and flowers.

"Drink," said Carlos. "You're not drinking enough."

Obedient, Janet drank the silvery, lively liquid. Carlos poured some more. "Carlos," she cried, trying to put her hand over her glass.

"It's okay," he said. "We'll go out for espresso. You can drink as much as you like."

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As they dressed to go out, Janet found the bowls she had made for Carlos, and forgotten to give him all day, in her bag. They were wrapped in layers of newspaper. She handed him the bundle, shyly, feeling like a peasant, turning over her work to a lord. Carlos was generous, though. He liked the pots she made.

"They're tea bowls," she said. "For the Japanese tea ceremony, but you can use them however you like. I was experimenting."

"Aaaah," said Carlos, as they emerged from the newsprint. The glaze had cracked in the firing, making intricate brown patterns on white. The shapes were irregular, the bowls a little thick, with sturdy brown feet. They were meant to be rough, to express the nature, the simplicity, the beauty of clay fired for ordinary use. Carlos turned them over in his big hands. "Perfect," he said. "They're beautiful." He put them under the skylight, with their newsprint, on the table with the breadcrumbs, the plates of chewed leaves and crab shells.

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She was pretty, Carlos had decided, in an austere way. Artless, unusual, but growing more definite. Most of the women he knew his age seemed a little past their prime, ripening and growing powerful with experience. But Janet's face was fresh. No longer thin on a scrawny neck, it was full, cheeks high and rosy. A few lines showed up around her eyes when she smiled or laughed, which was often. Her body was thin,

but the little breasts were round and firm, high on a long white torso. He liked the maturity in her, which seemed to have made her more joyful. She had suffered, but life had not beaten her down. Rather she had overcome it. She seemed more pliable now too.

He took her out on the back of the bike to have coffee. She sat lightly, moved with him as he turned corners. Her breasts pressed into his back, through the leather jacket. The bike was big, an older BMW, with worn leather seats, dull metal cams sticking out. Carlos used it for getting around town, never took it to San Francisco. He had had it a long time. Driving the wide familiar boulevard in the sun, along the embankments and into the crowded little town of Venice, he felt good. The traffic on Sunday afternoon was bad, but he knew it well. Moving along its edge, he zipped toward the beach, pleased to have a woman with him, an unfamiliar one, with whom he had no habits.

He had other girlfriends, two women who knew about each other. One of them was an artist, sophisticated with a tough exterior, six earrings, short dark hair colored with henna. He loved the contrasts in her, loved making her melt in her black leather jacket, seeing her pink breasts with the rosy nipples stretching and hardening under the leather shell. Hearing her foul mouth showing the innocence of her emotions.

The other was Vietnamese, young, with long dark hair and dark red lipstick. He had found her in a coffee shop, trying to be American, and educated her for his pleasure. It hadn't been difficult, she seemed to know instinctively how to please. She hid this from her family who expected a lot of her. She was smart, going to college and working at night as a waitress in a slick sushi bar on Melrose.

Both of these women seemed content to see him occasionally, each bent on their own strategies for becoming noticed in town. He relied on them, used them for confidences, for pleasure. But neither of them was allowed to imagine that he loved them, that they could disturb his profound contemplation of the extraordinary details of materials, of metals, denim, freeways, grass, clouds, streets, magnolias, bread, motorcycle pistons, and the skin colors of women. He didn't know about Janet. Distance had prevented her from becoming attached to him. He didn't know what she would want if she lived in Los Angeles, whether she could handle being in his life.

It was 5 p.m., hot, the sun still high. He parked the bike between two cars, waiting while Janet lifted her leg and swung it over the seat. She stood, waiting, smiling, her cheeks flushed from the ride. She seemed simple, like Isabella Rossellini in early films. It excited Carlos. He often brought women to this place, framing them in it to see how they stood up to what he considered to be art, to see whether they noticed, whether they were heightened or diminished by it, whether they became themselves or wilted in its glare.

They looked good together, he thought, she in a white cotton pullover, the sleeves pushed up on thin freckled arms. He wore a t-shirt, black leather, silver bracelets, a silver belt buckle, black ponytail. He looked exactly as he had always wanted to, and so did she, he thought. Her hair was short with a careful edge at the bottom. She wore blue jeans, no underwear, no belt, moccasin-like shoes. The bones of her pelvis were visible under the jeans. He wanted to kneel down on the sidewalk and kiss the sweet little mound he knew under the jeans. Steady, he told himself. Watch it. She's just a woman. But she had never been to Los Angeles before. She didn't look like she had either.

Carlos put his hand on the small of Janet's back and propelled her into the restaurant. It was mostly empty, his favorite place along the wall under the open window available. He motioned to Janet to sit on the bench under the dulled glass mirror. It was his place. He had worked on it. The room was made of two intersecting cubes, one of concrete, the other of wooden panels grouted with copper strips. In the far room, subdued ochre light thickened the atmosphere created by an unused piano, flowers, mirror glass on the back wall. Above them was a two dimensional figure, punctured with holes by that bastard Robert, and a fantasy metal pulley construction which he had made after years of driving up La Cienega past the oil drills.

Max, the waiter, came over, Max in a white jacket, his hair slicked back. Carlos ordered a double espresso and a mocha for Janet. She sat with her back to the wall on the bench, putting her elbows on the table and leaning to one side, her face resting on her hand. She was beautiful in the afternoon light, freckles dotting her nose, looking out the open window at the people in the street. Carlos was moved, felt Janet passed the test of the beauty surrounding her.

Beyond Janet, in the darkened mirror, Carlos watched people walking from the west. As they passed the window, they were both in the mirror, and beside him, and then they disappeared in the

mirror, and went on in reality, up the street. Across the narrow street, a row of boarded up buildings made of bricks, set with windows and doors, without any disturbing words on them, contributed to the sense of being in a created reality. Janet sat still, no more than a visual object in the setting.

Next to them two women doubled themselves as he and Janet did, in white shirts, drinking coffee. One was Chinese with blunt cut dark hair, the other blonde, plump. They were talking about a book. It seemed to be about a woman who changed into a man and back again effortlessly. Carlos could see that Janet was listening. She leaned toward him and said softly, "They're talking about *Orlando*. I read it a few years ago. It's by Virginia Woolf. Don't you think it's odd?"

Carlos held up a flat hand and dipped the little finger and then the thumb in a gesture of "maybe, maybe not". The silver bracelets clinked against each other. "How's your coffee?" he asked.

Janet's face opened, relaxed as she spoke. "Lovely, just lovely."

"You do like Los Angeles don't you," he said.

"Oh yes. I don't know how it will feel to live here. I might get homesick for northern California. I don't know."

"Will feel?"

"Yes," said Janet. "I'm sure about it. I'll just come down here, find work and then start taking classes."

"You should come down here," said Carlos. "Definitely. But I don't know if you need school. You have to find your uniqueness, your world view. I'm starting to see it in you. Do you know what I mean?"

Janet shook her head. "No," she said. "I think I'm odd sometimes, not like other people, but not that different either. Tell me. Please, Carlos."

"I don't think I can," he replied. "Your austerity, maybe. Not many people can handle it. You have a simple, spare style, but it doesn't seem empty, or dry. It's still full of promise." He leaned back, stretching, and feeling the space. He put his hands behind his head. "I dunno. You have to find it yourself. Peel that onion. Realize it."

Janet sighed and leaned on her hand. "It seems so hard," she said. "I bet this city could peel you pretty quickly, though."

Behind her, in the mirror, Carlos saw the car parked behind his motorcycle pulling out of its space. His eyes narrowed and he turned around to look out the window, watching intently. The driver moved back and then forward, turning, not touching the bike. But that left an empty space behind the bike. A long life of dealing had taught Carlos to forestall trouble. It was a lot easier. "Come on," he said to Janet. "Let's go."

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