

Determination without Negation: A Love Story

by Ian Wolff

In dreams begin responsibilities--Yeats

I'm writing this story to tell you about a mistake, despite the fact that you might find it boring or might consider my writing style onerous or overeager. I begin with self-abnegation like any insecure writer of little consequence and (almost) no recognition. However, I still feel compelled to write my story, though I'm sure that compulsion is derived in some way from delusion. Have I caught your attention? Or have you already closed my book and replaced it on the shelf at the bookstore where you browsed absent-mindedly while scanning the room for an attractive man or woman? It's a drizzly gray day in New York City. The perfect day for browsing in a bookstore, the industry of which, I'm happy to say, seems to be having a renaissance of sorts, despite all the hand-wringing about the death of the novel, and all the chatter about how eBooks will kill the "brick and mortar" bookstore as they like to call the non-virtual bookstores these days. Despite all the hub-bub, both new and used bookstores seem to be sprouting up throughout the five boroughs and with them a demand for all sorts of new books. Which is likely why my book was published at all, it being a rather uninteresting tale about a single man in New York City who goes into a deep state of despondency, or a vague malaise, when his girlfriend abruptly leaves him; and this resurgence of bookstores is likely why it even occurred to you to enter the bookstore, since you had been aimlessly wandering the sidewalks, enjoying the cool drizzle, the first break in the heat of a long summer, and low and behold, there was this new bookstore, one of the few to carry my book.

If you must know, the man in my book was deeply in love with the woman or girl who left him—more so than with any previous

girlfriend. She was much younger than he was, which was part of the problem, and yet they got along smashingly and all their friends, both his (older) and hers (younger) were constantly commenting on how great they looked together, and how it was like a modern day fairytale, you know, where love conquers all despite the cards being stacked against the two lovers...The protagonist maintained a certain sense of foreboding that something ultimately would go wrong, that, in fact, it was too good to be true, that she was young and still had so much to experience in life, men to sleep with, places to see etc., whereas he had become set in his ways, had a well-established job at a mid-level culinary magazine, a comfortable apartment (that he invited his young girlfriend to share with him after she was evicted from her apartment for not paying rent), and was at a point in his life where he looked forward to settling down with someone and perhaps considering a family, though he'd never thought of himself as a family man and had a very hard time picturing himself dandling his own child on his knee.

While for him she was a renaissance, a reversal of the onslaught of time that had rendered him a 41 year old man of vague and possibly fading charms, for her he was more of an adventure who, despite his waning age and lack of rock star status was nonetheless better in bed than any boy or man she had been with, was well-read and pithy, had good taste and knew how to make her laugh, so any hesitation she had about giving herself over completely to him was virtually erased, ameliorated even more by the fact that at 23, very few things in life had a sense of permanence. He still remembered those days, even more so when he was with her. In a way it all came flooding back and he felt as if each day was in fact new and fresh and that decisions could be made at the drop of a hat, apartments and cities abandoned for aimless road trips, crappy jobs held for two weeks left with no notice. And so, as the story goes, one day it was I love you so much, the next day it was splitsville.

The book was entirely fictional, but that's beside the point. What's important is that I wrote the book at all, and that a small independent publisher deigned print it, albeit in small quantities and

with very little promotional support, though the publisher did arrange a few readings at a number of the smaller bookstores and reading series throughout the city and even as far away as Boston and Philadelphia. Even more important is not so much the book that I wrote, but what I'm writing about now, which, you might have noticed, I still have not gotten to the point of, the point being that several months ago I made a mistake, which I will blame on the emotional turmoil at the time. The turmoil or confusion I will blame on the sleeping pills that my doctor prescribed to treat an extreme bout of insomnia that set in shortly after my book was published. The pills had a strange way of blurring the line between sleep and waking so that I began to think that the girl in the book, who had occupied my dreams after I finished the book, as characters in my books often do after I write them, was in fact a real girl, or a girl in my waking life. The mistake is harder to characterize. I suppose I'm still processing it, as my therapist likes to say. She was very understanding when I told her about the mistake. Did I mention that my therapist has very nice legs? She often wore just short-of-unprofessional skirts (or perhaps she was redefining the professional skirt, which has an intrigue of its own), and I couldn't help but notice the smoothness of her legs and the shapeliness of their musculature. They had a certain texture or shine that was very enticing and I often wondered if it was appropriate for a therapist to have such nice legs, and if one did, shouldn't one be compelled to keep them covered to avoid distracting her client or patient, especially one as excitable as myself? She knew all my secrets, many of which had to do with a borderline sex addiction. She knew about the prostitutes and massage parlors. And yet there they were, two lovely legs, seemingly carved from rare, pale wood, yet suffused with a kind of life of their own, a breathing, warm and smooth life, descending from her tight gray wool skirt and crossed at the knees, which she would occasionally uncross and re-cross oppositely, exposing a round flushed blossom just above the uncovered knee where the other leg had rested. She had very straight and long brown hair always parted neatly in the center so as to frame her

slightly moon-shaped face and the incongruously severe rectangular glasses, the picture of the male fantasy, sexy librarian or schoolteacher made famous in noir movies and on the cover of dime store novels.

I suppose in retrospect it was a mistake anyone could have made. In the end, the ramifications were not particularly irreversible or unmanageable. No, it didn't have anything to do with my therapist, although I shared it with her despite my shame, much as I'm about to share it with you now, despite my shame. But back there in the bookstore on that gray and drizzly day, the one where everyone knows that the oppressive heat of the summer is coming to an end and, despite the overcast day, there is a crispness in the air which is as invigorating as the sun breaking through the clouds after a long spell of frigid days, you have re-shelved my book and moved down the aisle a few authors so as to keep that attractive man or woman in your line of sight. She or he is in the New Releases section devoted to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, which makes you hesitate or reconsider your attraction to the individual. But really it's a moot point because you won't approach him or her, choosing instead to watch from a distance as you go over in your head all the different things you could say to break the ice and realizing that there's nothing you could say that wouldn't sound prurient or just plain tacky. So you nonchalantly grab a book by David Foster Wallace, which one you can't recall, since they all blend together in the swirl of Wallace's imagination, but it was a large one. You are looking over the top of the book at the man or woman. You are hoping for some sign or signal even though you know you won't get one. The person is much too engrossed in their book. You head to the cash register with your book, even though you don't want to buy it, fairly certain that you've already read it at some point, and might even have it on your bookshelf under a layer of dust. As you pass the New Releases section the person you are admiring looks up and gives you the most radiant smile any stranger has ever given you. It cuts through the vast chasm that exists between one person and another. It invites, it rejoices, it has a purity you've never seen

before. He/She is one of the most intriguing people you have ever laid eyes on, at least who've also laid eyes on you and not simply been an anonymous object of your desire. Yes, it was exactly the invitation you were praying for, exactly the sign or signal, and yet you continue on past the New Releases section. You can't bring yourself to stop, to ask him or her about the book they are holding in their hands, about *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. At the cash register, where you place your book on the counter with a deep sense of shame rising up from your nauseous stomach, castigating yourself for your cowardice, you reach for your wallet. When you glance over your shoulder you find that the man or woman is watching you over the rim of their book but quickly looks away. And now you feel like something has been set in motion, but it is tumbling steeply down the hill away from the person of interest. It's as if you crossed over an event horizon and there is no going back. Why this gravitational force that is pulling you in the opposite direction that you should be going? Why this need to flee? If that's not a mistake, I don't know what is. Life presents certain irrefutable opportunities. Perhaps anguish in life that is the result of missed opportunities is as biting as anguish in life from hardship or scarcity. Of course, the fault for missing opportunity is placed squarely on the privileged one missing their opportunity, while the person facing hardship or scarcity can hardly be blamed. Is one anguish a false anguish, a self-indulgent privilege? Perhaps, but the anguish is there nonetheless. But it is a determination without negation, a situation that one must suffer alone among the multitude that surround us, even though they might all be going through their own versions of anguish. We might cast sideways glances, as if to say, "are you going through what I'm going through?" But it's rare we fuse into a group of fellows-in-anguish. And when we do, the amalgamated anguish merely amplifies, even if we are offered a sense of solace or comfort in being surrounded by fellow sufferers. But then the grievances kick in and you begin to realize that everyone considers their grievance the most worthy of sympathy ... and you're right back where you started.

But that's not the mistake I'm writing about. If I seem evasive or indeterminate, it's not out of malice or literary coquetry or even indecision, well, maybe a bit of the latter, but only because I haven't figured out how to convey what I'm trying to convey. OK, I'll be honest, I'm not even sure what it is, or more importantly whether or not it's worth writing about. As in, maybe it wasn't worth all this dramatic suspense. But none of that was on purpose, only now have I realized that I've painted myself into a metaphorical corner, or, actually, a real corner by building this "mistake" up to such a degree. You'll likely be expecting some major philosophical revelation of the existential sort that makes you say "Ah, what savvy, what prowess, what encyclopedic knowledge of his literary predecessors. Obviously he's riffing on Dostoevsky and Bulgakov, on Mann and Walser and Shulz and Gombrowicz and Kraznahorkai, on Beckett and Joyce, on Marais and Aira and Bolaño, on K.A. Porter and Mansfield and Chopin and McCullers and O'Conner. What's more there's Lutz and Wallace. But you could even go back again to South America and how could you have forgotten Pessoa and Borges and Hernández, not to mention his insight into the writings of Spinoza and Hegel." Of course you've left many an author out, Tolstoy, not the least, though of course, I'm not really riffing on Tolstoy, as he's unriffable-upon. And in either case, I'm putting words, or authors, as the case may be, in your mouth, because, likely, in reading my little story none of those authors would have come to your mind. That is only a fantasy of mine, like the woman or girl in my book that you briefly opened in the bookstore on that drizzly day when you missed the opportunity to meet your soul mate.

Part of the problem is that the mistake I'm trying to convey occurred in a dream which is already fading as I try to get it down. The dream was, of course, about the girl in the book that you eschewed in favor of that Scandinavian tome. In the dream, I haven't seen her for some time since the breakup. When I do see her, she is reservedly happy to see me. At first I take this as a bad sign, and then I realize that she is just overwhelmed with emotions, or so I tell myself in my dream. She is as beautiful as I imagined her in the

book, but here she seems even more real to me than when I imagined her in the first place. She is majestic yet humble, bold yet shy, sexy yet demure, in short, everything I dream of in a girl, which is a good sign because nobody wants to dream about what they dislike in the world, otherwise known as a nightmare. No, this was a pleasant dream, though, like many dreams, there was an inimical undercurrent. It's a feeling that goes mostly unnoticed while dreaming, and is almost too vague to really put your finger on upon waking, yet there it is, that sense that something is amiss, off the tracks or that something terribly bad is going to happen at any moment, which is in a way true, because the paradox of dreams is that in the really good ones, the ones where you are in love or flying or breathing underwater as you swim through Atlantis with a colorful array of exotic fish, you always sense that it is too good to be true and that it all must come to an end, while in the really bad ones where you are being buried alive or there is some ominous creature hovering over your bed ready to smother you with its all encompassing evil, it seems like it will never end, that you have been relegated to an infinite hell.

In the dream we are friends, and yet there is a new kind of love that has sprung up between us that didn't exist when we had been together (in our dream lives before we had broken up). There was a kind of camaraderie, a permanence, and she seemed more mature, more grounded now than in our dream relationship (or in the book). Even as I write this, though, the dream fades and I fear making it up. I could make it up, but that would feel like cheating. I had a writing teacher who said never write about dreams in your short stories (he had many staunch rules) because nobody wants to read about other people's dreams. I took all his rules to heart and many of them were so ridiculous I can't believe I clung to them for so long, to any of them, for that matter. (For instance, he told his workshop never start a story with a quote or dialogue because art directors hated to have to make a drop cap with a quotation mark.) But I still get worried when I break his rules. Like writing a dream into one of my stories. It's true, though, it is risky business. I even get a little

nervous, even if it's a really good writer, when a dream sequence pops up. I'm always wondering if it's real or make believe. It seems to me that made up dreams are a bad idea. I've read some great sequences by Walser, but then I think he was in a constant state of waking dream.

That said, in my dream, the girl or woman from the book is for some reason in the same house as I am when we run into each other. It seems odd now that we would accidently be in the same house, so I'm worried I'm leaving something out, even dreams tend to make more sense in such mundane situations, but there she was. And now I'm not even sure if it was my house, her house, or either of our relatives' house. My inclination is to say that it was the house of one of our relatives, or maybe even a house of friend's of my parents from my childhood because there is some sort of resonance with a memory from my childhood. It was a funky house somewhere around Forestville in Northern California. It was one of those old houses from way back when the area was logging territory. There were many old beautiful houses that had fallen into decay and hippies loved to turn them into communal living spaces. Anyway, in reality, there were a group of friends of my parents who lived in one and they would have parties and my parents would take me along and all the kids would be sort of chaperoned by one of the older kids in a separate large room with a fireplace where we'd hang out and play games and then go to sleep on the floor in sleeping bags around the fire while the parents all tripped on LSD and smoked pot until the sun came up, when they'd rouse us and cook a big family breakfast, and then everyone drifted back to their other lives, at least the ones of us who didn't live at the communal house. Something about the house in the dream reminded me of that house. In any event, there she was and I was so glad to see her again despite the fact that, in the opening scene of the dream, before I had realized that she was there in the house, I had been very upset with her because I felt as if I had been treated badly, her leaving for another man (I assumed) like that. Perhaps I hoped she had left for another man because if she hadn't, if she simply had left because she didn't love me any

more or never had, that would be worse. But which was worse? I debated that with myself in the opening scene (of the dream), but then, when I saw her I was very happy to see her and we embraced and kissed. It was a passionate kiss, and yet it was short. We both drew apart because I think neither of us expected to kiss like that. Her eyes are very brown. I remember thinking that in the dream, even though, theoretically, in the dream I already knew her eyes were brown. But in that dream moment they were particularly brown, or maybe it was just the way she looked at me that brought out the “brownness” of her eyes.

I'm going to stop recounting the dream there because A) It's getting too vague to continue and B) I worry that your mind is beginning to wander. I only wish I had been in the middle of writing the book when I had the dream, because then I would have been compelled to get the dream down immediately, as I would have assumed it would give me amazing literary insight into my characters and the drama in which they were involved. I've always noted the dreamlike qualities of some of my favorite writers' works. Bolaño and Walser in particular (you might recognize their names from the list above). But also Nerval and Bataille (since I excluded the French from my above list) among many others.

Suffice it to say the dream had a profound effect on me, and it made me feel as if I had known this woman or girl (from my book and my dream) in real life. When I woke up, I was sad because I felt as if I might never feel that sense of familiarity and deep love for another woman or girl. At the time, I tried to blame that sense of loss on the sleeping pills, which had a strange effect on my waking life. But in the end, I think that was the first vague understanding of my mistake: I forgot (or never recognized) that responsibilities do indeed begin in dreams.

