

Almost Like Love

by Lillian Ann Slugocki

Your limbs loose in faded blue jeans, I watched you scramble up the side of a deserted building that Saturday afternoon on Coney Island. And I liked the way your body moved as you strained to peer into the cracked windows. Down by the water, the Atlantic Ocean was sapphire in the diffuse light. The white gulls wheeling in the cold sky. I kicked off my shoes and waded into the surf. I felt your eyes on me. I felt as if I should perform for you, right here, on the silver beach, show you how graceful I am, that I could fly if I wanted, or the frailty of my heart, but I didn't. Instead I insinuated myself into your arms as you lay on the sand, and even though my feet were cold and wet, and even though I felt awkward in your arms, I was happy.

Earlier, when I came downstairs to meet you, I liked the way you lay stretched out on the hood of your car in the sunlight, early November, waiting for me, the yellow leaves falling as you read a magazine. I liked the plastic lizards on your dashboard, the odd assortment of tools in your glove box, the way you drove with the map in one hand, the other in my lap. Your laugh is manic, your fingers are long, and we criss-crossed our way through Brooklyn all through that afternoon; Park Slope, Prospect Park, Bed-Stuy, Brownsville, Kings Highway, until we reached the ocean, Little Odessa. The Cyrillic alphabet scrawled across shop windows, the Russian women trailing fur coats, walking home from shul.

Mostly I longed to rub my tongue up against your teeth, rub my nipples up against yours. And it wasn't just your limbs, or your legs, or your manic laugh, or the way you keep yourself so tightly wrapped. I think its more the fact that I loved the smell of you, under your arms in particular, that was so provocative, so familiar. And later that evening, the way your cock unfurled in my mouth, and the way I felt so beautiful, finally, beautiful as you opened your mouth to mine. But, we are so mismatched, your mother would

never approve of me, your father would desire me, and I am older than you.

I met you at Halloween party, a neighborhood bordering Queens, an industrial loft. After a couple of drinks, I twirled around on the dance floor, and suddenly there you were, dressed up in a coat of blue light, arms flapping, such a tall man. I asked you to dance. In your arms and kissing you before I even knew your name. But you should know that I've had lovers from around the world. You should know that I'm an expert in the art of the one night stand. Men have poured champagne down my belly, proffered raw oysters by the light of the Mediterranean, and amber glasses of cognac in elegant hotel lobbies.

Charming, handsome men with foreign accents, gold and silver credit cards, some with wives, some with girlfriends and it was never like love. It was only a very good game. Round and round I went wearing French lipstick, high heeled sandals, silver earrings, offering up a smile that promised nothing. Dinner with a film distributor from Manchester, steak frites and cordials. Sunday brunch with a producer from London, on the cold streets of Edinburgh. The director from Australia. The lawyer from Israel. And so on. This was my secret life.

And somewhere between an anonymous sunrise on a 747 and a hang-over in an over heated hotel room, I lost my innocence. There were mitigating circumstances to be sure; a divorce, a death. But after meeting you, I could conjure it up again, fresh from the pages of my adolescent diary, and this is what I mourn most of all, after all these years, years you have not lived, but there is nothing I can do about that. But somehow the sight of you, the smell of you, made it possible again. Because it was almost like love, love. Because the potential for that innocence beckoned me, and I became reckless in search of it. I exposed my heart.

I decided that, this time, the mask would come off. When you walked into my apartment, for our first date, I let you lay across me, I let you unzip my pants, pull up my shirt, I opened myself to you. When you entered me, you said, "Oh baby you are so tight," and I

loved that. I loved the way you kissed me. I wanted you to say my name over and over again, I wanted you to be sure that I knew you were there, deep inside me. I wanted you to be sure you knew that's exactly where you belonged. It was almost like love, love.

And then last Saturday. One o'clock. Perhaps a few minutes after. What color was the sky? It was more than blue, and the leaves, yes, were yellow but lit from within, lit from the light of the sun, so the sky was blue but it was also gold. I remember these details. I do. I wanted to frame every minute of that afternoon, and every minute of that evening like a series of photographs, and so I have. And I am offering them to you.

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After Coney Island, after the boardwalk, after the gulls, the sunset, after we left Little Odessa, it was dark, and we wound our way on the highway that rings the East River and snakes beneath the Verrazano Bridge, music playing on the radio, your long fingers wound around the steering wheel. I couldn't resist cupping the back of your head with the palm of my hand, stroking your short black hair. I didn't know who you were then or now, but I liked the mystery, I liked the way the back of your head fit into the palm of my hand.

At my apartment, I got into the shower, alone. But I knew you were standing outside the closed door, naked. Waiting for an invitation. After a few moments, you got tired of waiting, pushed aside the shower curtain, and stepped in. Under the sharp spray of hot water, your brown eyes glassy, your erection slapping against my thigh, the dark night from the skylight, you kissed me.

Your mouth filled with water, your hands traveling over the soapy, slippery contours of my body, you kissed me and kissed me, and I kissed you back because it was almost like love. Your mouth literally imbedded in mine, your tongue literally wrapped around my tongue. That was the kind of kiss we kissed. The kind of kiss you get once or twice in a lifetime, and then afterwards you are glad, and say: *That's all I want.* My wet hair streamed down my back like a shank of

damp silk, my naked breasts glistening from the hot water, I was so clean.

Things went awry after that: A tangle of missing socks, of questions, of things unsaid. The awkward sheets undone and scattered on the floor. Misapprehension, suspicion. I'm so sorry. I would've done anything to undo that, but I couldn't. I think that sometimes words fail me, and so I didn't try. Instead I thought: Watch me. Watch me closely. Because I am older than you, I know more things than you, and it's more than how to kiss someone, it's this: This series of pictures. They are rare. Trust me. What time was it? It was one o'clock on Sunday, twenty-four hours later. In the end, it wasn't love, but it was almost like love. Yes?

The next time you meet a woman, and you kiss her the way you kissed me and the next time the day rains down so much gold and blue light you are almost blinded, and the next time you step into the shower with the moon overhead and kiss her, your mouth filled with water, white seagulls wheeling over-head, the morning sky shot through with pink light, remember this is one of the reasons we are given breath, remember that even if its not love, but almost like love, it's why we are alive.

