

Waiting for Big Bird

by Marcy Dermansky

Jonathan jumps up from his seat, knocking over his mug of coffee, when Mona tells him she thinks she is in labor. They are having brunch at Café Bar. It is one of their favorite things to do.

"You aren't due for two weeks," he says.

Mona agrees. She is not due for another two weeks, and she cannot be sure that what she feels is labor, because she has never been in labor before.

"I'm pretty sure," Mona says.

They are sitting at an outdoor table across the street from the *Kaufman Astoria Studios*. The sun is shining. They had the day ahead of them, plans to go home and clean the apartment. They have ordered the same dishes they always order: the Mediterranean scramble for Jonathan and the herb omelet with goat cheese for Mona. Jonathan's scrambled eggs are swimming in spilt coffee. This is his first coffee of the day. Mona is afraid her husband will cry. She motions for the waiter.

It is a useless gesture. They are sitting outside. Fabio just served their food. He went back inside. It could be minutes before he returns.

"I have this fantasy that one day Big Bird will come walking down the street," Mona says. She closes her eyes. Labor. It was inevitable. "Big Bird will come to Café Bar," she says. "And he orders a *frappé*."

Mona has said this before, many times. It is a line that has long ago ceased to be clever, though Mona has never stopped wishing for Big Bird. *Sesame Street* is produced at the Kaufman Astoria Studios; a cameo appearance by the tall, yellow creature is not in the realm of the impossible.

"I saw Denzel Washington here once," Jonathan says.

"You did? You never told me that."

"They were filming that Pelham movie."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me that." Mona is surprised by how angry this makes her. Her forehead is covered in sweat. She is not

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supposed to go into labor two weeks early. She has work still to get done. The edits on her book are due. The baby was supposed to come late. "Did you see John Travolta?"

"Only Denzel Washington. He was wearing a dark suit. He ordered a beer and the halloumi sandwich."

Mona has never once seen a celebrity at Café Bar. She has lived with Jonathan in Astoria for six years, longer than she has lived anywhere else in her adult life. Their two-bedroom apartment is too small for a baby. The cramped office they share would be the baby's room, but Mona and Jonathan are writers who work from home. They need that office. They fight over who gets to sit in that office. They have made a schedule. For years, they have talked about moving, but somehow, they never move. They don't have enough money.

When Mona tells people that she lives in Astoria, she is surprised by the most frequent response. *I love the Greek restaurants*, she is told again and again. Maybe that is true. Maybe everyone in Manhattan loves to make a yearly pilgrimage to Astoria for the authentic Greek food experience, but the truth is Mona never goes to these restaurants. The grilled fish, the wine, the fried cheese, and the lemon potatoes—a meal for two is never less than seventy dollars. Except Uncle George's. The local dive is cheaper, especially the house wine, served in a tall carafe and poured into what looks like shot glasses. Mona always walks out of Uncle George's pleasantly drunk. Except, of course, she has not been drunk in a long while. Mona does not think Astoria will be a good place to raise her baby. She thinks that it is ugly. There are not enough green places.

There is, Mona knows, Astoria Park. And Mona likes this park. Other summers, when she was not pregnant, when she was more inclined to walk ten blocks to the N train, ride it two stations, and then walk another half mile still to the park, she swam laps there in the enormous swimming pool designed by Robert Moses. Mona loved to swim in that pool, watch the sun set over the East River. But

as far as parks go, it's faster to take the subway to Central Park. Where Mona lives, it's all ugly architecture and cement.

"Oh," Mona says.

Mona is in labor. She is having another contraction.

"Okay. I think this might be painful."

She looks at Jonathan, trying to gauge from the expression on his face how she should feel. He is looking anxiously at the door, waiting for his coffee. They had known this was going to happen. They are almost forty years old. They are not children. At this particular moment in time, Mona doesn't want to panic. Mona wants to eat her omelet. She also wants to go home and pack her bag. She has been told, repeatedly, to pack this bag for her stay in the hospital. She has continuously put it off, though, still needing her toothbrush, her toothpaste, her favorite pair of pajamas. Mona has been unwilling to pack these items. She has also been busy, editing her book.

"I don't believe Denzel Washington ordered the halloumi sandwich," Mona says. "You are making that up."

"Maybe I made that part up." Jonathan smiles.

Mona loves him for that, for the smile.

Fabio, the waiter, has finally come back outside and is on his way to their table. Of all the waiters at Café Bar, he is Mona's favorite. Mona feels grateful.

"Can we get some more coffee?" Mona asks him. "And the check, please? As soon as you can?"

"Already?" Fabio expertly refills Jonathan's empty mug. He pulls out a rag from his back pocket and begins to wipe the table. "Don't worry," he says, lifting Jonathan's plate of ruined eggs, and then wiping away the coffee that pooled beneath it. "I'll get you another order. It will take no time."

"We have no time," Jonathan says.

Jonathan pours milk in his coffee, brings the mug to his lips, closes his eyes. Mona looks down, again, at her food. She picks out a piece of asparagus from her home fries with her fingers. Mona eats the asparagus and wishes that she hadn't. She isn't hungry. She might need to throw up. They will, of course, still have to pay for this

meal. Café Bar isn't cheap. Mona knows she shouldn't be worrying about wasting thirty dollars when she is about to have a baby, but she is.

Also, Mona has changed her mind. She does not want to have a baby. She knows this is the stupidest possible thing to think, but that is what she is thinking. She hasn't even packed her bag. Clearly, she is unequipped for what lies ahead. Mona blinks. She considers her breakfast, virtually untouched. When she goes to the hospital, she knows they won't let her eat. She will probably be in labor for a long time. Mona never took a birthing class. All of the classes took place in Brooklyn or Manhattan and Mona did not have time for such a class. Mona cuts off a tiny piece of omelet with the edge of her fork, but she doesn't eat it. A bead of sweat drops from her chin onto the table.

"Are you okay?" Fabio asks.

"No," Mona says.

"She's in labor," Jonathan says and then takes another gulp of coffee. "We have to go to the hospital, but we need to go home first. And pick up the bag."

"We didn't pack our bag," Mona says.

"We need to go home and pack it," Jonathan agrees.

"Can we do that?" Mona asks him.

Their apartment is six blocks away. That seems especially far. Mona, of course, cannot change her mind. She is going to have a baby, and she is going to bring the baby home to live with them in their not-big-enough apartment that is next door to the auto repair shop. This is what is going to happen. There are, of course, other babies that live on the same street, who seem to grow up just fine, in Astoria, without anything green. Identical twins, beautiful Indian girls almost always dressed in the same clothes live next door. They were toddlers when Jonathan and Mona first moved in, and now they are big girls. Mona smiles at these girls and they smile at Mona. After six years of living next door, watching them grow, she does not know their names.

They still have not moved from their table. Jonathan and Fabio are watching Mona, solicitous, but also useless.

Mona looks across the street, still hoping for Big Bird. And if not Big Bird, she'll take Oscar the Grouch. Or *Snuffleupagus*, Big Bird's imaginary friend, except, apparently, he is no longer invisible. Or Cookie Monster. Mona would be happy with Cookie Monster.

"I didn't even know you were pregnant," Fabio says.

This unexpected observation makes Mona strangely happy. She is plenty pregnant, eight and a half months pregnant, but her face has stayed the same. She has been swimming laps the entire time. Not at Astoria Park, but at the cheap Russian gym with the indoor pool. That is something Mona loves about her neighborhood, the gym, which is just around the corner from Café Bar.

"A boy or a girl?" Fabio asks.

"A girl," Mona says. "A girl."

They have picked a name, though Mona is not sure she likes it. Neither is Jonathan. A name is a big decision. Mona has trouble giving titles to her short stories. Again, Mona feels panic. She is not ready to have a baby. She looks at Fabio. He is a good waiter, efficient and friendly. He is kind. If the baby were a boy, she could name him Fabio.

"We have to pay you," Mona tells him, but she does not move to get her wallet. She feels that pain come back around, smashing her flat like an ocean wave.

Fabio waves his hand.

"Go," he says. "Go have a baby."

Mona looks at Jonathan. Go have a baby? Is that what they are supposed to do?

"I'm ready," he says.

His cup of coffee is empty. He puts his hand on Mona's. She looks into his eyes. He is ready.

"Breathe," Jonathan says.

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