

Everything Foreign

by Monic Ductan

In college, I made friends with my Jewish roommate. Her name was Leah and she was from Brooklyn. When she asked me home with her for Thanksgiving, she mentioned we could go to synagogue together. I asked if there would be other black people there.

"No," Leah said. "There won't be. Why does it matter, Annie?"

I rolled my eyes and didn't say anything, but I wanted to ask if she had ever been some place where she was the only white person. I knew that the answer was no, she hadn't. And so how could she understand what I was really asking?

Leah and I saved the change we earned from our waitressing jobs and went on weekend escapades in her old Volvo. Our school was in New York State, but sometimes we'd drive over to Penn or up to Canada for the weekend. We once drove all the way to North Carolina because Leah had read a book about the Outer Banks and wanted to see what they looked like. She claimed the salt water turned her curly hair to frizz. She straightened her hair as often as I straightened mine. We complained about our curly hair, even used one another's wide toothed combs and straightening chemicals. Even now, when I remember Leah Berg, I see her tearing barefoot across Nag's Head beach with her wild hair flying out and her sarong slipping down just enough to reveal the curly brown hair beneath her navel.

Leah declared herself a feminist, but not the man-bashing type. She loved men as much as I did. She preferred the ones that came home with her from bars and sweated all night and then left early and never called.

"It's simpler this way," Leah said. "All I need is a good lay every now and then."

"You talk like a man," I said.

I wanted the type of guy who would hold doors open for me and recite poetry, and though I'd dated only ones who did the former, I had yet to find any who did the latter.

"You're such a sap," Leah said. "Lower your standards."

I couldn't lower my standards. From the first moment I began to notice boys, I knew I wanted one that was different from me. The first boy I ever kissed was an out-of-towner. I was in eighth grade, and I had always lived in South Carolina, never even ventured out of the state. He was from Boston and had an accent that was completely foreign to me. When he stood to introduce himself to our English class, and that voice came out, I was drawn to it, as if lured by a Siren's song. His name was Mark, and I expected him to introduce me to new things, explain his corner of the world to me. I was disappointed to learn that Mark did not have much to teach me in the way of culture since we were both American and raised in the same culture. The first thing I learned from him was when to open and close my mouth during a kiss.

Catholicism was the second thing I learned. I was raised Southern Baptist, but Mark was Catholic. He took me to confession with him and explained how it worked. I liked the idea of confession, the idea that I could say anything. The priest would not tell anyone and God would forgive me. I began to make weekly pilgrimages down East Broad Street all the way to the railroad crossing and the overpass, and then I would slip into the only Catholic church in our town. The windows were stained and the altar was wide and long, much grander than anything in my clapboard Baptist church. At mass, the choir stood tall and formed their mouths into perfect Os. At my church, there was much more ostentation. The choir swayed from side to side, clapped their hands, and even moved their hips a little too much, so that they looked more like dancers than worshippers. Our church was a tiny space with ceiling fans. The old ladies smelled like denture cream and peppermint, and they would hug you so tight you half smothered. My conversion to Catholicism was the first phase of a lifetime spent sampling new religions and cultures.

In college, I dated men from every part of the world. Haiti. West Africa. Ethiopia. Puerto Rico. India. The Netherlands. Italy. The man I remember most from my college days is Leah's brother.

As it turned out, I did go home with Leah at Thanksgiving during our sophomore year. Brooklyn was another world to me. The city blocks and the men in yarmulkes with those darks strands of hair down the sides of their faces were so different from anything I ever saw growing up in the Deep South.

As Leah drove us through the city, I asked about her family.

"Does your dad wear a yarmulke?"

"Nope," Leah said. "Does yours?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Only on weekends," I said, keeping my face neutral.

She grinned as we pulled up in front of a brownstone. I didn't know if the smile was in response to my question or if it was just in anticipation of being home after months of living away at school. In contrast, I had not gone home since I first left for college the year before. Though I did sometimes miss my mother and even dreamed about our little shotgun house, I still could not bring myself to go back there. I felt that I had matured, and so it was hard to go home. I wanted to shake the red clay of the Piedmont from beneath my feet and become someone new.

On that Thanksgiving Eve, Leah and I decided to bake pies. Halfway through mixing the ingredients together, she realized we needed more flour and left to buy it. I was beating yams and sugar into a thick, orange glaze when I heard the kitchen door open and felt the cold New York wind on the nape of my neck. The man who stood in the doorway was not much taller than me, and he had Leah's face—straight dark eyebrows hung low over brown eyes that were too close together. His chin, like Leah's, was broad and slightly pointy. I knew that he must be her brother Seth.

Seth stepped forward. "You must be the beauty queen from Alabama," he said, and Leah's dimple winked in his cheek.

"South Carolina," I said. I noticed that he offered his hand to me with his palm facing down, and I had to reach up to accept his handshake.

He was a charmer. By the time Leah came back from the corner market, he had regaled me with stories about crazy co-workers at

his accounting firm and talked me into having dinner at his apartment on Friday evening.

Seth lived in Manhattan. Though I wanted the dinner to include only the two of us, we shared the evening with Leah and two of her friends from NYU. They all talked about which boarding schools they had attended, their summers abroad, and myriad other things I knew nothing about.

I did wind up in bed with Seth. It happened that weekend after Thanksgiving. Leah had driven back to school on Sunday morning, but Seth offered to take me back the next day if I would spend the night with him.

Before Leah left, she whispered to me, "So if you marry my brother, will you convert?" She giggled. "You could be a Baptist Catholic Jew." Leah loved to tease me about religion.

In bed with Seth, I tried to get his take on religion. He was a non-practicing Reformed Jew. He didn't want to talk much about himself. Instead, Seth asked about South Carolina and how I grew up and what I did there.

He traced my face with his fingertip. "I really like your nose and lips and hair," he said. "You look so different from me."

Something burned in my belly. At the time I thought it was the wine, but now I realize that I was to him what so many other men had been to me: an experiment. I was his chance to taste something foreign to him: a blue-collar black girl. But I didn't realize any of this at the time. And so I said, "I would really like to spend Christmas with you."

He didn't answer.

I lifted my head and propped it on my hand. "Do you have plans for Christmas?" I asked.

His brown curls brushed across the pillowcase as he shook his head.

"Christmas is another month away, Annie. I guess we could get together, I mean, if we're still friends then..."

Realization dawned on me. This man wanted nothing to do with me outside of his experiment. We would not spend Christmas together or even speak again beyond that night.

"Take me home, please," I said, knowing that he would take me back to the dorm, but what I really wanted was to go back to South Carolina. I had become someone new, and I longed to see my welcoming mother in our little shotgun house.

