

Carmen (from The New Yorker+ a Jimmy Breslin "afterword" from Newsday)

by Rick Rofihe

It doesn't happen on the Wednesdays, when Carmen's meeting her mother at LaGuardia. Every time, for the past few years, it's when her mother's about to leave, during those final steps to the airport bus. Last trip it was math. "Carmen, honey. It's thirteen years since that stuff with Eddie."

"Ma—"

"Eighteen and thirteen is thirty-one, honey. What about the next...,"

And the trip before that: "Carmen, if you could keep your eyes on one guy—"

"Ma, there's nothing wrong with my eyes; it's these *guys!*"

It's almost too much for Carmen to think of when she tries to follow it back. Her mother didn't go to college, because of getting married. Then she herself didn't get married—but she didn't go to college, either.

Her mother, when she was the age for it, was all "What's he like? What's he like?" That's the way Carmen's Aunt Jean, her mother's sister, tells it, and how Carmen's parents got together. Aunt Jean had been seeing some guy while she was finishing her last year of high school, but kept putting him off because she was getting ready to go to college. Then he catches the eye of her little sister, just one grade down, who starts asking what he's like.

Aunt Jean said she knew it was going to be trouble because her little sister had also started talking about home not feeling like

home anymore and, gee, sometimes she'd sure like to get out of the house. From the very first week Aunt Jean went away, she started sending presents back, one a week—Ohio State sweatshirts, T-shirts, pins—to try to make the idea of college more real, to get her sister to hold out one more year.

That same guy her aunt put off back then her mother took on. And it was the same week in November the pregnancy test came back that the bookmark with the college song, “Carmen Ohio,” on it arrived.

“ ‘*Carmen*,’ that’s a nice name.” That’s what her Aunt Jean told her her mother said. That if it was a girl that’s what she’d call her. “Your mother didn’t really have much on her mind in those days, Carmen.”

“Aunt Jean! I was named after a bookmark?”

As far as Carmen could tell, from all the things she could remember, her parents’ marriage had never been good. What could it be like for her mother? Because she always finds in her own life that when it’s not working out either she starts to forget or she starts to remember what life’s all about.

Her Aunt Jean, a few years after graduating from college, moved out to the state of Washington and got married. She wrote back to her sister that she’d heard things weren’t so good for her, to bring Carmen and come out there to live. Carmen had read the letter when her mother left it in the telephone-table drawer. But they didn’t go. All Carmen’s been able to figure out in all the time since is that her mother didn’t ever want to do anything that made it look like she’d made a mistake, even if staying was a bigger one.

Maybe other mothers thought the kind of things her mother would say; Carmen didn’t know. Once, a woman her mother’s age came into their tuxedo-rental place and said, “You sure are lucky, Mrs. Mitchell. You get to be around so many *men*.”

Carmen’s father wasn’t far—he had to have heard. Carmen’s mother looked at the woman as if she were focusing, concentrating,

compressing before she delivered her response, full but not loud, and through a narrow smile. "Men?" And then, as if it were music, she let a few silent beats go by before finishing. "*I hate men.*"

Carmen had a good view, standing there behind the cufflink showcase, with her mother and the woman in front. She could see for a few seconds the woman didn't know how to take it, but then her mother's smile broadened, which made it look as if she were just joking, which allowed the woman to smile also.

Carmen wasn't even in high school yet, but she already knew her mother always chose her words carefully. Since she's been out on her own and thought about it, she's realized that though there are many things beyond her mother's control, at least her thoughts and her words are her own.

Even in those days, when she was helping her parents after school in the shop, Carmen would look at her mother speak and notice she never seemed to start a sentence until she was sure of the end of it. And even after they enlarged the place, when Carmen couldn't always get a clear view of her mother saying the things she said, Carmen could still imagine, from the tone of her mother's voice, the exact look on her face.

At first it *was* all men, because they'd conceded the wedding-dress trade to the women's shop down the street, but when Carmen was in tenth grade her mother prodded her father into taking over the small store next to theirs. They broke through a wall to make a large arch, and in the new part they put the women's section, with wedding dresses, bridesmaids' outfits, flower-girl things.

Her father mostly avoided that area, while her mother roamed in and out of both. Before the shop expanded, if a bride-to-be came along to help her future husband pick out a style for his tux, Carmen's mother might say to her, especially if the bride was very young, "Are you sure you're doing the right thing?" Meanwhile, Carmen's father would be kneeling on the floor, trying to call out measurements to her mother, who was supposed to be putting them down on a form sheet. But her mother would still be turned to the

bride. "Have you talked it over with your mother?" Her voice was clear and low. "Do you know what it can mean to be married?"

At times like these, the grooms invariably deferred to Carmen's mother as some kind of wit, and her father, down near the ground level, couldn't say or do much about it. The business may have been his, as it had been his father's before him, but he could never control what his wife thought about it. And, when customers were there, the things she might say. "Wait a while," she'd tell the brides-to-be. "Maybe come back in five years—we'll *still be here*."

The worst thing for Carmen about the stuff with that boy in their town, Eddie, was that she really didn't know what her father thought about it. Not then and not now. If he really did think she should marry the boy and stay around town, shouldn't go to Ohio State—if there was any possibility at all that that's what her father was thinking—she didn't want to know. But not knowing made her even more frightened than she already was. Just another reason now for not going back home.

"Carmen . . ." her mother had said to her when she asked.

"Well? What *does* Daddy think?"

"Carmen, honey . . . I know you've got your heart set on Ohio State—but I just don't think Columbus is far enough away."

Well, Eddie *had* said to Carmen, "You think I can't drive over to Columbus and find you?" Yes, she knew he could. He could find her by phoning her dorm or hanging around outside, or at the part-time job she had waiting at the Lazarus department store downtown. He could bother her. He could make her nervous. And it would be when she was new in Columbus, new in the dorm, new at work.

"Carmen . . ." her mother had said softly, standing in the doorway of Carmen's room, reaching behind herself and producing one of those little squarish suitcases that you hardly ever see anymore—train cases, Carmen thought they were called. Women always used to carry them. Inside they had five-by-eight-inch mirrors, fitted sideways into the top part, and elasticized pouches

along the edges, with bobby pins or grit left in them from some previous trip.

This was a dull-blue-green one her mother was holding. Carmen looked at it, then at her mother. “Ma, am I going out to Washington to stay with Aunt Jean?”

“You’re going to New York. There’s a place you might like there—it’s a hotel where I stayed that trip Daddy couldn’t go. I liked it so much I wanted to live there.”

Her mother had entered Carmen’s room and started packing, as if it were she, not her daughter, who was going. “I know it’s late, honey, but maybe in the dark is the best time to leave. I’ll drive you to the bus station and wait with you. I can send you more dresses and things later.” Her mother packed the case better and quicker than Carmen could have herself. And whichever drawer her mother’s hand went to Carmen didn’t mind. She hadn’t thought about it before, but there was really nothing anywhere that she was hiding from her mother.

As long as it was August, it was fine there in the Gramercy Park Hotel. But as soon as the calendar said September, Carmen had to keep reminding herself why she wasn’t in Columbus.

During the three weeks in August, she hadn’t really done much besides taking the check that would have been her tuition and dorm fees to a bank around the corner and opening her account. That was probably the biggest thing—there seemed something very final about it.

The rest of the days were more or less the same. In the morning she read every word in the newspaper over a long breakfast. In the afternoon she napped and read magazines. She would always go down for dinner *after* she watched the news on television—it broke up the evening, and when she came back to her room it was almost time to get ready for bed.

Then, for the first two weeks in September, she really wanted to call Ohio State to find out what the textbooks were for the

courses she would have taken. So she could sit in her hotel room in New York and read them. Was that so strange? She started thinking that there was nothing about herself she couldn't explain—explain *away*, she thought—in a few seconds. If there had been anyone asking.

From her hotel room, the stuff with Eddie began to become clearer to her. When it happened, it had taken her completely by surprise; she didn't understand what was going on. After all, she didn't know him that well, even if he had graduated from her school the year before. But there he was, all of a sudden, calling her. Just small talk, and then he could say, in different ways, that he wanted to see her in a wedding dress. And she always seemed to be running into him, near her house, or near the shop. Then it got worse. "Your long dark curls and a long white gown—hey, rosy cheeks?"

"Stand a pretty little thing like that around all those wedding dresses and what do you expect?" the policeman who came to take the report had even said to her mother. He said they would, if she wanted, send someone around to talk to the boy and his parents, but that might not produce the desired effect. That a court order of protection could be requested, but it's just a piece of paper. And since the boy really wasn't threatening her—what he was doing was asking her to get married—a judge might not take it too seriously. "Maybe it's harassment, and maybe it isn't," the policeman said. "Either way, she can keep saying no."

Those first few weeks in New York it was no good calling her mother every day, collect or not. Whether she called the house or the shop, her father almost always answered, and when she asked to talk to her mother her father would stand by the phone while they talked, so her mother really couldn't say much about how she was doing. And the times she did get her mother alone all Carmen wanted to ask her was "Now what do I do?" But she began to realize that her mother couldn't answer that, so after the first couple of weeks she called less.

Every day, for those six weeks in the hotel, venturing a little further into her new world, she found herself learning new things in, for her, a completely new way: which newspapers not to buy, which restaurants not to eat at, which apartments not to go see, which jobs not to apply for, who not to give her name to. All this while trying not to cause any problems for her mother and not to be anything like her father, while also trying not to make the same mistakes as her mother.

Mornings, alone, not fully awake, she'd look at the yellowing leaves outside in the morning light, figuring out what she wasn't going to do that day—when going to Ohio State would have been the natural order of things. August was too late to apply to any of the universities in New York, but she knew she wasn't going to start midyear, or the following fall, either. The whole idea had been to go to Columbus after twelfth-grade summer vacation. To her, no other place and time for that was ever going to make sense.

Her mother visits her twice a year now, spring and fall. She always arrives on a Wednesday evening and Carmen always meets her plane. And she always leaves on a Sunday afternoon, and lets Carmen go with her only as far as across the street from Grand Central, where she catches the airport bus.

“Ma, can't I—”

“Carmen, honey, I'll be all right.”

Every trip her mother leaves it until then: Shouldn't she look for an apartment in a better area; shouldn't she try for a job with some future? “And, you know, someday you *could* get married, Carmen.”

It's true that she's never had the same boyfriend two trips in a row. Some of these visits of her mother's she doesn't have a boyfriend at all. The last guy lasted six months, which was about right; if her mother saw her with the same guy twice, she might get her hopes too high.

“It's not easy, Ma. It looks easy, but then maybe their friends have to like you, maybe their family has to like you. And if somebody

doesn't like you there's nothing you can do to make them like you—they're going to look for things.”

Her mother was married at seventeen, so how could she know of such problems? Because it seems to Carmen it's taken every year of her life in New York to learn them.

So Wednesdays her mother gets there, Fridays and Saturdays Carmen follows her around while she shops, but Thursdays she just takes her mother along to work, a costume-design place in a loft in Chelsea. “They're not *real* wedding dresses, right, Ma?” And her mother's got it all sorted out, after so many trips, that some of the boys there prefer boys, and some of the girls prefer girls. There's not really what you'd call job security, not much health insurance, but it's quiet up on that high floor, and there's never anybody who's not speaking to someone else, so it's an easy place to be for whole days.

On the Sunday mornings, when she's leaving, Carmen's mother always counts out some twenties. She squirrels them away for these trips, for Carmen. “Save it or spend it—up to you. You're on your own, anyway.” Her mother always tells her something like that.

And Carmen saves it to spend it. Once a year, she'll have two parties. When, in the beginning, she thought of having a party, she started to worry. So many invitations to repay—all those people, and she didn't mean numbers. Then she figured out what to do: two parties, on two nights in a row.

To the first night's party she invites people who may not like each other, but she doesn't really care if they do. To the second she invites people she knows will. So on the first night she worries but doesn't really care; on the second she cares but doesn't have to worry.

Of course, she tells everybody that her place just isn't big enough, which it isn't, to have all those people arrive at one time. And if she thinks one half of a couple could be right for the first night and the other for the second, she feels bad about it, but they

both have to come the first night. Because she's trying to get the second night the way she wants it. On the first night she'll have freedom of thought at least, but on the second she's got to also have freedom of speech.

It's on the second night she finishes paying the caterers with those twenties from her mother. She pays them half in advance when she books them, half when the second night's party is just as she wants it to be.

"You *see*?" she says to the caterers, always making a sweep with her hand to include all her guests. Besides herself, the caterers are the only ones ever there on both nights. "You *see*?" She says it every time she has these parties, on the second night. "You *see*?" And she always says it in the same way she answers her mother across the street from the airport bus, every trip now.

"Carmen, honey . . ." her mother will say, starting to tell her one thing while Carmen looks for a way to tell her another: that she has her own place, she pays her own rent, that some of the people she knows really like each other.

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HOW (WHERE) "Carmen" WAS WRITTEN...

Pastry, the Mob And Principle

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What aspiring writer or artist ever could resist the thoughtful atmosphere and white tile walls of De Robertis pastry shop? It is a place with the smell of pastry and the much stronger odor of

principle, that last word being an exact description of the effect the place always had on people. The joint weighed on you.

There was an early evening when an artist with painted hands — “Future,” waitress noted — was telling somebody that he did not like what he was doing and that, as he refused to commit fraud, he was going back to his studio and start all over again. A chubby, jovial guy named Rick Rofihe, who teaches writing at Columbia, was talking about the work he still had to do on a short story. He didn't think it was quite right, he said. He went home and when the work finally pleased him, he sent it to The New Yorker magazine, which was pleased to print it. The short story was called “Carmen,” and was well received.

Another man who drew strength from the place was Joseph Armone, also known as Joe Piney. He had this name because he sold Christmas trees. When he tired of doing that, he became a gangster. He took a Mafia oath, given by the late Carlo Gambino, and then sat in De Robertis as an official member of organized crime. As he was sworn to absolute secrecy, he rarely said more than hello. One night, however, he wandered over to the Reno Bar on Second Avenue and began looking at a girl for far too long a period. The girl was with Barney the Polack, who handled the matter by shooting Joe Armone five times. Somehow, Joe lived, but when first the detective asked him who did it, and then Carlo Gambino inquired, Joe gave both the same answers. “I swore I never would rat on anybody.”

Because Armone wouldn't talk, Barney the Polack lived for about 25 years, or until he ran into the usual hail of bullets, for reasons unknown.

There came a December when Joe Armone was convicted of being a criminal in Brooklyn Federal Court and he asked the judge if he could spend Christmas with his wife. He guaranteed that he would return to court for his sentencing.

The judge, Jack Weinstein, said he thought it might be all right, but he placed a condition: Joe Armone had to sign a paper swearing that he would renounce his membership in the Mafia and neither see, nor speak to, anybody in the Mafia.

An iciness came from Joe Armone. Had he not sworn to keep an eternal silence about the Mafia? How could a mere judge ask him to break a solemn oath? Joe Armone walked through the door and spent Christmas in silence and in a jail cell. Which is where he is to this very day.

Because of such things, De Robertis, even though you must walk down steps to enter the place, always seemed a promontory that was out of the reach of the turmoil of the rest of the city.

Oh, the neighborhood at 10th Street and First Avenue, hardly has been serene. Two middleweight champions of the world, Rocky Graziano and Jake LaMotta, came off the corner. So did a couple of major criminals, Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky. It was also in this corner that Hymie the Bookmaker and his girlfriend Iris swirled out of Hymie's storefront gambling headquarters and boxed a draw on the sidewalk. It was a fair fight. Then they had a return match in a bar at 120-25 Queens Blvd. in Kew Gardens and this was not fair. Iris grabbed the pay phone receiver as Hymie walked out of the men's room and she caught him in the face with the instrument. The result was a straight knockout.

None of this, however, spilled into De Robertis. Of course there were guys in and out of the joint, crewmen from the Gotti vessel, but they were just part of a quiet room, with the tile walls and old booths and pictures from 1904, when the place was first opened. This attracted people like Rofihe, the writer. Certainly, it wasn't like any of these other places where people used to gather their thoughts.

Once, in Queens, there once was the splendor of Licata's on Forest Avenue, in Ridgewood. It had a backyard with tables, which were in front of a high wall covered with ivy. Tomato plants were on the other side of a wrought iron fence. Unfortunately, the place also had a front door and this was used one night by people who came in accompanied by assault weapons. And that was the end of that place.

Always, however, there was De Robertis, which was safe from everything but, it now turns out, John Gotti's mouth. Gotti is the first

rap star of the Mafia. Whenever he walks into a room, he turns it into a sound studio. Here he is in a hallway at his Ravenite Social Club on Mulberry Street and, acting as if even the doorbell had not yet been invented, he talks, for the entire electronic world to hear, "You tell this punk . . . I . . . me . . . John Gotti . . . will sever your — — head off!"

How can any place, even the most secluded fortress, survive the anger and widespread energy that rises in the law enforcement business upon their hearing something like this?

So into De Robertis they came, these lawmen in their suits and with their badges and warrants, and they lugged off all the Gotti people they could find, Jack Giordano, known as Handsome Jack, most prominent. They charged them with running an entire criminal enterprise out of the back room of De Robertis. The Manhattan District Attorney's office said that they had heard tremendous statements being made by these criminals as they sat in De Robertis' back room, the same place where artists and writers consider their talent. Gone, apparently, is Joe Armone's allegiance to his oath of silence at all costs. Apparently, it has been replaced by a lot of loose talk.

Oh, the owner, John De Robertis, said he didn't know what all this was about. He has eye trouble and doesn't see as far as the tables in the back of his pastry shop. Therefore, how could he be expected to know who was sitting back there?

But this was hardly enough to prevent the inevitable. De Robertis, once so wonderful and important to anybody who sought solace and a place to think, probably will be changed forever. For now it is famous as a mob hangout, one of the Gotti gang's places, and the tourists and onlookers will come into De Robertis like a herd, shattering the quiet.

