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**WHAT I FOUND OUT  
ABOUT HER**



1. I found out that she had always been tall, skinny when a kid and now as slim as a runway model, even if she wasn't a runway model but some sort of copy editor (I'm not sure I quite followed that, exactly what the position was) at a fashion news service in what I imagined as a blue-tinted glass skyscraper somewhere around Herald Square. Her voice was whispery, a certain softness to it.

2. I found out that she smiled a lot, and that when she smiled her top lip flattened over her upper teeth that did protrude a bit, slightly bucked, but there was something right about that, the pouty overbite, and lovely, too.

3. I found out that she had always hated the whole idea of going to a gym, all those strangers so sweaty, so she considered herself lucky to be naturally tall and slim, even if it had meant being gangly as a kid. The big green eyes and the lustrous black hair, which she wore like maybe a French schoolgirl, just parted on the side and with a single yellow plastic barrette to hold it across her forehead, weren't any secret, anything you had to find out, or the fact that she dressed well, maybe because she did work at that fashion news service, perfect when she met me for drinks in a short straight black skirt and satiny emerald-green camisole shirt and shoes with braided gold straps that looked expensive.

She was twenty-seven and very lovely, and we spent the night together in my room at the Pennington Hotel on Forty-eighth Street. That's when I found out these things, in the room high up with a balcony. We would be together just a dozen or so hours, which in a way makes the truth of our being together—when put up against the whole matter of what eventually happened later, that big darkness—

seem negligible, but in a way so much more important, too, even frightening, I suppose.

4. And, hell, it was hot that Sunday night in late June in Manhattan, and Room 1411 in the Pennington Hotel—a nice older place—was on the building’s back corner. It had the balcony perched above the humpy black roofs of several Forty-seventh Street theaters below (the Biltmore, the Barrymore, the Brooks Atkinson), and that balcony was what turned out to save us, you might say, seeing that the air conditioner itself didn’t pack much of a punch; we ended up keeping the twin doors to the balcony open, the big windows on the corner’s other side open, too, windows overlooking Eighth Avenue, then tenements and glistening street lights and lime-green puffs of summer treetops, clear to the black Hudson and silhouetted New Jersey across the way.

The whole week and then the weekend had been breaking June records, and before we finally got together, met for drinks and then dinner on that Sunday night, before we eventually went up to that room, 1411, I had asked myself why I had been so crazy as to linger in the city for a weekend when I had already finished up by Friday just about everything I had to do in the city during my stay of several days. And New York on a summer weekend was too crowded to even think about the Metropolitan Museum or the recently reopened MoMA, altogether too hot to just walk and contentedly walk, which is what you’re supposed to do in New York, the only city of that kind in the whole of America, a world city, where you can just walk and walk and walk, no?

5. But to backtrack some, I had met her at a dinner party in Los Angeles, a couple of months before. She was visiting L.A. then for a long weekend.

I was simply supposed to look her up if I was ever in New York, so I did just that. And we talked over drinks in the quiet bar where we met on Ninth Avenue that she suggested on the phone, then talked some more at dinner in the good pasta restaurant on Ninth Avenue that she also suggested. (She said she knew the area a

little because she had friends who lived in the orange-brick high-rise of Manhattan Plaza nearby—two struggling actors, a couple—and she explained that Manhattan Plaza was basically subsidized housing for theater people, having been locked into forever being such when an overaggressive developer in the seventies was too far ahead of his time in figuring out that because Hell’s Kitchen was so close to midtown, it would one day be upscale and in demand; she said the city had to bail out the developer back then, buying the high-rise and setting up that subsidized-rent deal with the theater union, she said her friends were set for life, with their rent being based on what they made, and—she laughed—they both made damn little.) We walked back to the hotel in the heat, and when we talked out on the balcony, a fine view of the definitely lurid show for a sunset in the haze over New Jersey, she said she wished she had brought her pot to smoke, it would have been perfect, which made me realize how young she was. And still out on the balcony, smooching some by then in the darkness, we watched in a nearby high-rise an odd scene of some little kids rolling around on the carpet in their lit, air-conditioned living room, wrestling with one another, thumping one another solidly with sofa pillows, and we both laughed; it was terrible but pretty funny, too, to see that, and when she laughed she did put her hand over her teeth that were a little buck, like I said, a gesture that seemed entirely girlish and made me also realize again how young she was.

A dozen years between us, though maybe that isn’t all that much. I’d just turned thirty-nine.

There was eventually lovemaking that neither of us had expected, certainly, when I had called her that week after getting into the city from L.A., when she had told me she was tied up most of the weekend, Friday night and all day Saturday, but Sunday evening would be fine for her if it was for me. So I decided to stay for the weekend, and, after all, the agent I had met with that week was paying for everything, this trip to New York.

6. Her mother had died when she was seven, and she said it probably affected her sister, a few years older, more than her. With her

father assigned to so many places in his consular job with the State Department (Egypt, Barbados, Senegal), she got used to being on her own in the other countries, which was more or less what being raised by a nanny felt like, she said, and by the time her father remarried, she was already off in boarding school in Switzerland. She said her time at the school in Switzerland was now kind of a blur to her, the same for taking the last year before college at a prep school in Providence called Moses Brown, where she said that, granting it was a Quaker institution, there were an awful lot of serious drugs and not just pot, because rich American kids like that had money for all the drugs they wanted. She said there had been some experimenting with girls sexually, at the boarding school in Switzerland, or at least one girl. She said the girl was a pale and lisping and skinny girl at the school there, a girl named Nicole, who she never knew what happened to. She said she would like to have an address even now to email her, to see what became of Nicole in life.

I mean, I was finding out an *awful* lot about her.

7. I learned that she made forty-one thousand dollars a year on the job as a copy editor for the fashion news service (I had asked her only out of curiosity and she was direct), and I learned that she had been wooed by a similar operation that apparently did about the same kind of thing, but it was located in New Jersey, across the river, so she didn't take the offer, though they wanted to give her almost fifty thousand, a deal where she might get Fridays off as well. She said she really didn't want to take that step, working in New Jersey and not actually be working in New York, she didn't like the idea of that. She lived in Williamsburg in Brooklyn.

8. I don't know exactly what I told her, and I suppose there was equally as much talk about me, probably more than her own talk about herself. But you never remember all of that, or much of that, what you yourself said, when you do look back on one of those first times together with somebody, do you? I mean, it's all a matter of what the other person has to say to you, isn't it?

In truth, I have no real idea what I said to her, what I told her. I suppose she did ask me about my screenwriting work in L.A., I suppose I did tell her about my bust of a brief marriage, no kids. And I don't want to make it seem that she was going on and on with her own story, because all of what I found out about her just came out in the course of conversation, in the restaurant, then on the balcony, then in bed after the lovemaking, and I suppose I gently asked her things the way you do when you first get to know somebody, especially when both of you immediately feel so attracted to each other that way.

9. And even now I would like to be able to say that there was some clue in the course of it all, something she said, even in our brief time together, to indicate what eventually did happen to her might happen to her. (Months later I finally got a long-distance call back in L.A. from her sister, a few years older, as said, who told me that she herself was married with kids, lived in Connecticut. She had taken it upon herself to carefully go through all the phone messages that had been left with her sister's answering service and finally reply the best she could to people, and the sister was the one who told me what had happened, that's how I got word of it, but only after my leaving several messages following the beep, which I—knowing what I do know now—lately hear as so haunting; but I had given up leaving messages for her after a while back then, had decided then that for some reason or other the young woman I spent the night with was obviously dodging me, even screening the several calls I made when back on the Coast.) Yes, now, to think that we were together for only what amounted to hours and there was *so much* I learned, there was *so much* that I found out about her—though, I should emphasize, our conversation was completely relaxed and casual, all of it natural enough, when I found out these things.

10. I found out that there really hadn't been that many boyfriends, or as many as I would have expected, anyway.

In college at the University of Arizona (she was an English major, said she went there because a lot of other kids from the prep school

in Providence were going there, and she later decided that she maybe should have thought more about what college to attend, picked a place more serious), in college there was a hippie-retro guy her age in the student co-op where she lived with a lot of other hippie-retro people, and she dated him for most of her sophomore and junior years (she laughed, saying that she personally hadn't been a hippie, retro or otherwise, and the co-op turned out to be pretty crazy—it seemed a bunch of them there gave the pet Scottie that she had gotten at an animal shelter a magic mushroom one night while she was out with the boyfriend at a movie, and the poor little dog apparently wandered off thoroughly stoned, she never saw it again), and then when she was a senior she had a job working as a waitress in a Tucson brew pub, which I found myself picturing, all that polished copper and polished mahogany you always find in any brew pub, and she dated a grad school dropout studying Latin American politics who was a bartender and perpetually trying very hard, she laughed, to get back into grad school, not turn out to be a lifelong Ph.D. dropout; she still heard from him occasionally, married in Tucson now with three kids, no Ph.D. (when I seemed surprised to learn that she had to work during college, the waitress job, she explained that maybe I had gotten the wrong impression from what she had told me about being at the Swiss boarding school and then what surely was the expensive prep school in Providence, she explained that tuition for such places was a perk her father got with the foreign service, and he actually didn't make that much money as a consular-section staffer and simple government employee, was saddled to the usual step-by-step raises and not much more than that). I suppose it was very surprising that there hadn't been more men in college, more men now, when you considered how attractive she was, how soft-voiced and pleasantly engaging she was.

11. She laughed and said she wanted to have kids some day. Of course, she wanted that, she *really did* want that.

12. She said she lived in Washington right after college (her father now lived there, but I'm not sure whether I quite followed that

either, if he was retired or simply assigned there before retirement), then she moved to New York to share a place with pals from college. In New York she met a young Wall Street lawyer not long after getting her first job, and they dated for two and a half years, but that was thoroughly over now. She laughed that though he had a good degree from Columbia Law and though he worked for a large and important firm, was very successful, he was also convinced his career would eventually be doomed by the fact that his last name was Cruk, pronounced “Crook,” certainly not the name any lawyer would want. (I think I was more envious than curious about that, and I knew what kind of money big-time lawyers made in Wall Street firms, even young lawyers, money for Porsches and summer houses out in the Hamptons, that sort of thing, and my screenwriting career was middle income at best, that best being when one job did lead to another, which I, and especially my own wise-cracking agent in L.A., always hoped would be the case.) More recently, for about a year, there had been somebody named Jack, who she said was a welder and who she had known for a long time, he had gone to prep school with her, that Moses Brown School. And then rather than laughing she seemed to express a remembered and quite real concern about the fact that there was genuine danger to the welding he did, and sometimes he would out of habit tip up his mask too soon, before he should tip up the mask, and a stray spark or two would flick toward his eye, she was always nervous about the danger of that for him, always told him he had to be more careful, he could injure himself for life. (I guess that raised questions as I lay there listening, and I also felt envious with mention of him, the welder, to think of some surely muscular and handsome young working-class guy, but maybe he wasn’t such, because hadn’t she said that she had known him from prep school, and then I felt even more envious, to think that possibly he was a welding artist not only muscular and handsome, but somebody masterfully handling the eerily glowing blue torch, wearing a mysterious, almost primordial mask, to wrestle with heavy steel slabs and energetically construct, no doubt, huge and acclaimed art installations—but I didn’t ask her to elaborate, so

I never really knew what kind of welder that boyfriend had been.) I listened.

She laughed and said that maybe she wasn't good with relationships.

13. "Are you seeing anybody now?" I asked her.

Hell, it was hot in that room, our naked bodies glazed and the two of us lying there side by side, facing each other, the doors to the balcony and the windows thrown wide open to the night, or possibly *more* than wide open like that, so the outside was inside, maybe. You could hear the traffic and horns below, somehow distant, you could imagine all the people down there in the heat, perhaps getting out of the theaters now on a Sunday evening, out on the sidewalk and themselves amazed by the sultry deep-blueness of the evening, people still half in the other world of whatever pantomime of life they had been so caught up in for the last couple of hours there under the roofs of the theaters directly below the balcony of Room 1411, and she reached out to push my own forelock up from my brow, look right at me with the truly green eyes, flecked with gold like autumn leaves, very lovely, and say:

"I'm seeing you right now."

I looked right back at her, smiled, and I suppose I thought what a rare surprise it was, how I wasn't even going to linger in the city for the extra couple of days—face all that heat, all the usual summer weekend crowding, plus my knowing that I should have been back in California and tending to things piling up there, I could have booked a flight out on Friday evening—and now everything had turned out like this, so right, so wonderful, you might say.

14. "I'm seeing you right now." That was the exact line, maybe the only exact line I could quote from her for the entire night even if I do remember so much, and it sticks with me. "I'm seeing you right now," which she said as she looked at me that way, as she did *see* me right then.

15. The horns continued to sound, softly, very far below, lulling and pleasant in the night, like distant surf can be lulling, like a thunder-

storm heard rumbling a couple of towns over can be lulling. From the sheets, creased and lumped from our tumbling before, you could look out through the open balcony doors of the hotel so high up like that and see the giant red-and-white neon *M* atop the yellow brick pile of the very old Milford Hotel, the letter almost floating untethered in the night sky of a hot Sunday in late June, you could see now and then a faraway jet swooping up, taking off from maybe LaGuardia into what must have been the set ascent path for takeoffs, a silver speck making no noise at all, but very much there, getting smaller and smaller as it gained height, as if it was something you almost knew, something you were trying to think of, but then it somehow got away from you the more you did try to think of it, the more you tried to concentrate on it, determine what *exactly* it was.

“It’s crazy hot in here, isn’t it,” I said to her.

I remember my saying that, probably more than once, the joke of the air-conditioning getting nowhere against such record-breaking heat, and, in fact, I had learned by my second day in the room that week that it was worse to keep the doors and windows shut and try to let the AC do its job, which it obviously really couldn’t do.

And maybe when I talked about the heat, she didn’t say anything, still looking at me. She just smiled, there was that pouty overbite.

16. And what was it that she had said before, the exact quote? “I’m seeing you right now.”

17. I found out that the apartment she had over in Williamsburg was shared with two other people her age (not the original roommates, there had been understandable turnover); she said the place was a bit absurd, in that it was divided-up loft space in an old factory and was located right above, wouldn’t you know it, a recording studio for an independent rock label. She said the noise could be loud sometimes, even rattling the dishes, and she said that recently, in the last month, there had been the even more absurd situation of some construction going on across the street (I was trying to picture it, knowing about Williamsburg only from a couple of L-train trips there over the years maybe to see art in small galleries, but also knowing that Williamsburg nowadays was unquestionably “in” with

younger people, the old Hasidic neighborhoods and block after block of brick factories giving way to more loft space, lately very hip and with too many, surely, galleries and restaurants and trendy new dating bars, that sort of thing), yes, with the construction across the street, there suddenly seemed to be a fleeing of mice from the demolished building there and a resulting mass invasion of them now into her building. She said she was going to get a cat, even if a single girl having a cat was a cliché, did sound stupid, she admitted, and she said she had already looked into it, how you could go down to the Brooklyn Animal Shelter for a kitten—getting a cat, everybody told her, was the only real way to solve the mouse problem. When I asked her about the noise from the recording studio, she said that for her it wasn't bad at all, because it coincided with her own schedule, the music always knocking off by midnight, and she never went to bed before midnight; plus, she said, there pretty much was none of it on the weekends. She said the location of the place was great, the rent really reasonable for that much space, too. And I told myself that her being completely accepting of such annoyances, that alone was electric in a way, youthful, to think how much somebody could put up with at twenty-seven; I remembered what I mentioned before, how when I first showed her the balcony and the view, the first thing she said was that she really wished she had brought her pot to smoke, it would have been perfect to have it out there, she said.

18. I suppose that after I heard nothing from her once I returned to L.A., got no answer to my messages left, I didn't think of her much before long, and I was eventually in what you might call a very serious relationship, the kind of relationship that I really wanted to work at, that I really wanted to develop. I didn't think that much anymore about how it had been so good to be with the young woman that night, how unexpectedly enjoyable were the dozen or so hours we spent together.

Which is to say, when her sister did call me from there in Connecticut—to tell me the big sadness of it all, to talk to me honestly, because it was obvious that the woman thought I was somebody more important than I was in her sister's life—not only was