

## AN OLD (NOT SO OLD) MAN

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**F**or years my friend Gigi kept an eye out for the old Jewish novelist who lived in our neighborhood near Broadway. Not that she'd read all his books—though she'd read plenty of them, as well as many of his stories that appeared in all the major magazines. What interested her most was the way he walked up 86th Street. A small, white-faced man with big ears, he managed to be inconspicuous yet totally noticeable at the same time. She couldn't tell how much was due to fame, how much to personal charisma, but whenever she saw him shuffling along on his morning strolls, putting one foot delicately in front of the other like a Chinese matron, she wondered what it would be like to touch him. His skin was so pale it looked like rice paper. At times he seemed almost insubstantial, halfway to heaven. But then there were those books of his, seething with passion, sex, guilt, betrayal! As old as he was, he seemed to be the only writer around who knew what she knew: that underneath people's obsession with money, or their problems, or their feelings of helplessness and wish for relief, they were still searching for the perfect mate—and that this was what gave their lives meaning. Yet whenever she saw him, she found it hard to believe that he was the one who'd written those books: either he had an amazing memory, or he was a geriatric miracle.

To fully understand what happened when Gigi finally met the old novelist, one has to be aware of two things: the atmos-

phere on our particular stretch of Broadway, and the effects of a mild New York fall day. Although true to its name, Broadway is an unexpectedly intimate street, at least the portion where we live, as well as a living palimpsest. If one looks hard and long enough at the few remaining benches on the concrete islands in the middle of the street, one can see the ghosts of Russian Jewish uncles and grandmothers who sat for decades happily breathing in exhaust fumes as they thanked God for putting an ocean between them and the Ukraine or Auschwitz. The atmosphere is relaxed, even hopeful. People stand in the middle of the street holding long conversations while the traffic roars around them—the kind of atmosphere in which a Wasp from Missouri and a Polish immigrant genius could actually meet and talk.

Especially on a day in early fall. There are certain days just after Labor Day when people, coming back from East Hampton or Cape Cod, want to show off their tans. They haven't yet settled back into their old routines, and the air is still clear and mild enough to make them feel that anything is possible. The sensuality in the air is pastel-colored; the sun itself—not hot enough to make you sweat, not distant enough to disappoint—touches exposed limbs gently, reminding people of their June optimism. During days like these they walk slower than usual, looking for any opportunity to pause and talk. Conversation itself is an aphrodisiac, and if you look carefully you can see how much pleasure people get, while talking, in crossing one leg over the other or tossing their hair—any excuse for one part of their bodies to make contact with another.

It was on such a Sunday morning when Gigi was returning home with the *Times* under her arm that she spotted him on the corner of Broadway and 90th Street. He didn't look well—even paler than usual—and he was wearing an awful, yellow-beige open-necked shirt (why did all old Jewish men dress so badly?) that nevertheless showed off his muscular forearms, the forearms of a retired cop rather than an eighty-five-year-old intellectual.

Perhaps because of the beauty of the morning or a particularly potent strain of pheromones, she felt bold enough to approach him. "Mr.—, I hope I'm not disturbing you, but I have to tell you—"

"Excuse me, Miss." He interrupted her in an accent that comedians have been making fun of for a century. "I suddenly don't feel very well. Could I have your arm?"

This she hadn't expected. She felt his hand hold her forearm in a tight, frightened grip.

He stood very still and breathed through his mouth. Obviously he was experiencing something that he recognized well enough to have turned it into a ritual. Later she told me that as he held her arm she felt calm, prepared, vigilant—like a character in one of his novels, a sexual adventurer who takes advantage of other people's frailties to enter their lives and take what he wants. She was half the novelist's age, no doubt stronger and healthier than he was—which still didn't make her young.

"Would you like to sit down somewhere?" she said when color returned to his face. Up close his skin wasn't white but faintly freckled: as a boy he'd probably been a redhead.

Now his breathing grew calmer. "It's I who owe you at least a coffee. Can I invite you?"

They walked across the street into the pink vinyl splendor of the Argo Coffee Shoppe. He seemed older than she'd realized—his steps really *were* small—and she could tell that he had back problems. She had them herself, and once to do research for an article she'd even taken a preliminary course in chiropractic. Maybe she could give him a massage?

"Of course I know who you are," she said after they'd settled down at a Formica-topped table.

"Oh yes, on the street you were about to tell me—"

"I just finished reading your latest book. Actually, it's been on my mind."

Not that she completely loved it. She could see its flaws: the impatient, sketchy writing of an old man who couldn't be bothered by setting scenes or describing characters. His pro-

tagonist was a man obsessed with betraying women, and, though the novelist had tried to disavow him, he'd made the betrayals so passionate and sexy, so much a combination of cruelty and vulnerability, that she'd found herself getting turned on. Whatever the book's flaws, it had gotten to her. He meant what he wrote. The fact that he didn't seem completely clear which side he was on—propriety or recklessness, morality or immorality—made the book that much more appealing: even at his age, he was wrestling with the same problems that she was.

"A terribly evil character I wrote about, no?"

"Not really," she said. "Rotten, yes, but sexy."

Why did she feel like flirting with him? What a crazy idea. He certainly showed no sign of being interested. Probably he'd grabbed her in the middle of a stroke, and flirting was the last thing on his mind. But then again, wouldn't that be just the time one *would* flirt? As they were closing the lid on your coffin?

"Do you really feel all right?" she asked. "You don't look totally okay. I could get a cab and take you back to your apartment."

"You were convinced by the sex in my book?" the novelist asked.

"Of course. Weren't you?"

"Of course, but one never knows about others. Are you a writer, too?"

"How did you guess?"

"Half the neighborhood are writers, so it isn't so difficult. And you look the type. What do you write?"

She told him about her career, such as it was, writing freelance articles and quickie books on waste disposal or painted furniture, editing magazines whose articles were forgotten almost before they were read (or written)—and piling up hundreds of pages of a novel about her lovelife that would probably never be completed. While she talked, she felt herself getting more and more depressed. This wasn't at all what she'd intended! She'd envisioned a meeting of complementary opposites, an exchange of wisdom from his side and charm from

hers. But all she was doing was talking about her miserable life to someone's Jewish uncle.

"Look, I don't really want to talk about myself." She heard steeliness in her voice. "Nor do I want to ask you questions like an interviewer. I want to get back to your book."

"What about it?" She recognized the look of a writer preparing to defend himself against an irate reader.

"Okay. I have to tell you that I loved it, but something about it bothers me. You seem to be critical of the hero, the guy who betrays all those women, but I'm not really sure you are. You describe the seductions so vividly that I have to say that I got sexually excited. That's what bothers me. I found myself wanting to be him and the women that he, if you'll excuse the expression, screwed."

"So did I," said the novelist.

For the first time that morning he smiled. It wasn't exactly winning—more the smile of someone in pain. She could see that his lips were widened by ill-fitting dentures.

"But that's no answer," she protested. "You can't have it both ways!"

"What two ways are that?"

"You can't write a book with all kinds of wild passion and sex that gets everybody including yourself turned on, and then imply that we should all live a balanced, reasonable, monogamous life. That's exactly the problem I have in real life! I've had three husbands. When I try to live a reasonable, sensible life I get incredibly bored. When I live a wild, promiscuous life—which I have done—I destroy myself. Now I'm not asking your advice. I realize this is an age-old problem. But why aren't you any closer to solving it than I am?"

"Maybe I am," the novelist said. He looked at her quizzically. "Maybe it has to do with the fact that there are many levels of the erotic. Right now, for instance, I listen to your gravelly voice and I like it. Maybe it reminds me of someone I knew, or maybe Marlene Dietrich, one of my old favorites. That doesn't mean that I have to sleep with you, does it—especially if I think of how complex and difficult the whole experience

is of sleeping with someone. The problem is that we are all a little crude, and we confuse sexual intercourse with the erotic. They're not the same thing. That's my character's problem. If he were excited by the many varieties of the erotic rather than the compulsion to possess and discard, he might not be so destructive."

Gigi paused for a moment. "Do you really believe this?"

"I think so. Yes. It's been my experience. And sex is not always sexual. Not even often."

He can't be serious, she thought. I thought he was going to say something about Nature sending us a variety of signals so that we feel contrary impulses—the urge to be promiscuous and faithful at the same time. But to be a connoisseur of the erotic...that sounds more than a little kinky.

Yet it did get her thinking. About how different the quality of her desire was, depending on its objects. How sometimes she was attracted to men or women, even children or animals, and how each instance—at least before her shame took over—delighted her: she seemed to be a multitude of sexes, as many as her varied, complicated desires called for. Was love only one form of the erotic? And did that mean that one was allowed to feel the shadings and contradictions without guilt? Right now, for instance, she was thrilled that she was talking with one of the people she most respected in the world. That itself was a turn-on. But there was also the fact that they were talking about being turned on; that was a turn-on, too. And the fact that he was famous: why wasn't that a legitimate turn-on? And the fact that he was twice her age: if one liked challenges, that could be the most stimulating turn-on of all.

It occurred to Gigi that the novelist might be flirting with her, suggesting obliquely that one could find a pale old man erotically interesting without wanting to go to bed with him. And after one realized it, then one might want to. Did she? Did he?

"What are you working on now?" she asked.

"A short story about a man who has the option of living forever, but without feeling sexual desire."

"Does he do it?"

"I think so, yes. He imagines that he can live on his memories."

"And that's when he discovers all these different levels of the erotic? When the sexual has been ruled out?"

For a moment she thought he had the look of a man about to try to move the relationship to the next level: to ask her out to dinner or up to his place. But then the blood drained out of the novelist's face; suddenly he looked his age.

"Miss—." He paused and smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry that I don't even know your name." But he didn't ask or give her time to tell. "I think you may have been right after all. Could I perhaps take you up on your offer to help me home?"

"So nothing actually happened between you?" I asked Gigi.

"Well, it depends on how you look at it. I did take him back to his place. In the cab he looked absolutely awful, sort of greenish-pale, and when I stroked his hand it was limp. He seemed annoyed, too, and kept muttering under his breath the way old people do when they seem to be settling old inner scores.

"Eventually I managed to get him upstairs. He was fragile in a way, but not at all light—he's a pretty solid guy. And he didn't seem at home in the apartment, one of those Upper West Side caves with heavy, fake-antique furniture, no bookshelves, all the walls a ghastly off-white, the kind of apartment that men who make money in the middle of their lives let their wives completely redecorate because they're too lazy or timid to protest. Still holding my hand, he sighed when we stepped in. 'Well, this is my home,' he said gloomily."

Gigi thought that he frowned like a sullen boy who's been sent home by the teacher and now has to face his mother. But as far as she could tell, the apartment was empty.

"Don't you want me to call a doctor?" she said. "I really think we should."

But the old novelist slumped down in the nearest couch—there were several—his body weight causing him to curl up and hunch his shoulders. Then he wiped his hand over his eyes; she couldn't tell if he was sweating or crying.

"Miss, please come sit over here." He said it with a firmness that could have been panic or masculine impatience.

Was this the hand finally reaching out of the coffin?

Gigi hesitated a moment, but by now she was running on instinct; whatever was going on was too muddled to pick apart. The couch pillows were so soft and overused that she felt as though she was sinking through to Wonderland; now her shoulders were hunched up, too. The apartment was filled with early Sunday morning sunshine, the quietest time Manhattan has to offer; it almost felt as if there was time enough to think.

Looking at her sideways, the novelist studied her carefully, perhaps expectantly, but made no move to touch her. She was confused. Was he ill or not? Was he shy? What the hell was going on? One thing was clear: she didn't feel like one of his characters anymore. What she felt was young, young, younger.

And then she said something that surprised even her: "Mr.—, what exactly would make you happy?"

It seemed to wake him up. He looked amused, and curious about her for the first time. She wasn't offering herself as a sycophant, far from it; she wasn't offering herself at all. Really what she was offering was compassion: the form it would take depended on the usual delicate negotiations between adults.

And now he really did smile. It was filled with a certain amount of slyness, but mostly with what looked to her the respect one feels in encountering an equal, a *landsmann*. If the circumstances were different, she thought to herself, circumstances would be...different. Finally he seemed to know that she existed.

"What a clever person you are," he said.

"But what actually *happened* between you?"

"A lot, a little, you decide," said Gigi. "When I was walking back to my place on that sensationally gorgeous morning, I have to admit that it was exactly like he said it was: all the levels of the erotic working at once. The whole place—the city, the air, my clothes, the scrawny privet hedges in his court-



yard—everything was bursting with libido! To this day I don't know whether or not he meant to turn me on. Or really what he had in mind. But he did turn me on. Not because he was famous—at least I don't think so—but because he had a certain...fineness of taste."

"You mean his line about all the different levels of the erotic?"

"That, and the fact that he grabbed *my* arm instead of the arm of any old bag who came walking by!"