Another Thing to Fall

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Published by Orion

Extract

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ANOTHER THING TO FALL

LAURA LIPPMAN



First Shot

There she was.

Smaller than he expected. Younger, too. But the primary shock was that she was human, a person just like him. Well, not *just* like him—there was the thirty-plus age difference to start—but flesh and blood, standing on a street in Baltimore, occupying the same latitude and longitude, breathing the same air. Look at her, sipping one of those enormous coffee drinks that all the young people seemed to carry now, as if the entire generation had been weaned too early and never recovered from the shock of it. He imagined a world of twenty-somethings, their mouths puckering around nothingness, lost without something to suck. Figuratively, not literally. Unlike most people, even allegedly educated ones, he used those words with absolute precision and

prided himself on the fact, as he prided himself on all his usage, even in the sentences he formed in his head, the endless sentences, the commentary that never stopped, the running voice-over of his life. Which was funny, as he disdained voice-over in film, where it almost never worked.

Yet even as the vision of a suckling nation took shape in his head, he knew it wasn't his exclusively, that it had been influenced by something he had seen. Who? What? A small part of his brain wouldn't rest until he pinned down this fleeting memory. He was as punctilious about the origins of his ideas as he was about the correctness of his speech.

He liked young people, usually, thrived in their company, and they seemed to like him, too. *Crabbed age and youth cannot live together*—whoever wrote that line couldn't have been more wrong. The young people he invited into his home, his life, had given him sustenance, enough so that he didn't mind tolerating the inevitable rumors. *Baltimore bachelor . . . lives by himself in that old house near the park . . . up to strange things with all that camera equipment. People swear he's on the up-and-up, but who can tell?* But those things were said by the neighbors who didn't know him. When he selected the children, he got to know their parents first, went around to the houses, showed them what he did, explained his methods, provided personal references. It got so where parents were calling *him*, begging for a slot for little Johnny or Jill. Gently, tactfully, he would explain that his wasn't just another after-school program, open to any child. It was up to him, and him alone, who would be admitted.

Now that he had this one in his viewfinder—would he have chosen her, glimpsed her potential when she was eight or nine? Possibly, maybe. It was hard to know. Faces coarsened so much after adolescence. Personalities, more so. This one—she was probably sweet, once upon a time. Affection starved, the kind who crawled

into your lap and cupped your cheeks with her baby-fat palms. Patted your face and stroked your hair and stared straight into your eyes with no sense of boundaries, much less the concept of personal space. He loved children when they were unself-conscious, but that phase was so swift, so fleeting, and he was left with the paradox of trying to teach them to be as they once were, to return to a time when they didn't understand the concept of embarrassment, much less worry about what others thought. But it was the eternal struggle—once you realize you're in Eden, you have to leave. He watched the teenage years approach with more anguish than any parent, knowing it marked the end.

The lens was a powerful one, purchased years ago. He was no Luddite—there was much new technology on which he doted, and even more for which he yearned—but he could not sacrifice his old Pentax for a digital camera. Besides, the kind of SLR system he would need was out of reach. The Canon he had priced online was $2,500 at discount, and that was for the body alone. No, he would stick with his battered Pentax for now. Come to think of it—how old was this camera? It must be twenty-five, thirty years ago that he had taken the plunge at Cooper's Camera Mart. A memory tickled his nose—what was that wonderful aroma that camera stores once had? Film, it must have been film, or the developing products, all outmoded now. Consider it—in his lifetime, just a little over a half century, he had gone from shooting photos with a Kodak automatic, the kind with a detachable wand of flashbulbs, to shooting movies that he could watch instantly at home, and if anyone thought that was inferior to trying to load an eel-slippery roll of film onto a reel, then they had his sympathy. No, he had no complaints about what technology had wrought. Technology was wonderful. If he had had more technology at his disposal, even fifteen years ago, then things might be very different now.

Look up, *look up*, *look up*, he urged the image he had captured, and

just like that, as if his wish were her command, she lifted her eyes from the paper in front of her, stopped sipping her drink, and stared into the distance. Such an open, innocent face, so guileless and genuine. So everything she wasn't.

Her mouth, free from the straw, puckered in lonely dismay, and he knew in that instant the image that had been tantalizing him—*The Simpsons*, the episode that had managed to parody *The Great Escape* and *The Birds* with just a few deft strokes. He had watched it with his young friends, pointing out the Hitchcock cameo, then screening the real movies for them so they could understand the larger context. (It was the only reason he agreed to watch the cartoon with them, in order to explain all its cinematic allusions.) They had loved both movies, although the explicit horror of killer birds had seemed to affect them far more than the true story behind the men who had escaped from Stalag Luft III, only to be executed upon their capture. He was ten years old when the movie came out—he saw it at the Hippodrome—and World War II, an experience shared by his father and uncles, loomed large in his imagination. Now he found himself surrounded by young people who thought Vietnam was ancient history. They had reeled when they learned he was old enough to have been in the draft. This one—she, too, considered him old, and therefore a person she was free to ignore. She probably didn't even remember the Persian Gulf War. She might not know there was a war going on even now, given how insular she was. Insular and insolent.

He watched the rosebud of her mouth return to the straw and decided that the image that had been teasing him, literally and figuratively, was Lolita. The movie version, of course. No heart-shaped sunglasses, but she didn't need them, did she? *You'll be the death of me*, he lamented, clicking the shutter. *You'll be the death of me.*

Literally and figuratively.