

Her Terrible Singing Voice and Love of Singing

James phoned Olivia to ask if she would like to spend a day with him when he arrived at O'Hare International Airport from Minneapolis for a conference in May. He suggested that they go to the Art Institute during the afternoon, and Olivia offered to cook dinner for him at her condo that night. In the five years since they graduated from law school at the University of Chicago, James had visited Olivia three times on company trips, always with a hotel room reserved. Though they never dated during school, in wood-paneled bars and under green-shaded lamps in the library, Olivia had often thought of touching his hand. For their dinner, she chose a recipe out of a Betty Crocker cookbook: grilled tuna steak and asparagus. At an organic grocery store, Olivia bought three times the number of tuna steaks that she would need and practiced cooking the meal so she would not need to consult the cookbook with James.

"Are tuna extinct yet?" Her secretary asked when Olivia ate her third lunch of tuna.

"I made too much," Olivia said, blushing, "when my mother came for dinner."

She had not told her secretary about her mother's sudden death from a pulmonary embolism six months ago. The details of this deception came easily to Olivia (Christmas present from her mother: an antique nightstand, birthday present to her mother: tickets to an *Oprah* taping). She had taken off three days from work for the funeral, claiming to have the flu, and left a voice message for James with the wake and funeral arrangements, just as she had for the rest of her family and her closest friends. He'd e-mailed back in hours: "so sorry for your loss" and signed off with his initials, but did not offer to guide her by the elbow to the gravesite.

Olivia called two friends for advice before James's visit: Should she get a new hair style? Was a corduroy jacket too casual? She'd been calling to talk about James for five years: the

overly friendly e-mails, the two-bottle-of-wine dinners at French restaurants. Her friend in Los Angeles told her to script a scene in which she declares her love. ("Show, don't tell. Anyway don't only tell, show too: Grab his hand and press it to your lips.") New York City told her that if she loves James, she must be willing to put herself on the line. ("Shit or get off the pot.") Los Angeles and NYC were both married to men they met in their cities, small weddings in which Olivia carried flowers down the aisle on the arm of a married cousin. They both asked about her coming thirtieth birthday: Had she made plans yet? Was this why she was thinking of James again? The wives were both in therapy and believed the problem was Olivia. Her romantic fantasies were too calculating and empty of risk. The wives were invested in the small gestures of lifelong commitments: washing dishes and remembering birthdays.

In Olivia's fantasies about the day with James that she described to Los Angeles and NYC, they sat on a park bench outside the fountains at Millennium Park and shared a snack: roasted peanuts, a smuggled can of beer, a vanilla ice cream cone they took turns licking? (Los Angeles: "Honey, that sounds like Disney's *Lady and the Tramp*. If this is a fantasy, go hotter.") NYC: "Put newspapers down before you sit on that bench. You could get diseases.") James kissed her with vanilla lips, then recalled moments over the years when he had nearly reached for her, but stopped out of cowardice or a Shakespearean confusion about her feelings. He recounted the details of her life that he had observed: how flocks of geese flying overhead made her sentimental, her terrible singing voice and love of singing. Though he had not been present at the funeral, he knew how bravely Olivia comforted her grief-stricken father.

She collected such fragments about his life, his offhand stories from those wood-paneled bars: his undergraduate minors (art history, German) and majors (economics) and hobbies (soccer league, St. Mary of the Lake Catholic Church, small engines, crosswords in pencil). Her

knowledge of these fragments was embarrassing, and she hoped it was reciprocated. More than anything, Olivia wanted an audience. This was the center of her fantasy: being intimately observed in a way that allowed her to feel worthy of love and grand gestures. Not the time alone, the worst part of being single for Olivia was facing the indignities of her life in the absence of an onlooker who might feel sympathy or outrage, who would notice the indignities. The men that Olivia had dated over the years were interested in her history, preferences, and opinions, but not in the detail she desired. Without an audience to grant meaning to her choices, Olivia felt herself as transparent as a ghost, a placeholder when she should be a real person. Since her mother's death, Olivia felt increasingly immaterial in the world and thought more often of James.

James and Olivia took a cab to her apartment after the art museum. She wore a black corduroy jacket that she bought for \$142.50 at Marshall Fields. That week, her stylist gave her an asymmetrical haircut. The right side was cut short and the left was longer and wispy. Olivia thought the effect was sexy, though she feared that James would recognize her efforts as an elaborate disguise. At the art museum, she had to remind herself not to smile too much as she listened to James recall those art history classes years ago. She reached for her purse when the driver pulled the cab over on Dalton Avenue near her condo, but James insisted that he pay.

"For the pleasure of your company," he said.

She thanked him and slid out of the seat.

When she drew back the curtains from the four window panels in her eighteenth-floor condo, he complimented her view. Three panels opened to the windows of other high-rise apartments, and the fourth window panel opened to Lake Michigan. Shadows of sailboats and yachts on the water lengthened in the summer evening.

She opened a bottle of red wine and poured it in two glasses. Sipping the wine, James sat at a stool pulled up to the granite countertop in the kitchen. He wore dark brown pants and a light blue shirt. In law school, he'd always been a few days short of a fresh shave and wore black plastic glasses and smelled like laundry soap; now he wore contacts and did not have a five o'clock shadow until it was actually five o'clock. But he still smelled like laundry soap.

"How long have you lived here?" James asked.

"Two years," Olivia said. She reached into the refrigerator and removed a plastic container of tuna steaks in marinade. "This is a specialty of mine. Do you like tuna?"

"Well enough," he said. He stood and stared at the lake through the glass. "You should feel good about buying this condo by yourself. Most women I know wouldn't buy a place until after they're married because they're afraid of appearing too independent."

"Oh," Olivia said. She wore a low-cut red sweater, and beneath the sweater, a new lacy black bra. "I don't fear that. Are you dating any of these women?"

"Nothing serious," James said. "When I go on dates in Minneapolis, the women always seem to be interviewing for husbands. I find that tiresome."

"What kind of woman do you want to find?"

"Someone to spend time with. A pretty girl. I don't like all the anticipation."

"Of course," Olivia said. "Who would?"

"Can I help you with dinner?" James asked.

She nodded, took the steaks out of the marinade, and laid them in a skillet. She put a pot of water to boil and placed a metal steamer inside. James walked behind the counter, and Olivia handed him a rubber-banded handful of asparagus. They worked in silence. In three panels, the windows of the buildings facing east reflected gold, the sun falling toward the western suburbs.

The sailboats and yachts were coming to rest in their harbors. Olivia heard the sound of keys in the door of her neighbors' apartment.

"This is nice to cook dinner together," Olivia said.

"It reminds me of the old days," James said.

"Only then it would have been Ramen noodles or frozen pizzas."

"We've moved up in the world."

"Do you think of those days?" Olivia asked.

"Not often," James said. "I prefer to be on the other side of the bar exam."

Olivia nodded, but she wasn't listening. The spatula shook in her hand.

"There's something I want to tell you," Olivia spat out.

"What's that?" James put the stalks of asparagus in the steamer.

"I've wanted to say for some time that I have feelings for you."

The tuna steaks simmered. Lake Michigan darkened to a deeper blue in one of four window panels. The sky was empty of clouds. The neighbors to the east switched on their television set. James sat down on the stool. Olivia stood at the stove, not facing him.

"I haven't been sure what to do with the feelings, if they were wrong or if I was stupid."

"You're not stupid," James said.

Olivia nodded, feeling reassured. She inhaled. "I've been thinking about these feelings since you said you'd be in town. And here we are, so I wanted to let you know how I feel."

"I think I understand."

"You do?" Olivia turned around to face him. He was looking at his hands.

"I understand those feelings," he said.

"Do you have them?"

“I do. I have them sometimes.”

“For me?”

James nodded. “The kind that you describe.”

“What have you done about them?”

“Not much, I guess.” He touched the base of the wine glass. It shifted on the granite.

“Oh, right.” Olivia said.

“I’m wondering if you want something from me?” James looked up at her.

Olivia studied his face. “I wanted to get this confession off my chest, for one.”

“The steaks are burning,” James said.

Olivia turned toward the stove and flipped the steaks. She removed the asparagus stalks from the steamer and arranged them on two plates. She put the steaks on the plates and moved the bottle of wine to the dining room table. She lit two taper candles in the middle of the table and drew closed the blinds on the three window panels. The room was nearly dark. She put the plates down and gestured for James to join her. He picked up his glass and sat down. They ate in silence. The neighbors to the east began to argue over the noise of the television.

“Should I feel badly?” Olivia asked.

“I’m happy how things are between us,” James said.

“I’ve embarrassed myself and nothing will come of it.”

“We’ve spoken honestly. That’s something.”

As they ate, Olivia thought of the exhortations of NYC and Los Angeles. She’d been brave to speak, but the test of romance was tenderness. In the candlelight, Olivia put her hand on top of his hand. James threaded his fingers between hers. She could not bear to lift her eyes from her plate, but she felt him kneel beside her chair, and then he was kissing her. His lips felt soft,

but did not taste like vanilla ice cream. She put her hand on his cheek and opened her eyes. His face was so close; it was a new angle from which she could observe him.

James's eyes fluttered open and he pulled back from her.

"You're watching me," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've thought of this moment so often."

"How often?" James asked.

Olivia shrugged.

"Why didn't you say something before?"

"We were good friends." She dropped her hand from his face.

He walked over to his side of the table, cut a piece of tuna steak, and chewed it slowly.

"A friendship is no great sacrifice if you have strong feelings," he said.

"It was never the right time," Olivia parsed.

"Maybe you were waiting for me to make the first move?"

"You said that you had feelings for me too."

"I did say that," James said. "If you felt this way for some time, why tell me today?"

"You are here. I can feel time passing."

"What if I didn't call? Time has always been passing."

"I can feel time passing faster," Olivia said. She pressed her hand to her brow and remembered her mother's face against the coffin's linen: waxen, yet soft. Had she touched her mother's face to know it was soft even in death? She could not remember, but knew her mother's skin so well that she was certain of its softness. (Her mother's routine observed at the bathroom sink since girlhood: Dove Cold Cream to wash, Neutrogena Moisturizer in the day, a department store eye cream at night.) She moved her hand to her heart and felt blood rise in her cheeks.

“What did you think of that kiss?” James pressed her.

“I’m not sure,” Olivia gasped. “It just happened. I haven’t formed an opinion yet.”

“There’s your answer.”

“In time, these things reveal themselves.”

“No,” James said, shaking his head. “Immediately, these things reveal themselves.”

“I love you.”

“It cannot be love.”

“I have a stomach ache,” Olivia said. “I’m feeling ill.”

“That’s not love,” James said. “That’s nerves. Or bad tuna.”

“The tuna was excellent.”

“Kiss me again, then,” James said. Olivia nodded and pulled her chair to his side. He closed his eyes and she closed hers. When she put her lips against his, she was thinking about what it meant for her to love him. He slipped his tongue into her mouth, put his hand on her breast, and began kneading it but not in a tender way. She pulled away.

“You are a fine kisser,” James said. “When you lose yourself.”

“Thank you,” Olivia said.

“You make me want to be closer to you.” He nodded his head toward her bedroom.

“Wait,” Olivia said. “Tell me. What do you want for yourself?”

He removed his hand from her breast and sighed. “In what way?”

“What kind of woman? What kind of life?”

James shrugged. “I don’t often think of these things.”

“Have you ever thought about me?”

“I thought you were smart and nice and good company.”

“Did you ever imagine us together?”

“Idly, perhaps.”

Olivia looked down at her plate, then at his. “Did you like the tuna?”

“It was fine,” James said. “I don’t like asparagus.”

“Oh,” Olivia said.

The couple to the east turned off their television. Red lights flickered on the water from the boats remaining in the darkness. Had the three window panels been open, they could have watched careless neighbors in opposite buildings who had neglected to draw their curtains, a flash of breasts, a naked bottom, an arm reaching out from a tangle of limbs as they shifted and strained on their sectional couches.

“How early are your meetings tomorrow?” Olivia asked.

“Eight o’clock.”

“That’s early,” she said.

“I could stay for tonight,” James glanced at her.

Olivia shook her head. “I think you should leave.”

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to accomplish.”

“Me neither,” Olivia said.

James nodded, walked to the coat rack, picked up his coat, and put it on.

“It was nice to see you,” he said.

“Good night,” Olivia remained seated at the table.

James pulled the door shut behind him.

The candles flickered in the darkness, the sunset now drained from the surrounding buildings. The lake was the color of the sky. Olivia thought of what James did not know about

her: the flocks of geese, her terrible singing voice and love of singing. She put the plates in the sink, then reached into the refrigerator and pulled out the tiramisu that she had brought for dessert. She sat back down at the table and between forkfuls of the cake, she began to sob. She would not miss James, the man who had walked out the door, but already she missed her thoughts of him thinking of her that had kept her company, the consolation of love in the imagination, the single-minded focus it provided, the audience for her slightest thoughts and most beautiful angles. Without it, her mind and her heart, they were unfettered, and she was free.

In her sadness, Olivia craved her mother's consolation more than the outrage she could now expect from Los Angeles and NYC. (NYC: "What kind of pansy studies art history?") Olivia wished for her mother's interest in the fragments of her life: hair styles, new corduroy jackets, her grilled tuna. She wished for advice on the eye cream she should buy now that she was turning thirty. If she imagined herself in the company of her mother, she could script that scene down to the food on the table and the outfit her mother would be wearing. Loss required Olivia to refigure her mother outside of the physical world, and this was an entirely different kind of fantasy than her dreams of an afternoon in the park with James. Her imagined conversations with her mother were her heart's reprieve from an awful personal grief; James could have been any man. Olivia closed her eyes to will true the words her mother would have used to describe her in years to come: hardworking, brave, loved so truly she did not have to earn it.