

of him being discovered in the elevator, drooling and gibbering, gave me momentary pleasure. But I pressed the call button, and the elevator carrying Dedo came obediently back. *We are never as beautiful as now.*

The crushing sadness of hotel rooms, the gelid lights and clean notepads, the blank walls and particles of someone else's erased life: I rolled him into this as if into Hell. I hoisted him up onto the bed, took off his shoes and his socks. His toes were frostbitten, his heels brandished a pair of blisters. I peeled off his coat and pants and he was shivering, his skin goose-bumped, his navel hidden in a tuft of hair. I wrapped the bedcovers around him and threw a blanket on top. Then I lay down next to him, smelling his sweat and infected gums. He grunted and murmured, until his face calmed, the eyelids smoothing out into slumber, the brows unfurrowing. A deep sigh, as when dusk falls, settled in his body. He was a beautiful human being.

And then on Tuesday, last Tuesday, he died.

MARY GAITSKILL

Today I'm Yours

FROM ZOETROPE

I'VE DREAMT OF DANI only once that I can remember, but it was a deep, delicious dream, like a maze of diaphanous silk, or a room of hidden chambers, each chamber nested inside the previous one — except that according to the inverse law of the dream, each inner chamber was bigger, not smaller, than the last.

In the dream, I was alone on the streets of Las Vegas, surrounded by speeding traffic and huge, streaming lights advertising monstrous casinos. There were thousands of people pouring in and out of the monstrous advertised mouths, but I didn't know any of them. I went to my hotel. The walls of its lobby were made of artificial forest, with animals and birds moving inside them. I went to my room; its walls seemed to shift and flux. Dani came out of the bathroom wearing a leopard-print mini dress and black high-heeled shoes. The room stirred as if surprised; though she sometimes wore lipstick, Dani never wore a dress or high heels. She wore pants and clunky boys' shoes; she liked her lovers to wear dresses. But in the fluxing chamber of my dream, she walked toward me with a leopard-print dress, purring on her haunches.

Her slender little body was like a cold-blooded eel with electricity inside it; her movements too had the blithe, whipping ease of an eel traveling in deep water. But her flashing eyes were human. She came toward me as though she were going to kiss me; instead she walked past me, opened a door in the wall, and disappeared. I looked out the window and saw that I could see cities and countries; I could see into private rooms in other countries; I could see things that had happened hundreds of

years ago. But I couldn't see Dani, even though she was inside my room.

A week later, I was walking down the street in Manhattan, and there she was. It was during the first autumn of the Iraq War. On the newsstand a magazine cover read: "Why We Haven't Been Hit Again: Ten Reasons to Feel Safe — and Scared." In the middle of town, a building fell down and crushed people to death, and before sadness, there was relief that it was merely more decay, and not terrorism. A bus stop advertisement for bras read: "Who Needs Inner Beauty?" and someone had written across it in black marker: "You do asshole."

I was carrying wine and fuchsia flowers, the flowers nervously waving their wobbling fingers over the top of my bag. It was a humid afternoon, and the air was heavy with the burnt tang of fresh-laid asphalt and hot salted nuts. I walked past a wall layered with many seasons of damp movie posters; the suggestion of a circus seeped up under the face of an actress until a whole half-tiger leapt roaring through the hoop of her eye. Loud, clashing music poured out car windows and ran together in a muddy pool of sound with a single bell-like instrument sparkling in and around the murk. I looked up, my mind suddenly tingling with a half-remembered song, and there she was, looking at me. A smiling beggar wandered between us, jiggling the coins in his cup, and I remembered that when we first met, she had put her finger on my sternum, lightly run it down to my navel, and turned away. "Hello, Ella," she said.

She was on her way home from her job as an editor of a small press, distinguished mainly by its embroilment in several lawsuits. I was preparing for a dinner party my husband was giving for some pleasant, foolish people who had once been well regarded in bohemian literary circles. She knew I was married, but still, when I said the word *husband*, she let contempt touch her eyes and lips. We clasped hands, and I kissed her cool, porous cheek. Dani used contempt like a clever accessory, worn lightly enough to beguile and unsettle the eye before blending into otherwise ordinary clothing. I've never seen her without it, though sometimes it fails to catch the light and flash.

During the last ten years, we've met several times like this. When we first met, nothing was like this. That was fifteen years ago. I had

just published a book that was like a little box with monsters inside it. I had spent five dreary years writing it in a tiny apartment with a sink and a stove against one wall and a mattress against the other, building the box and its inhabitants out of words that ran, stumbled, posed, and pirouetted across cheap notepaper as if a swarm of hornets were after them. I neglected my family. I forgot how to talk to people, except to have sex. I paced the room while feverish tinny songs poured from a transistor radio with a broken antenna, and fantasized about the social identity that might be mine if the book were to succeed.

I did not realize I had made monsters, nor how strong they were, until the book was published, and they lifted the roof off my apartment, scaled the wall, and roamed the streets in clothes I never would've worn myself. Everywhere I went, it seemed my monsters had preceded me; and by the time I appeared, people saw me through their aura. This could've worked for me socially; monsters were and always will be fashionable. But in my mind, my monsters and I were separate. Painful and complicated situations arose, and I lacked the skill to handle them with finesse. I left the monsters behind and moved to California, where I rented a cottage in a canyon heavily grown with trees. I purchased a rug with large, bright polka dots on it and a red couch on which I sat for hours hypnotized by the prize of my new social identity. It was an appealing thing, and I longed to put it on — but when I did, I couldn't quite make it fit. Hesitant to go out in something so ill-fitting and uncertain how to alter it, I stayed home with the cat, who accepted my private identity as she always had.

Back in New York, several new acquaintances became concerned. They gave me the names of people I might introduce myself to in San Francisco, and one day I took the bus across the Golden Gate Bridge to meet one of them. The warm, dim, creaking old coach traveled low on its haunches, half-full of adults heavily wrapped in their bodies and minds, plus light-limbed, yawping teens, bounding and darting even as they sat in their seats. On the highway, the bus accelerated, and with a high whining sound, we sprouted crude wings and flew across luminous bay on humming bridge, between radiant, declaiming sky and enrapt, answering sea, flecked with flying brightness and lightly spangled with little tossing boats. We barreled along a winding avenue, thickly built with motels (the stick-

legged ball of a smiling sheep leaping over the words COMFORT INN still exists somewhere in my brain) and squat chunks of fast-food stores. The distant ocean flashed and brimmed at intersections. We turned right, ^{climbing} a hill ^{at} the top, fog boiled through the air on wings of mystery and delight. Down the hill, lit slabs of business rose up into the coming night. Floods of quick, smart people surged along with the hobbled and toiling; the felled sat beached and stunned against buildings in heaps of rags. Turn and turn again. Out the window, I saw a strip club with a poster on its wall featuring one half-naked girl walking another on a leash. The leashed girl looked up and raised a paw in a patently ironic expression of submission and desire. I was meeting Dani in a neighborhood of bars and old burlesque clubs, a place of cockeyed streets lined with doors like jack-o'-lantern mouths of teeth. The fog lolled in the sky, sluggish as a fat white woman on rumpled sheets. I was in a place where people dressed up as monsters; and after going to so much trouble to make them, I'd left mine behind. Feeling small and naked, I walked under big neon signs: a naked woman, an apple, a snake. It was not frightening. It was a relief to feel small and naked again.

I entered the appointed spot, a dive with a slanted, vertiginous floor. It took a moment to figure out who she was, but I believe she saw my nakedness at once. So did the man sitting with her, a middle-aged academic with a red shelflike brow. "Your stories are interesting for their subject matter," he peevishly remarked to me. "But they aren't formally aggressive enough for me." He went on to describe his formal needs; Dani listened with droll courtesy, then turned to me with an amused grin. She put her cold finger on my sternum and ran it lightly down to my navel, then turned back with mock solemnity as her companion lowered his drained glass and held forth again. He left minutes later, banging a table cockeyed as his curled arm and flipper hand worried the torn sleeve of his jacket.

"I'm sorry about that," she said. "I just ran into him. He's lonely and he talks too much when he's drunk."

She was twenty-five. I was thirty-three. She was already editor-in-chief of a venerable avant-garde press, a veritable circus of caged monsters and their stylish keepers. She spoke with a combination of real confidence and its flimsy counterfeit. Monsterless, I barely

knew how to speak at all, and what I could say was timid and unctuous. It didn't matter. She wore a heavy silver necklace over her white T-shirt, under which her small breasts gave off dark, glandular warmth. Behind the bar a mountain of green, blue, and gold bottles glimmered before a murky mirror lake. On the television above the bar, a rock star in an elaborate video drew a door in the air with a piece of chalk, smiled, and stepped through it. Jukebox music rose up, making a forest of sound through which young girls traveled on their way to the bathroom. Above us, the fog traveled too, laughing and quick. The bathroom door creaked loud and long; slim thighs went past, along with a swinging little wrist loaded with shining jewelry. We were hungry for this, all of this, and for each of us *this* took form in the other. We ate each other with our eyes and, completely apart from our inconsequential words, our voices said, *How delicious*. We impulsively kissed and separated quickly, laughing like people who had accidentally brushed against each other on the sidewalk. Then, with a nervous toss of her head, she glided in close again. Soft heat came off her face, and then there was the dark, sucking heat of her mouth. She said, "I'd take you to dinner, but my girlfriend is expecting me."

She drove me to the bus stop in front of a doughnut place and stood waiting with me. She lived with her girlfriend, she said, but they had an understanding. Gum wrappers and plastic bags stirred in the cold, light-echoing wake of night traffic. Behind the glass of the doughnut place, a dark woman with rhythmic arms labored over golden dough. On the street, a hunched man with a sour face strutted back and forth displaying the masking-tape words on the back of his jacket: COPS ARE TOPS — I'M A BOTTOM, plus an arrow pointing at his butt. Really, I said, an understanding? Yes, said Dani, though it had been difficult to maintain. How had they arrived at it? I asked. How had they talked about it? They had not talked about it, she said. She thought it was more powerful for not being talked about. Bottom scowled as we kissed again. Golden doughnuts continued to fry. The bus arrived; I crossed its black rubber threshold, sat in the back, and almost immediately went to sleep.

Asleep on the bus, I dreamt that, while watching a magic show, I was plucked blank and tingling from the audience and led by a white-gloved assistant up onto the stage, where I was suddenly

drenched with color and identity: I was the girl to be sawed in half. My heart pounded. I woke on the winding avenue, thickly built with motels, their signs now hot and raptly glowing in the velvet dark.

Naturally, it was nonsense about the understanding. That was just a door Dani had drawn in the air with her finger. But when we tried it, it opened, and so in we went.

We met almost every week for five months. Our time alone was as light and pleasantly shocking as her casual touch to my sternum, but with its meaning now thoroughly unfolded. We attended film screenings, dinner parties, the dull receptions that follow literary panels — and somehow we always found an unused room, an inviting stair, a hallway that would magically rearrange its molecules to become a sweet little seraglio and modestly revert as soon as we left it, smoothing our clothes and hair. We would have dinner somewhere, and then she would drive me back home to Marin. We drove without talking, the tape deck playing and the landscape making dark, curved shapes all about us, shapes that would part to reveal the stars, then the ocean, then clusters of fleeing light. I remember a tape she played a lot, a song that went: "Let your love come through / Love come through to you." It was a lush and long-ing song, and after it, the silence between songs seemed dense and deep. During this silence, Dani asked, "What are you thinking?" And so we began to talk.

We talked much like we made love — false and sincere, bold and fearful, vulnerable and shielded. I knew that her mother had had several facelifts, a tummy tuck, and liposuction. I knew that after an especially grueling set of operations, she had declared triumphantly to her daughter, "You have inherited an excellent set of healing genes!" She knew that my father had screamed to my mother, "I'm done with you, you phony! I'm going to find me a black lady with big flat feet and a hole up her butt!" I knew that one Thanksgiving her mother had burst into tears, run into the kitchen, and stuffed the turkey into the garbage, shouting, "And I wish I could do this to every one of you!" When Dani tried to comfort her, she turned away, shouting, "No! No!" Dani told this story not with self-pity but with laughter and love in her voice. When I showed her a picture of my parents taken at an ancient local studio known for its funereal tinting and suffocating airbrush technique, she said, entirely without irony, "They look great! They look so real!"

"She means we look like hell," stated my father when I told him what my friend had said.

"She meant you don't look like you've had a facelift," I answered.

"I would if I could afford it."

I repeated that to Dani, with laughter and love in my voice. We love our parents, our stories said to each other. We are people who can love. At thirty-three, I used my parents to explain me — to make me something more real than the outline of a woman drawn in the polluted air of a bar by the most casual of fingers. The thought makes me sad and a little ashamed, and yet our confidences were not entirely false. Standing on the street more than ten years later, we still felt the silken warmth of our stories breathing between us, a live tissue of affectionate trust that appears to give us shelter each time we meet.

The light changed, but instead of crossing the street toward my destination, I went the other way with Dani, as if she had led me, even though she hadn't. I asked about her latest girlfriend, a poet as fashionable as Dani's orange hip-hugging jeans. "Yasmin is in LA for the month," she said, and paused while we recognized an actress striding toward us on starved stick legs, a little black poodle with a beautiful red tongue peering haplessly from the tensile cave of her bosom. "She's teaching a workshop," finished Dani. "And how is David?"

A grainy smell of gas rose off a torpid snake of traffic and snakily wound through the scent of damp bark and leaves. A taxi driver with his arm out the window beat out a song on his section of snake. Already it had formed, our invisible shelter, its walls hung with living pictures.

"So," said Dani lightly, "are we going somewhere?"

Down the hall and to the right, past the picture of Dani in her office talking on the telephone to her father; he is in San Francisco and wants to see *Tosca* with her. Dani is wearing black-and-white-checked stretch pants and bright red lipstick, her glossy hair flush against her wide cheekbones. "O.K., Daddy," she says, and her voice is softer and more seductive than it ever is with me.

We walk down the street in San Francisco, holding hands; a creamy-skinned young girl with a rosy smile rides up on a lavender bike, and says, "Dani!" She and Dani talk, the girl's long bare leg bracing tense and beautiful against the curb. Dani promises to call

soon; the girl rides away in a wake of lavender and rosy eagerness. I ask, "Who's that?" and Dani smiles. "Oh," she answers, drawing it out, "just some girl."

In my bedroom, we lounge on a summer afternoon. The air is thick with heat and vegetable smells: cat piss, armpit, rug mold, fruit, cunt; in the world around us, fibrous green and fungal life unfurls to offer its inmost odor to the sun. We are naked, my blue comforter rolled back like a parted wave; the cat walks in and out with her tail up. I am showing Dani a picture of my father holding me in one arm and bending his head to kiss my infant foot. My mother is a blur of breast in the background; and my breast — just scored by Dani's teeth and tongue — poignantly echoes hers. Dani had called and asked me to meet her, and I'd said no because I had a cold. An hour later, she showed up with a plastic bag of oranges and echinacea tea, and I was surprised and touched to realize she thought I might be lying.

I should not have been surprised: Dani's confidence lay almost entirely in her social identity, a smart, well-secured area beyond which lay hidden a verdant, private world longing for and afraid of form — hidden even from her. When she broke up with her girlfriend (a pretty blonde with pink, allergic eyes whom I was fated to run into at parties for the next dozen years), Dani said this woman, with whom she'd lived for two years, had not ever known her. "I feel like people accept the first thing I show them," she said, "and that's all I ever am to them." A month later, she broke up with me.

I said, "Do you have time to get a drink?"

"With your bag?"

"Why not?" I said. "It's easily checked."

"Umm."

A freckled girl walked by in a red raincoat, smiling to herself, and there was that same papered-over circus poster on another wall, this time showing a ghostly tiger leaping from a shouting model's open mouth.

"I dreamt about you last week," I said.

"Yes?" Her sidelong glance was piercing in the eye, but watchful in the heart; her dark hair was rough-textured, and layered in a ragged way that gave a casual carnality to her lips and jaw.

"I dreamt we were in Las Vegas again, and you were wearing high heels and a dress."

"Really!" She laughed, a hot, dry little sound, and — how ridiculous — on yet another wall a circus elephant dourly paraded across an advertisement for a rock concert against cancer, apparently holding another elephant by the tail. "So," she said, "where do you want to go?"

Back to that first dive with its passing girls, its flavor of fog and forest of music; or the sweet, sad cave next to a vacant lot strung with darkish colored bulbs; or that odorous cavern glittering with earrings and rhinestone studs and sweat on the tossing hair of some dancer under a dirt-swarmed light; that velvety cubbyhole like an emerald jewelry box with a false back, a secret compartment that, when we found it, revealed a place where we belonged together.

"Café Loup?" I said. "It's quiet."

Six months or so after the first time we broke up, we met again at the book fair in Las Vegas. I was there because my new book was coming soon; Dani was there as an editor. During the day, the book fair was a bland caravan parked inside a pallid amphitheater tented with beige, a series of stalls and tables draped with colorless cloth and laden methodically with books. At night it was a giant Ferris wheel whirring ecstatically and predictably, each club, restaurant, and gaming room its own tossing car, blurred with lights and screaming faces while the sober carnies worked the machine. In this tossing blur, I kept glimpsing Dani; walking down a hallway to an obligatory event, I glanced into a passing room and saw her crossing it with the feral stride particular to her — her hips never swaying, but projecting intently, rather coldly forward. I thought I saw her slender back and butt impatiently squeeze between a pair of outsized hams and heads in order to get to the bar, but more hams and heads crowded in and buried her before I could be sure. I was at a party for an author who has since become an actor when I saw her politely listening to someone I couldn't see, eyes flashing through the politeness as if in response to the flattered speaker — a fool who would not recognize the instinctive flashing of an eel in deep water. It was a few minutes later that she came up behind me while I was scooping a finger full of thick vanilla icing off the au-

thor's cake. Later that night, in front of a display of white tigers trapped behind the glass wall of a hotel lobby, I leaned against her and whispered, "Let's pretend we don't know each other." She embraced me from behind and roughly rubbed her head on mine. A brilliantly colored bird flew behind the glass; one tiger snarled at another that had come too close.

In my room, we ordered a bottle of Scotch. An hour or so later, in a torrent of furious drunkenness, we used each other on the floor. I remember pungently but only dimly the terse movement of her lean arm and its maniacal shadow, my soft splayed leg, the gentle edifice of her chin, her underlip, the soft visual snarl as she turned her face sharply to the side. Amazement briefly lit my drunkenness as she gathered me in her arms and carried me to the bed. "I love you," I said, and sleep came batlike down upon us.

The next day, we ordered breakfast from a huge menu in a fake-leather book, and I apologized for that intimacy — we were not after all supposed to know each other. "Oh, that's all right," she said. "People who don't know you are always saying that." For the rest of the book fair we were together every night, holding hands and kissing at strip shows, casinos, and women's boxing matches. Then we went back to San Francisco and broke up again.

During that breakup conversation, I reminded her of what she'd said about no one really knowing her. "Don't you see why that is?" I said. "You've gone out of your way to create a perfect, seductive surface, and people want to believe in perfection. If they think they see it, they don't want to look further."

"Do you want to?"

If I said yes, I meant it, in a way. But in another way, I didn't. I loved to see myself reflected in her shiny surface. I loved to appear in public as that reflection — even if the reflection was that of a stupidly smiling woman in a sequined costume, waiting to be sawed in half.

Café Loup is an elegant establishment with a low ceiling, dim lighting, and a melancholy feeling of aquarium depth that subtly obscured the diners seated at the white-draped tables in the back — the elderly gentleman with his gallant fallen face and his pressed shirt, his companion's lowered white head and dark linen dress, her pale arm quivering slightly as she sawed the leg off a small bird.

I checked my bag at the door, and we chose a table, even though the polished bar was almost empty. Dani ordered a martini with no olive; I had red wine. The waiter, a middle-aged man with a heavy face, silently approved of the elegant manner with which Dani placed her order. Silently, with upturned eyes, she accepted his approval. Then she turned to me and said, "So, how long has it been?"

Months passed; I moved from Marin to San Francisco. I saw Dani for dinner every now and then, or went with her to the movies. We were only friends, but still her face froze when, over pomegranate cocktails with lime, I told her I couldn't meet her later because I had to meet my boyfriend. Seeing her expression, I became so flustered I nearly stammered. She turned her head and became absorbed in the view — the chartreuse shrubbery tossing below, the blue and hazy sky above, as blissful as a watercolor, with a purple blur spreading poisonously across its middle.

After that, our invisible shelter became less substantial, more like a series of tents gently billowing and hollowing in the night air. When I saw her at a poetry reading/performance that I attended with my boyfriend, it was almost not there at all. While he wandered through the room with an affable air, I sought out Dani, half-afraid to find her. When I did, she saw my fear and, rushing to press her advantage, she tried and failed to contemptuously curl her lip. Perhaps to steady her quavering mouth, she took my extended hand. "Hello," she said softly. *Hello*, said the heat of her hand.

It was around then that she took up with another writer, a preposterous person who once took offense at something I said or didn't say and, to my relief, refused to speak to me ever after. Suddenly, there were long distances between one tent and the next, and I found myself walking under the stars, alone on dark, wet grass.

Dani sipped her martini and nibbled at a dish of nuts. She talked about Yasmin, with whom she had lived for the last three years — longer than with anyone else. Her posture was erect and alert, her small shoulders perfectly squared. But her hair was rough by then, not glossy. She was swollen under the eyes, and there were deep creases on either side of her mouth and between her brows; her

lips were bare and dry. Her once insouciant slenderness had become gaunt and somehow stripped, like a car or motorcycle might be stripped to reveal the crude elegance of its engine.

"I don't want to be unfaithful anymore," she said. "I want to stay with Yasmin. I want to take care of her."

I teased her for being like a man; her abrupt smile was like a blush of pleasure. "I guess I am," she said.

In San Francisco I wandered into a maze that was sometimes peopled and sometimes empty, sometimes brightly lit and sometimes so dark I had to grope my way along it with my hands, heart pounding with fear that I would never find my way out. I quickly became lost and thought almost everyone I met was lost too. Sometimes it seemed to me an empty life, but that wasn't really true. It wasn't empty; it was more that the people and events in it were difficult to put together in any way that felt whole.

Before she met Yasmin, Dani said, she did not court or date or screw any girls for over a year. She was thirty-five then, and she felt very old. She did not want to be the older lesbian going after young girls, did not have the heart for it. But she was very lonely, more lonely than she had ever been. She felt she didn't belong anywhere. She thought she would die. I didn't ask her why she didn't call me because I already knew. Instead, I glanced down at my watch, saw that I needed to go, and ordered another drink.

At the end of the show, the magician goes home. And so does the girl who was sawed in half. She changes out of her costume into her jeans and sneakers and leaves out the back door, crushing a cigarette under her foot. It is a low form of performance, and a tawdry metaphor for any kind of affair. And yet the shows are wonderful. Even for jaded performers, they have a sheen of glamour, no matter if the sheen is threadbare and collecting dust. And in that sheen there may be hidden, in the sparkle of some stray rhinestone or store-bought glitter, the true magic that will, as the synthetic curtain opens, reveal a glimpse of something more real than one's strange and unreal life.

The curtain opened again at a boring book event in LA; I walked in, and there was Dani, lying eel-like on a leather love seat, nodding

at someone I couldn't see. She must've felt my gaze because she turned, saw me, and said, "Of all people — !" loud enough for me to hear her across the room. I knocked down a lamp as we stumbled into her room, a funky little box that my fun house memory has given three walls instead of four. To steady me, she took my hair in her fist. "We really *don't* know each other now," she said. The next day I woke alone in my room, where a lustily roaring hotel shower brightly stippled my bruised flesh. The curtain reopened that evening; silently she offered me her smartly clad arm, and silently I accepted.

Halfway through her second martini Dani asked, "Does David take care of you?"

"Yes," I said. "We take care of each other."

"Good," she said. "I'm glad."

In the back of the restaurant the elderly couple slowly rose from their seats, the man taking the woman's arm at the elbow. We paused to watch them. Ceiling fans with large wooden blades solemnly turned over our heads.

Each scene covers and is covered and shows through the others, fractured, shifting, and shaded, like bits of color in a kaleidoscope. I moved to Houston to teach; she moved to New York to work for a former jazz singer who wanted to write a memoir. She traveled often to LA to visit a woman she was courting there; I traveled often to New York to visit no one in particular. We were nothing to each other, really. I rarely thought of her, and although she said otherwise, I doubt she thought of me except when she saw me. Yet from time to time, in a little pit with a shimmering curtain, we would discover a room with a false back, and through the trapdoor we would willingly tumble, into a place where we were not a mere addendum to another, more genuine life — a place where we were the life, in this fervid red rectangle or this blue one.

Slowly the elderly couple moved past our table, the man still holding the woman's arm, the woman's small silver handbag dangling a little rakishly from her gentle, wrinkled hand. Dani watched them, her eyes softening even in profile.

Her strength, her social identity, had been stripped from her as

time had stripped her youth. But her private world had moved forward to fill the empty space. I thought, *This is why I always trusted her*; because my private identity was my strength, I could sense hers even when I couldn't see it, and I knew it could be trusted.

Time and again, the curtain parted: Served by stylish hostesses, we sat in ornate chairs drinking martinis and eating caviar on toast. A lurid dream of music surged around us, mixed with the globule voices of strangers bent double, triple with personality. We held hands and kissed across the table. Dani said, "If we have sex again, I don't want us to be drunk." Drunk already, I took a ring out of my pocket, a flat amethyst I had bought that day. I had not bought it for her, but I gave it to her. "I love you," I said. "We can't be together, and maybe we'll never even have sex again. But I love you." Rosy young heterosexuals burst into laughter, gobbling olives and peanuts and beautiful colored drinks in shimmering glasses. We sat side by side in a modest music hall, my arm around her low back, feeling the knobs of her fiery spine. We were there because Dani knew the singer in the band, a sexy blonde no longer in her first youth. She sang "Today I'm Yours," and the music made shapes for her words: a flower; a rainy street in spring; an open hand; a wet thumping heart. Each shape was crude and colored, maybe a little too vividly with feeling. But we wanted those shapes and that feeling. My father was dead, and the writer Dani had once left me for was dead too. We were not young anymore. "Today I'm Yours." It is a crude and romantic song. Yet human feeling is crude and romantic. Sometimes, it is more vivid than anyone could color it. In some faraway, badly smudged mirror, Dani's striking arm flashes again and again; her face is in an almost featureless trance, and my red twisted mouth is the only thing I can see of myself.

"Here," she said, handing the taxi driver a bill. "Wait until she gets in the door, O.K.?" The cab bucked forward, and her hard, dear face disappeared in a rush of starless darkness and cold city lights. I woke sprawled half-naked in a room with all the lights on, the phone in one hand, my address book in the other, open to the page with Dani's number on it.

"I'm sorry about something," she said. "I've always wanted to tell you." We were waiting for the check. Playfully laughing waitpeople

lingered at the warmly lit kitchen door; for them the evening was about to begin. "I wish I'd been a better friend to you," she said. "In San Francisco, I mean. I knew you were lonely. But I couldn't. I was too young, and I just couldn't."

"It's all right," I said. "It would've been difficult." I looked down at the table; it was gleaming and hard, and there was a shining drop of water or alcohol graying the tip of Dani's spotless napkin. Soon my husband and I would be making chicken for five people. There would be little bowls of snacks and flowers and drinks. But how private the knobs of Dani's spine were when she was next to me, and my arm was around her low back. How good it was to sit across from her and see the changes in her face. How heartless and ridiculous we had been with each other, how obscene. How strange if ten years from this moment, David and Yasmin were gone and instead Dani and I were living together. The image of this, our shared life, winked like a piece of glitter with a whole atomic globe whirring inside it, then vanished like the speck it was. The check came. We counted out the money. I paid the tab; Dani left a generous tip.

We came out onto the street and saw it had rained. The pavement was steamy and darkly patched, and traffic moved with a soft shadowy hiss. The sky was pale, but gold light rimmed a rumpled horizon of old brick apartments, restaurants, and shops that had changed their names a dozen times in ten years. Dani said she'd walk me home. We passed the wall layered with movie posters, and I half saw that the circus tiger leaping through the rubbed-away eye of an actress had itself been rubbed away by the rain, leaving the image of a pale blue eye staring through rippling black stripes. I remembered the song "Today I'm Yours," and I asked Dani if she knew what the blond singer was doing now. "I don't," she said. "We lost touch somehow." We walked in silence for a while. Another piece of glitter winked; in it I saw my parents, smiling at each other, kissing and embracing. Like an afterimage, I saw Dani's parents embracing too. That night David and I would make food for people; we would talk and there would be music. We would smile, kiss, embrace — before we lost touch, or each turned into something else, another person or a spirit or ashes or bones in the dirt with a stone on it.

Forgetting to look at the light, I stepped off the curb into traffic. A panting car swerved and braked as Dani yanked me back against

her. The driver, remarkably dressed as a clown without the red nose, shook his clown-gloved fist out the window and honked his rubber horn as he sped past. We laughed, our arms around each other, our lips and teeth nearly touching. Turning her head, she kissed my cheek. We let go. She said, "It's great to see you"; she said it as she always had. Then she walked away to be with Yasmin, and I walked away to be with David, hurrying now because I was late.

NATHAN ENGLANDER

How We Avenged the Blums

FROM THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY

IF YOU HEAD OUT TO GREENHEATH, LONG ISLAND, today, you'll find that the schoolyard where Zvi Blum was attacked is more or less as it was. The bell at the public school still rings through the weekend, and the bushes behind the lot where we played hockey still stand. The only difference is that the sharp screws and jagged edges of the jungle gym are gone, the playground stripped of all adventure, sissified and padded and covered with a snow of shredded tires.

It was onto this lot that Zvi Blum, the littlest of the three Blum boys, stepped. During the week we played in the parking lot of our yeshiva, where slap shots sent gravel flying, but on Shabbos afternoons we ventured onto the fine, uncracked asphalt at the public school. The first to arrive for our game, Zvi wore his helmet with the metal face protector snapped in place. He had on his gloves and held a stick in his hand.

Zvi worked up a sweat playing a fantasy game while he waited for the rest of us to arrive. After a fake around an imagined opponent, he found himself at a real and sudden halt. The boy we feared most stood before him. It was Greenheath's local Anti-Semite, with a row of friends beyond. The Anti-Semite had until then abided by a certain understanding. We stepped gingerly in his presence, looking beaten, which seemed to satisfy his need to beat us for real.

The Anti-Semite took hold of Zvi's facemask as if little Blum were a six-pack of beer.

Zvi looked past the bully and the jungle gym, through the chain-link fence and up Crocus Avenue, hoping we'd appear, a dozen or

Author's Note #1: I've bracketed some adjectives that I believe are coordinating and could use a comma. In my opinion, I felt "deep/delicious" and "slender/little" to be in the same class of adjectives, which would make them need a comma, but this is up to your discretion.

Author's Note #2: I recommend examining the use of semicolons in the second paragraph of this piece. You used semicolons seven times in a short span of writing, and I found some to be quite powerful, while others seemed unnecessary. I think the semicolon would be more effective if used sparingly. The semicolons in the sentence that begins with "I looked out the window..." were thoughtfully used, but I think the sentences that I put in brackets could be reorganized without semicolons to be more effective.

Author's Note #3: Is "hot salted nuts" the way the nuts are made or are those two adjectives to describe the nuts? If that is the way they are made, then "hot-salted" would be hyphenated, but if they are coordinating adjectives both describing the nuts, then there should be a comma between "hot, salted nuts." But if hot is describing the state of the salted nuts, then it can be left as is.

Author's Note #4: Is this a direct quote? There is a quotation right above it, so if this is supposed to be something Dani said you should add the proper quotations.

Author's Note #5: This sentence jumps quite quickly between two different ideas. I recommend making Dani's reaction to Ella's dream its own sentence, and then referring back to the circus image. Since the circus images are a theme throughout the story, I think it would be more impactful to give it its own moment in the paragraph and to help the reader's clarity.

Author's Note #6: The use of semicolons to separate single words is somewhat ambiguous here. Is there a reason commas do not work to separate this list of things? If you are trying to create emphasis, I recommend considering using periods.

From: Avery Stanley, [averystanley@ucsb.edu]

To: Mary Gaitskill

Subject: “Today I’m Yours” Editing Feedback

Date: Wednesday, April 30, 2025

Dear Mary Gaitskill,

First, I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to read and edit your writing. Reading “Today I’m Yours” was a very emotional, reflective experience for me, and I found many aspects of your writing to be quite powerful. In this letter, I will touch upon what I found worked well in this piece, as well as what I believe could be improved. Secondly, I hope to present my constructive feedback in a way that keeps the integrity of your writing fully intact, while providing you with small, detailed changes that could be made to increase the overall strength of this piece. Please let me know if you have any questions regarding this feedback.

A strong element within “Today I’m Yours” is your precise use of participial phrases and nominative absolutes to add description. Examples of the effective use of these rhetorical tools are the following: “I loved to appear in public as that reflection—even if that reflection was that of a stupidly smiling woman in a sequined costume, **waiting to be sawed in half**” (230), and “We sat side by side in the modest music hall, **my arm around her low back, feeling the knobs of her fiery spine**” (234). These participial phrases and absolute capture the feelings of Ella without you having to explicitly state these feelings. This is a great example of *showing* the reader what is occurring rather than *telling* the reader. Furthermore, the descriptions slow down the reader and keep them in a suspended, dream-like haze, which replicates Ella’s side of the relationship, constantly waiting for Dani to choose her. The overall essence of this piece of writing is strengthened by the intricate detail that describes Ella and Dani’s painfully complex relationship.

However, I do want to address the possibility of including too much detail that may distract the reader from the overall purpose of the story. Like I said, detail is crucial to portraying the relationship between Ella and Dani; however, there is also skill in knowing what detail is crucial to the story and what detail is not. In Stephen King’s “On Writing,” he addresses the issue of being over-descriptive, which could cause the purpose of the story to be muddled. King says, “Description begins in the writer’s imagination, but should finish in the readers,” which I feel greatly sums up the purpose of adding details. In my opinion, there are certain sections of this story that seem to be getting swallowed up by copious amounts of detail. These sections include

the paragraph that begins with “She drove me to the bus stop...”(225) and the paragraph that begins with “Café Loup is an elegant establishment...”(230). At the start of the paragraph from the first quote, you are portraying Dani telling Ella about the “understanding” she has with her current girlfriend. However, the next four sentences that follow provide a description of the setting before returning to this idea. While the detail is well written, it may be distracting from the main message of the paragraph. As a reader, I found myself lost by the time I returned to Dani and Ella’s conversation, and I had to reread the start of the paragraph to remind myself of the dialogue. I think choosing one or two sentences of description instead of four will still allow you to be descriptive without losing the meaning of the conversation. This also applies to the second quotation, as it is many lines of description before it reaches the dialogue between Ella and Dani. Overall, your descriptions are very well written, but I feel there are certain places where the detail could be refined to make the overall meaning of your story more clear.

Finally, I would like to circle back to another aspect of your writing that I feel was very effective in portraying the purpose of your story. Your use of multiple metaphors throughout the text demonstrated a creativity and consistency that I found very refreshing. The depictions of the circus and magic show, as well as the reference to invisible shelters, worked well to paint a vivid picture of the tumultuous moments Ella and Dani faced throughout their affair. For example, the paragraph that begins with “At the end of the show, the magician goes home,” (232) as well as the paragraph that begins with “Time and again, the curtain parted...(234)” both make reference to Ella and Dani’s relationship being like the fake illusion of a magic show. The consistent references back to these descriptions strengthens the use of metaphor and truly shows the reader what Ella is experiencing within the relationship.

Overall, “Today I’m Yours” contains very strong writing and demonstrates a mastery of many rhetorical tools. These rhetorical tools, including your use of participial phrases and nominative absolutes to add description, as well as your use of metaphors, allow the reader to better understand the overall message of the story. In order to strengthen this message even further, though, I recommend revising certain sections to confirm that your description is aiding the overall message, rather than distracting from it. I hope this recommendation has been helpful, and please let me know if you have any questions regarding my feedback.

Best,
Avery Stanley

