

“Snow and the Night Sky”

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The message was written in a spidery hand on a scrap of paper ripped from a legal pad, the edges ragged. It lay on the table in an unfamiliar kitchen, held down by a coffee mug. I had gone with my boyfriend, maybe he was already my fiancé, to visit his aunt in Weekapaug, Rhode Island. She lived alone in the family house, and barely spoke a word to us, though from time to time we heard her moving along the halls upstairs, the wood creaking the uneven floorboards in the dark house as the wind blew off the sea. We were just 24.

“Your sister called to tell you Snow is dead.” That was the message. I didn’t see the lugubrious aunt again. I got on a train back to New York for the funeral of my childhood best friend.

Her real name wasn’t Snow, it was Cathy. But Cathy didn’t do justice to her flaxen blond hair, it was too plain a name. We tried for a long time to come up for a counterpart for me, but my red-brown hair only conjured words like ‘Rust’ and ‘Irish setter’—for a while we tried ‘Terracotta’, but it was too much of a mouthful.

Our mothers had met dropping us off at Sunday school in the local Episcopal Church, and bonded over the fact we’d all just arrived in New York from Europe and were beginning schools across the street from each other on the Upper East Side; Snow to the more conservative school, where in 1968 girls wore Nixon buttons pinned in their hair ribbons, and me to the more progressive, where we wore black armbands and canvassed the Yorktown neighborhood for social studies credit.

It’s been said that you do not make friends, you recognize them. What did we recognize? A way of being easy with each other I suppose. A love of the madcap. Shaky super 8 movie footage shows us dashing around in my family’s den wearing my mother’s fur coats, the hems puddling at our feet. When Snowflake the albino gorilla graced the cover of National Geographic, we spent entire Saturday afternoons in white turtlenecks and ballet tights, our hair tucked into my mother’s white latex bathing caps, perched on the arms of club chairs and the backs of couches, munching imaginary bananas. We invented a language—it went bwa, bwa, bwa---that only albino gorillas could speak. On Sunday mornings, we zipped maroon choir robes over our neon striped minidresses and fishnet tights, and walked demurely up the aisle of the church, taking care not to let our chain belts clang against our hymnals.

The spring we were twelve, Madison Avenue opened to pedestrian traffic on Monday evenings to encourage retail, and families emerged from innocuous apartment buildings to congregate in the street, mothers in sensible shoes walked the family dogs, some smoked cigarettes. Salesgirls from the cosmetics shop on 76th Street and the bakery on 73rd would stand on the curb offering free samples.

Snow and I would watch the sky as evening came on, making our pilgrimage to Baskin & Robbins on 84th Street. She could only stay out until nightfall, so as we walked, we

found names for the darkening sky. Faded denim, Robin's egg blue, royal blue, brand new denim, sapphire, indigo. At indigo, we'd turn around. "It's not technically dark yet," I'd say, "I still see some blue up there, there's still some light." So, we'd linger, eating our cones, then slowly turn down a side street and back to the corner of Lexington and 72nd Street to drop Snow off with her doorman.

We both had artistic dreams. We'd lie in bed on our weekend sleepovers and tell each other grand plans, our hands dancing in the air as we constructed futures for our lives. I was to be a writer, she was to be a painter, and she surely would have been a gifted one. She tossed it off lightly, but her talent was recognized early on, by the time she got to Yale she was named the scholar of the house in the art department.

I remember at the time thinking of addiction as a big house. A house with loud music playing all the time, drowning out the sound of the phone ringing when those of us on the outside called. It was hectic in there, groups of damaged souls dancing and spinning into walls with chaotic euphoria.

Soon after we graduated from college, Snow slipped into that house quickly when I wasn't looking. Where the hell was I, why was I not pounding on the door of the house, demanding she come out? I was on the outside somewhere, busy starting my own life, living in a tiny apartment on Horatio Street with a tall man and a magazine job that included petty cash.

In the last picture I have of Snow, she is standing with her dog Travis, and a boy she met in art school. Her jeans are splattered with paint and rolled above her ankles, her blond hair is matted, cut short in uneven chunks around her face, as if she'd taken scissors to it in the dark. She had a column of rubber bands around her ankles, and more on her wrists, her car keys hung on a ribbon around her neck.

The image of that big chaotic house kept coming to mind at her funeral, and at the reception after in my family's living room. I saw myself outside that house, and I could not forgive myself for not looking up long enough to see her as she wafted by the window, as if that could lure her out. Even when I knew she was struggling, still I was standing outside with my hands in my pockets, staring down at the rough pavement, accepting the boundaries she'd put up.

The coroner reported pneumonia as the cause of death, and I imagine her body was so emaciated by then from heroin use that anything could have taken her out

The train rumbled through the Connecticut countryside later that day, as I returned to the tall fiancé in Rhode Island. Slowly the lights in the farmhouses along the route came on, the sky a faded denim blue. Still time to hang out, Snow would say, it's only technically dusk. Light lingers long in the New England summer sky. Gradually the clouds went from lavender to ash. Ten minutes later, as we neared the New Haven station, the sky darkened to royal blue, then slowly to sapphire. Even so, there was an astonishing light that night; a profusion of stars promised clear weather ahead. There's

no reason to leave yet, I was thinking, we can linger. There's so much left to do. But I was traveling through the New England indigo night alone.

The boys of our youth, now men in their sixties, still speak of Snow to me. The boy with the yellow socks, now a defense lawyer in San Francisco. The boy with the madras jacket and the buck teeth, now a screenwriter in LA. The jazz musician. As they speak a light sparks and redirects, they're rummaging in their deep past for a glimpse of the golden girl none of them could catch, the pale goddess of their fevered adolescent imaginations. Always they ask, "did you see it coming?"

Did I see it coming. After forty years, still I think of Snow when I look at the darkening sky. I've wondered what her art would be like, if our kids would know each other, if we'd teach them our monkey talk, and If she suddenly appeared, what we would say. I do know one thing. I know we would recognize each other.

