

Sara Rauch

Aleta Alehouse

At the far end of the bar, the redhead sat with a book splayed open, sipping a clear fizzy drink through a swizzle stick, tucking a curl behind her ear. She reminded Tom of the cardinal he often saw perched in the crabapple tree near his kitchen window. Besides the bartender, a silent man with smooth cheeks in a black gabardine vest and newsy cap, and the cardinal girl, the bar was empty. But it was one in the afternoon and Tom didn't have anywhere else to be. He'd been wandering the East Village for almost an hour after his brunch meeting when he saw the carved wooden sign above the bar and decided to go in. The redhead did not acknowledge Tom's presence when he sat down three stools over from her. He ordered a scotch neat and a Brooklyn Amber. In the age-speckled mirror that hung over the bottles of liquor, Tom watched the redhead turn a page and reach up to tuck her hair behind her ear again. The bartender brought Tom's beer and scotch. It was a generous pour in a cloudy lowball glass. The bartender did not make eye contact and retreated to the other end of the bar, head down.

Tom Brown gulped the scotch and slid over two stools, leaving one empty between himself and the redhead, who kept reading.

"Hi," he said.

"I'm not interested," she said, looking up from her book. Her eyes were the color of sea glass.

"But I haven't asked a question," he said.

"I'm going to save you the bother."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

The redhead sighed and rested a forefinger on the page. "I'm pretty sure," she said.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

She flipped the book shut. *Light Years* by James Salter.

"Never heard of it," Tom said. He read the newspaper spottily and *National Geographic* regularly and little else.

She reopened the book, pressing down hard along the center so the pages lay flat,

and began to read again. Tom said, "Can I buy you a drink?"

"You're not from the city, are you?" she asked. Along her jaw ran a serrated scar that disappeared up behind her ear and into her hair.

"Different city—Boston," he said, sipping his beer. "Well, outside of Boston."

"Do the girls in Boston respond well to your ineptitude?" She looked at him, more with curiosity than annoyance.

"Dunno. I've been married for almost a decade. I don't spend much time in bars."

"So what are you doing here?" She tilted her face, concealing the scar in shadow.

"Business trip," he said.

"For?"

"What's your name?"

She regarded him for a second before turning the book over on the bar. The cover was worn, and its edges curled up when she moved her hand, which she extended across the empty stool. "Liz."

"Short for?" he asked, taking her hand in his. It was dry and small, its slight heft like the body of a sparrow.

"Just Liz. Short for nothing."

"Liz Nothing."

"At your service."

"Tom Brown. So. Drink?"

She raised her eyebrows—very pale, much paler than the shock of red hair that fell around her shoulders—and said, "I'll have a vodka tonic." She pronounced *vodka* with a slight chirping of the vowels.

The bartender brought her drink. Liz moved onto the empty bar stool, closing the gap between them. She wore a simple black sweater with a wide boat-neck, and Tom saw a tattoo edging across her shoulders. He couldn't tell what it was, a tree branch maybe, or a vine.

"What brings you here on this beautiful Sunday?" More often than not now he hated the stilted words that came from his mouth.

"My roommate's parents are in town, and I didn't want to have lunch with them. What kind of work do you do?" she asked, letting her eyes dart to his wedding band.

"The soul-gobbling kind."

"That bad, huh?" She smiled, revealing very white, very straight teeth.

"Insurance." He nodded in the bartender's direction for another beer. "Liability and data breach."

"That sounds boring."

"It is. Ungodly dull. What do you do?"

"I work for a non-profit. Literacy in inner city schools."

“That’s noble,” he said.

“Yeah, but I can barely afford to share a tiny apartment, and I only eat rice and beans.”

“Money isn’t everything,” Tom said.

“People with money say that a lot,” Liz said, bobbing her head and sipping her vodka. “What’s your wife’s name?”

“Abigail.”

“Is she in insurance, too?”

“She takes care of our son.”

“That’s sweet.”

“It’s fine. She seems happy with it.”

The door of the bar opened, and two women came in. One had a shaved head; the other wore her hair styled like Mia Farrow in *Rosemary’s Baby*. The shaved head one caught Liz’s eye and nodded. Tom thought he saw Liz flinch. She focused on her vodka, stabbing the little plastic straw into the ice. He asked, “How long have you lived in the city?”

Instead of answering, she lifted her tumbler and drank the vodka down in one smooth gulp. “Want to go somewhere else?” Liz asked.

“Where?” he asked.

“Wherever,” she said, snapping the book shut and tucking it into her canvas bag. She pulled on her coat. Tom settled the tab. He paid for Liz’s first drink too, the one she’d been almost finished with when he arrived. The bartender brought Tom’s change, dropped it on the bar—he had tapered fingers and his nails were cut short and very clean. Tom wasn’t sure why this observation jumped out at him. He left the tip, filed the other bills into his wallet.

On their way out, the shaved-head woman held up her hand in a gesture that looked like both peace offering and wave, and said, “Hey, Liz.” Liz did not break her stride. She lifted her hand and said “Hey” before pulling the door open and stepping out onto the sidewalk. Behind her, Tom smiled toward the woman and nodded, but the woman frowned and turned away.

Out on Fifth Street, they stood in awkward pause. Liz was fine-boned but tall, almost as tall as Tom. Taxis and pigeons flew past. The upper bricks of the buildings across the street caught the sun. Two doors down, a fire escape decorated with pinwheels and streamers refracted metallic light into the afternoon air. Liz’s gaze followed Tom’s to the offering of radiance. She said, “Ever been on the Staten Island Ferry?”

He shook his head. The sky beyond the bricks was sharp blue, scalloped with cirrus clouds.

“How long do you have?”

“I’m free the rest of the day.”

“Alright, Tom Brown. Let’s walk down. This is our first real spring day.”

He hadn’t noticed the weather at all since his arrival the day before. Sometimes Manhattan felt like an airless dome—not a real ecosystem at all. Early April was the same as December or August here, he always thought. But he saw now the purple-headed crocuses butting up from hard-packed dirt, the tiny green buds emerging from slender branch tips. Liz was beside him, ruffling her red hair with her hands, waiting for him. Pigeons preened and strutted along the concrete, their heads nodding. He said yes.

Liz wove their way downtown; as they went, the streets and sidewalks became narrower. Tom had no idea where they were until he saw Chinese characters printed across red awnings. They skirted the Canal Street artery—he’d taken Abigail here once, after college, in search of a knockoff Coach bag—until the overcrowded bustle and teetering vegetable carts gave way to stately buildings. The Brooklyn Bridge appeared to their left before Liz cut across a thin finger of a park and led them down into the close alleyways of the financial district.

The warm air felt good and the streets were full of people; Liz’s body, mere inches away, gave off a tempting smell and a static charge that he was drawn to and scared of. She spoke with a lilt, and as they walked she pointed out things he wouldn’t have noticed: a community garden locked behind tall iron gates, a pair of dachshund puppies drowsing in a pet-store window, seven crows roosting atop the Courthouse, a blini shop she said made the most divine blueberry blini. He said, “Let’s get some.” She bit her lip, and Tom thought he saw a moment of hesitation—the kind that alights when being offered something too good to be true—but she agreed. They ordered blueberry and apple and raisin and ate them standing in front of the shop, watching people rush past.

“Everyone’s in a hurry here,” Tom said. “Even on a Sunday.”

“Bound up in busy. Careering toward death.”

“That’s intense.”

“New Yorkers don’t live by the same clock,” Liz said. She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin. “Ferry time.”

At the terminal, Liz stood aside and waited while Tom bought their tickets. She had pulled on a pair of fingerless gloves made of soft-looking purple yarn. When he handed her the boarding pass, their fingertips touched. There it was—a taut electricity that raced through his body and hit him in the stomach. They boarded. She told him there were cheap tall boys of Budweiser at the concession stand, so they went upstairs and ordered two. Tom bought a paper boat of nachos as well, covered with congealing orange cheese. “In case the blini weren’t enough,” he said. Liz plucked one and gobbled it, then looked guilty.

The boat pulled away from the dock; with it came an unsteady floating in his stom-

ach. He did not like water, could not swim. But this was a big boat—they sat at a table in a room that was easily bigger than the bar they’d just come from. There were life jackets and lifeboats somewhere—he knew that—it was impossible there weren’t. He wrapped his fingers around his can of beer. The condensation, the coolness, settled him.

He asked where she grew up, and she said Connecticut in a way that did not allow further elaboration. He pictured her, for some reason, on a sloping green lawn, how incredible her red hair would look aflame against the trees. He imagined laying her down in the grass, undressing her, finding the soft spots between the knobs of her spine, under her arms, pressing his mouth into the softness, smelling the sweat of her up close. Wrapping her hair in his hands. Biting her neck. Her nipples like tight buds between his teeth. Slid-

Their bodies were no longer touching, but she turned her head to look at him—he felt her eyes watching him as tangibly as he had her upper arm and hip.

ing his fingers inside her. Heat rippled through his body, and he sipped his beer, tried to calm himself. “Have you lived in the city long?” he asked again.

“Ten years. I went to Columbia.”

“Grad or undergrad?” He tried to gauge how old she was. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, and very smooth, but she had what his wife called “the parentheses,” two deep creases framing her patrician lips. She was at once innocent and resigned, impish and old-soul.

“Undergrad. English major. Poetry minor.”

“So, you’re—what, twenty-eight?”

Something about her seemed to skitter away from the question. A window was open to their left, and her narrow face flushed even as the cool air rushed in and tousled her bright hair. “Twenty-seven,” she said, pulling her hair out of her face and twisting it into a bun.

“You’re young.”

“You can’t be much older.”

“Thirty-five,” he said. He wondered, if he were to reach out and touch her cheek, how she would react, if she would pull away.

“That’s nothing. You don’t even have any grays yet.”

They finished the nachos, and Liz said, “Let’s go to the front deck.”

Wind whipped Liz’s hair back, uncoiling the bun she’d knotted. The scar along her chin glinted a vivid white in the sunlight. She stared out over the water for a long time without saying anything.

Governor’s Island passed by on their left, unassuming and bland. Liz walked away from Tom to the other side of the deck. He hesitated, followed her. She turned, sliding her hands along the metal rail as she moved back toward him. When their trajectories reconnected, he saw that her fingernails were chewed to the quick, distinguishable from his own only by their smallness. Liz settled close to him, resting her arm and thigh against his; she said, “I always think about the Titanic when I ride the ferry. Like we could go down here. It’s grandiose really—to imagine such an enormous loss of life repeated in this little bay.”

“Grandiose and entirely possible,” Tom said. Liz laughed and rolled her eyes.

Tom looked up at the clouds now streaking across the sky, dulling its blue to the pale color of a robin’s egg. In college, Tom had been a painter, obsessed with mixing colors to match the sky—a seemingly endless task—the sky was a new shade every day, every hour. He rarely studied the sky anymore; there was no time for something so capricious.

Despite the chill blowing off the water, he felt Liz’s warmth pressing into his body, felt it seep into his stomach and ascend his spine. He wanted to touch her hair, the fiery redness of it. Gulls swooped and shrieked, their caws carrying through the crystalline air. Tom and Liz stood there, arms and thighs alive against one another, until the boat docked on Staten Island. They disembarked in the tide of passengers, circled around, waited to board again.

They returned to their place on the prow. Across the water, the tip of Manhattan shimmered, tiny and jagged. Missing an essential piece, Tom thought. There would be a new tower—they’d already begun constructing it—a replacement. But there were no new lives for the ones lost, nothing shiny and rising into the sky. In a way, he thought, death was only about what was left behind. Never about what came after.

He worried about his mortgage and marriage and money—that these were the necessities of his life, the things that would remain if he were gone—and this bothered him. It bothered him that he’d gone looking for his *Encyclopedia of Birds* one recent afternoon, and unable to find it, had asked Abigail where it was. She said, “That old thing? I let Andy take it to school for a project.” Andy, upon questioning, could not recall the book. Tom had said, “It’s a big book, with a hawk on the cover?” Andy had shaken his head, his serious eyes darkening with confusion, and said, “I don’t remember, Daddy. I’m sorry.” “It’s okay, buddy. It’s just a book,” Tom had said. The book was not essential; the book was easily replaced. But Tom had not yet bought another copy.

He said, “I’ve always wanted to live in Manhattan.”

“Why?”

He thought it odd—he thought *Why not?* He said, “It’s alive here. There are answers here to questions no one has ever asked.”

“That’s deep,” she said.

“Don’t patronize me.”

“I’m not.” Their bodies were no longer touching, but she turned her head to look at him—he felt her eyes watching him as tangibly as he had her upper arm and hip. She said, “Where do you think those answers are?”

“All around us. Circling the way birds do buildings.”

“Occasionally crashing into us and bleeding to death on the sidewalk?”

He laughed. “Maybe the birds don’t always murder themselves against the glass. Maybe they pass through sometimes and keep going.” The wind and sun and glare of the water pushed at their faces, made them squint. He liked it. He liked standing next to this woman, the smell of diesel and dirty water mixing with the woody aroma of her.

“That’s romanticizing this place. People who don’t live here do it all the time. If you lived here you would know about homeless men asleep on broiling sidewalks with flies swarming their shit-stained pants. About roaches the size of mice, how creepy the sound their antennae make tapping the walls. About what it was like to live through the aftermath of the towers—to live forever with that dust inside you. Buildings are solid, Tom Brown, until they fall down.”

“You were here?”

“I was.”

“Did you—?”

Liz closed her eyes. After a moment, she jerked her head from right to left, just once. Her scar flashed in the fading light. Sharp. Definitive. But yes or no he could not tell. He had not even finished his question.

“Have dinner with me tonight?” he asked.

“What about your wife?”

“My wife.” He thought of Abigail’s shiny brown hair in a ponytail, how rarely she kissed him goodnight. He thought of the pair of crimson boxer briefs he had found stuffed into her nightstand drawer. She must think him so daft.

“I don’t think your wife would appreciate your taking me to dinner,” Liz said.

“I’m not going to tell her.”

“Where’s your hotel?”

“Tribeca.”

“I’m gay, you know,” Liz said.

“I didn’t,” Tom said. “I wouldn’t have guessed that.”

“No one ever does,” Liz replied. “Not that it matters.”

When they were back on Water Street, Liz said, “I’ll walk with you to your hotel.”

Dusk had settled between the buildings, the last rays of daylight illuminating windows and softening shadows into inky smudges. He wanted to ask again about dinner, did

not want to leave her scent—it was pine, he had figured out, now that they were off the water, pine and something grittier: moss, tree-bark, humus—or the buzzing her proximity created in his body. She was gay. And he was not the sort of man who cheated on his wife. None of it made any sense.

They walked with a thin inch of space between them, Liz humming. “What street is your hotel on?” she asked. It was apparent that Tom had no idea how to navigate the grid-less downtown streets.

“Hudson,” he said.

“And the cross street?”

“I don’t know. I’ll recognize it when we get there.”

Liz smiled, and he saw then that her first smile, the one in the bar, had been a fake.

“Who was that woman?” he asked.

“Which one?”

“The one in the bar.”

“No one,” Liz said, and the smile faded. “Someone I used to know.”

“An ex?”

“An ex of an ex,” she said.

“Something happened between you?”

“Something always happens.” Her voice went cold, far away.

“I suppose it does.”

“It’s different from the straight world.”

“I don’t think it is,” he said. His wife, when he came home from work, smelled like the sweat of another man.

“And you’re some sort of authority on the matter?”

“No. I just think relationships are complicated.” There was his wife’s false cheeriness as she prepared dinner, the way she talked only to Andy at the table.

“You know you came into a gay bar?”

“What about the bartender?” he asked.

“What about her?”

“That was a woman?” He felt suddenly stupid. Of course. The smooth chin, the narrow shoulders and fine hands.

“Kylie. Yup.”

Tom let out a low whistle, and laughed. “Wow. I just thought the sign was clever.” He remembered its carved image of a sawed-off tree trunk from which overflowed dozens of little birds, some with bows atop their heads, others adorned with bowties. “And I wanted a beer.”

“Aleta’s is a lesbian institution—”

“How would I know that?” he asked.

“You’re a strange duck, Tom Brown.”

“How was I supposed to know Aleta Alehouse is a gay bar? It’s not like there was some rainbow over the door.”

Liz glanced at him and raised her eyebrow. “You’re right. You couldn’t have known.”

They lapsed into silence—but it was an easy silence, nothing like the one he and Abigail had struck—until he saw the hotel sign looming ahead.

“It’s this one,” he said, pointing. They were in front of a deli, buckets of bright flowers on display under terrible fluorescent lights. Liz’s hair matched the dahlias. She angled toward him and studied his face before she extended her hand and said, “Nice to meet you, Tom Brown.”

With her gloves on, her hand no longer had the weightlessness of a sparrow. She felt sturdier, wrapped in protective raiment. “Come up for a drink?” Tom asked, still holding her hand.

She dropped her eyes and studied her feet. Then she drew a line in front of her with her toe. “I won’t cross that line,” she said, looking up at him.

“What line?”

“You’re married.”

He nodded, held her stare.

“One drink. Then I have to go.”

In the hotel room, Liz removed her gloves and jacket and shoes. She was not wearing socks, and had a purple orchid tattooed over the top of her right foot. “Vodka tonic?” Tom offered and she nodded, sitting on the bed. She used the remote to turn on the TV, flipping to CNN before hitting the mute button. Then she leaned back against the pillows—huge and fluffy, repositioned by housekeeping after Tom had tossed them on the floor—and closed her eyes. Her sharp collarbones jutted upward, visible beneath the drape of her sweater.

Tom removed his tie and his work shirt. In his t-shirt, without the required buttons and knots, he fixed the drinks, more vodka than tonic, before sitting on the bed next to Liz. She opened her eyes, but instead of taking the drink from his hand, she said, “I wouldn’t have guessed,” touching his left forearm, which was covered in tattoos. “The Little Owl,” she said, tracing the outline of the bird on his inner wrist.

“Aleta means ‘winged one’ in Greek,” he said.

“It’s the owner’s name,” she said, taking her drink from his hand.

They sipped and stared at the TV screen, where the image of a woman kneeling and wailing in a shattered street flashed and disappeared.

There was nothing, Tom knew, watching the etched lines of the woman’s contorted face, nothing even remotely interesting about his own suffering, about the question he

asked himself as he let his foot relax and rest on Liz’s ankle. She did not flinch or move away, kept her eyes on the images on the screen.

Abigail had been sleeping with their neighbor—Jones, Tom called him privately—and Tom had let it go on for over a year. Let it go on while he paid the bills and loved his son and mowed the lawn on Saturdays. Let it go on because there was always food in the refrigerator, and a warm body beside him when he fell asleep at night. What was infidelity in the face of death, of loss? Nothing. A drop in the bucket. Not even large enough to ripple. He knew what he had done wrong: accept as true the respectable adult life that was his McMansion on a cul-de-sac in the suburbs with a woman who wanted nothing more than facials and lawn parties and her child in private school. What he had done wrong was accept the job that paid for it all and let Abigail buy him ties, hundreds of them, every time she needed to give him a gift. The image on the screen flashed to footage of men running, their narrow backs pursued by clouds of smoke and plaster. The banner below read *Air Strikes in Gaza*.

Liz rolled onto her side, balancing her drink on the mattress. Tom shifted toward her and put his hand on her hip. “I’ve been thinking about leaving New York,” she said. Her mouth tipped down.

“Why?”

“Why not? I don’t love it here. I’m tired. This city is a habit I can’t break, nothing more.”

“Where will you go? Back to Connecticut?”

“I’ll never go back there.”

Tom took the vodka from her hand and leaned over her, setting it on the nightstand. His heart thumped against her shoulder; he felt the flutter of her breathing. When he moved back to his spot, her body followed him. He kissed her. She kissed him. She leaned into his chest, wound her arm through his, gripped his hand. Then she ducked her head, so his mouth was on her hairline, and said, “It’s been a long time since I kissed a man.” She let her face fall back and they stared at one another. She kissed him again, leaning in with vodka on her lips and with something akin to hunger. He had not felt it in her before, but now he understood—she was starved. They both were.

How long they kissed, he lost track—his hands in her hair, on her neck, down her back until he pulled her narrow hips into his, feeling their fragile boniness against his stomach. She kissed slowly, carefully, against his fervent motions, and said, once, *Gentle*, before closing her eyes to him, before tracing her tongue in a circle around his lips. But when he went to unbutton her jeans, to slip his hand down—she was not wearing underwear, his fingertips met only silken skin and a wiry brush of hair—she intercepted his hand and said, without hesitation, *No*.

He blinked, and she came into focus, her eyes blue and clouded, her body still in full

contact with his but the refusal plain on her face. “I can’t,” she said. “I won’t.”

“But haven’t we already—?”

“Crossed the line,” Liz said.

Tom nodded, did not release her from his arms.

“One line. But there are others. You must know that.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never done this before.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said.

“You should,” he said.

“My parents disowned me when I told them I like women. I’m not straight. I made that decision a long time ago. This wouldn’t be fair. To either of us.”

It hurt, to hear the words. He liked kissing her, liked the surrender of her body in his arms, liked her scent and her bravery. Liked, above all else, the possibility of her.

“What’s it like,” he said, “to believe in something so fiercely?”

“It’s not belief. It’s my identity. But it’s like anything else, I guess. You launch yourself into the air and hope you can figure it out before gravity gets wind of you. You get up every morning and pretend you know how to keep aloft.”

“Do you think we’re all pretending?” Tom thought of the dead chickadee his son had found in the yard last week—black feathers worn away from its cap, the dull, sandy body in Andy’s cupped palm. Andy cried while Tom dug a hole in the sodden ground to bury it, and when Tom told Abigail this later, she rolled her eyes and said, *He’s so sensitive. It’s just a bird.*

“To some extent, I do.”

“And right now?”

She rested her forehead on his shoulder and let out a long sigh. “Not now. But this isn’t real life.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a moment. A glimpse into the essential.”

“Have you tried to talk to your parents—about being gay, about being happy?”

“They’re spineless bigots.”

“That’s harsh.”

“They deserve it,” Liz said.

“My wife doesn’t love me any more,” Tom said.

“How do you know?”

“She never looks at me. She’s fucking someone else and barely hides it.”

“So that’s what this is? Revenge.” Liz’s body moved almost imperceptibly away from his.

“No, actually it isn’t. I like you, felt pulled toward you in some way.”

“Why should I believe that?” she asked.

“You don’t need to believe anything. But I’m telling you.”

Liz was quiet.

“Where will you go?” he asked again.

“California, maybe. Near the redwoods, the ocean. But maybe I won’t leave. Maybe I like the fantasy of someplace else.”

“I think we all do,” Tom said.

“There aren’t any answers here,” Liz said. “Any more than there are anywhere. We all live under the same sky.”

“If that’s not romanticizing things, I don’t know what is,” he said.

Liz stifled a laugh. She said, “Now you sound like a New Yorker. There’s hope for you yet.”

He let his mind trace back across the years to all the shades of color he’d mixed: purple and magenta and orange and every variation of blue and gray. How his neck ached constantly from craning his head backward, studying up. He wanted to tell her how much he missed it.

Liz’s body relaxed into his and after a few minutes, he felt the evenness of her ex-hales, how her body nestled into itself as she dropped into sleep.

Why the sky? everyone had asked him, Abigail included, and he never had an answer.

In his arms, Liz’s body softened further, as if relieved of some great burden. He bent his neck and rested his face on her hair, inhaling the earthen dustiness of her. The neckline of her shirt gapped and he saw then the tattoo inked on her shoulders: wings. Delicate feathers, spread to fly.