

# SHORT FICTION / ESSAYS

## I USED TO KNOW A GIRL NAMED MARIA

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The last time I saw Maria, my best childhood friend, she was living with a guy in a slum without much furniture in her apartment, but in one room there was a grand piano. It stood out like a shiny piece of jewelry surrounded by uneven walls of peeling yellow paint and a 40-watt bulb hanging from an exposed wire in the center of the ceiling. There was nothing else in the room, just the piano and some dust in the corners. And it wasn't clear who played it. It had been about 15 years since I last saw Maria but I guessed the instrument wasn't hers. As kids we had lived in low-income housing projects in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn and kids in the projects didn't have pianos, much less take piano lessons. We occupied adjacent, monolithic 20-story pink brick buildings cut down the center with common terraces on every floor, fronted with two rows of benches where old people spent the rest of their lives. Ten, maybe 20 feet of grass in front of each building was cordoned off with small steel posts connected with one strand of linked chain. We would play a game that involved jumping over the poles one by one in a straddling position. More than once we'd fall directly on the poles and the pain between our legs was fierce, but that was the point of the game, to avoid the poles. Kids in the projects went to zoned public schools and hung out in the streets all day as long as it wasn't raining. And even when it did rain, hanging out under the awning in front of a candy store or bodega was preferable to being in your apartment, cooped up with your parents who were either fighting or not talking to each other, sitting stone-faced in front of the TV/stereo console. Our buildings were just two of maybe ten that made up the projects; a huge fenced-in area was at its heart and contained four handball courts, two basketball courts, a playground for small children, and a baseball playing area—all concrete underfoot. Actually, the only grass we had was roped off by the post and chain fence and you weren't allowed to play on it. Hence, playing outside was somewhat of an oxymoron because the risk of concrete finding its way to your summer skin was imminent. The ice-cream man wore a white uniform complete with a white sea captain's cap and parked his small push truck at the project's perimeter facing the bordering street. His uniform and cap were too big for him and his cheeks were always a bit too rosy. He had one eye that didn't follow the movement of his other eye, and though we were sometimes afraid to get too close to him, deep down we knew there was almost nothing we wouldn't do to have ice cream every day. People hung out in the streets at all hours and a constant stream of garbage ran in the hydrant water that flowed in the gutter during the summer—in those days they didn't cap hydrants off with the sprinkler attachments they have now, in those days kids cut off both ends of a SpaghettiOs can and while embracing the hydrant from the dry side, the can firmly in hand, directed the gushing torrent high in the sky, and

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the kids screamed with abandon, and it didn't matter that they were standing almost knee deep near a garbage-clogged sewer grate, or that at any moment the rushing water might push you out in front of oncoming traffic, what mattered was ice cold water gushing around hot feet. To outsiders, the projects probably looked unkempt, unsupervised, and underachieving, in short, like a slum. The truth was, most families worked long hours at blue-collar jobs that kept them just above that hydrant water, their apartments were clean, and kids ran around in soiled clothes, but that was only after a long day of playing outside until their hands were completely black. Inside our apartment there was little laughter, and even less conversation, and no summer vacations away. And this part was true for most families who lived in the Williamsburg projects. Everybody was always around: spring breaks, winter breaks, holidays. All vacation ever meant to most project kids was that school was out.

Anyway, I visited grown-up Maria with my then-husband in tow who didn't know from projects or slums. He lived in a California suburb for most of his young life. I met him after his parents divorced and he was forced to move east with his mother and younger siblings to a tiny apartment in Brooklyn—which is where his mother's family lived—just upstairs from my family's post-projects apartment. It didn't take him long to turn his Italian heritage into a tool of the Brooklyn streets. He adopted the look, the walk, the cigarette, the slicked back DA, and I fell for the whole package. All the macho, tough-guy bravado a 16-year-old can dish out, I decided was for me. In a few years we were married. I was 18, he was 19 and there we were with our little jobs; I was a bank secretary, and he worked at a local junkyard for the local mobster, and all of our single friends with no place to hang out hung out at our apartment, sprawled out on our wall-to-wall shag carpeting. We smoked pot, we snorted coke off of Led Zeppelin and Grand Funk Railroad album covers, we drank beer, we watched TV, we watched the spectacle of our two Oscars swim in their 55-gallon home as they hunted down and chewed off heads of the unsuspecting goldfish we fed them, and we blasted Black Sabbath on our decked-out stereo with the two speakers the size of portable washing machines. We had MasterCard, a used Toronado, a fully furnished apartment, and we were in debt, but we had all the hardware and we looked good and we felt good. Sometimes a little too good.

Now here's my old friend Maria—the last time I saw her (before this time) we were maybe 11 years old—and this guy, in this slum with this piano and not much else. I don't remember anything that we talked about or how we even finally ended the visit, only stark impressions. He had Asian-black, shoulder-length hair, and wore blade-sharp, center-creased black pants with zoot suit-type darts running down the front, topped with a tight fit, sparkling white tank that revealed his slight build, naturally muscled arms, and golden skin. His face though is now a blur. I think he was handsome. There was secrecy as to his political involvement in some underground something that seemed relevant at the time and prompted my husband to give me his special signal that we should get the hell out of there. But I couldn't just walk out of my friend's house in a rush. She was already heating up a pot full of pasteles, a Puerto Rican delicacy which I happen to hate, almost to the point of gagging, and I knew my husband would never eat. As she removed the stringed

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paper packets of mashed plantain pregnant with specially seasoned meat and peas from the huge pot on the stove, drips of orange grease oozed out of each one and slid down the front of the white oven door. I remember thinking *is she even going to wipe it up? Will I have to politely eat one of these disgusting packets in honor of our past?*

The whole visit seemed surreal. Here was my best childhood friend I had not seen for what seemed a whole lifetime, and she's living with some kind of political criminal, with very few creature comforts, with a piano that she doesn't play—and it wasn't clear if he played it—cooking complicated food, and her hair hanging loose. The Maria I knew was an extremely neat and well-groomed child. Her clothes were always clean and crisp and though she was what we would have called skinny, I always envied her physique. She was very straight, her back was flat as a board, her legs were evenly shaped, not long, but slender and balanced, smooth and perpetually tanned and turned out in second position. Her hair was naturally straight and silky, always parted straight down the middle of her head and combed into a stay-put ponytail at the nape of her neck. I always felt disheveled and misshapen in her presence. I was too tall, too under-dressed or overdressed, unspecific, dull, uncrisp, and pimply. Yet we were best friends: she a Puerto Rican and me a Jew. The thing that was so different about her now was that she was involved with a man at all. As a preteen she had zero sexual appeal, she was uptight and prissy, whereas unbeknownst to her (I believe), at ten I was already making out with her older brother on his chopper bicycle behind the elementary school. Her other brother, who was next in age to the older one, but still older than we, was also interested in me, but he was immature and did childish things to get my attention whenever we hung out in Maria's room.

My mother died when I was ten. About a year later, my father was on his way to marrying his second wife, the woman that would become my stepmother. I remember bringing a wallet-size photo of her with me over to Maria's house and showing it to her father. As I was about to accept this woman into my life in place of my biological mother—who was mentally ill for most of my life—I showed him the picture of the woman who was going to change my world and fill it with sanity and love and with all those things I was sure Maria took for granted. Her father took the picture from my hand cautiously and held it between his thick callused hands, held it at arm's length and stared at it through his bifocals with a wrinkled brow and squinted eyes. Maria's father was very handsome, thin and muscular, a strict disciplinarian to his four children, who always walked cautiously in his presence. He held that picture in his hands for what seemed an interminable amount of time, at the end of which I expected to see an approving glance in my direction, something that said "you're a lucky kid" or "nice work on scoring a new mom." He said, "I don't trust her" and he handed the picture back to me without even looking at my face to see the effect. Maria's mother, a wonderfully warm and beautiful woman, and someone I always sensed cared about every person that entered her home, quickly came to my rescue. She admonished the father for saying what he did and immediately put her

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arm around me and guided me out of the living room and into the warmth of her kitchen. She assured me he didn't mean anything, and anyway I should not care what anyone else thinks.

So there we were, my first husband of about two years and my best friend from my pre-teen days. She was about to serve us the packets of greasy mashed plantains that I was dreading, but I would eat one anyway to be polite. I knew my husband would not let politeness get in his way of turning down the offering. He'd say something smart like *Thanks, but I just ate*. I suddenly remembered that back in our days, Maria had this little growth jutting out from her pinkie finger on her left hand. It was a small, skin-colored thing, the size and shape of an oversized ice cream sprinkle or, as it would be referred to in the suburbs, a jimmy. As a child I was always amazed at how she could use her hand effectively without having this growth effect its movement. And she never seemed to hide it or touch it self-consciously. It was just a part of her. And as she deftly maneuvered kitchen tongs and grabbed the plantain packets out of the large steaming pot, I looked as hard as I could to find the growth, to find a thing that would positively identify the Maria that I knew. *Did I remember the wrong hand?* When I finally got a good look at both hands I could see that the growth was gone. *Did she have it removed? Was it ripped off in a freak accident? Or did it just shrivel up and fall off on its own?* That little detail, that little piece of Maria was gone and so too, it seemed, was the childhood friend I remembered. My husband grew more and more annoyed with every new conversation thread that wove its way into the one before, and I could see that he was trying to signal me that it was time to leave. He refused to eat, yawned openly at the table, raised his eyebrows and tilted his head toward the apartment door every time Maria turned away. I can't remember anything we talked about, but I do remember coming away from that visit feeling uniquely disappointed. I had now lost something. The memory of Maria as my best friend, someone who I saw almost every day all those years ago, was now superceded by this new image.

Her boyfriend is just a shadow to me now. He was probably polite, but I remember he didn't even stay in the kitchen while we ate. He was in and out, busy doing things. *But what things? Political things? Underground things? Illegal things?* I remember my husband whispering to me later something about what's-his-name and his involvement in some big newspaper story and how glad he was to get the hell out of there. But I didn't believe him. It was just not like Maria to be involved with someone like this. Then again, what did I know about her life now that she was grown, and what type of man she was attracted to? Maybe this life she was living now was her brand of rebellion, her way of breaking away from her family, from our neighborhood, even from herself. She was turned around. Her hair was hanging loose, her finger deformity was gone, she had become someone else. And when we finally got out of there, I had no feeling of ever wanting to see her again and I almost wished I had never come.

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