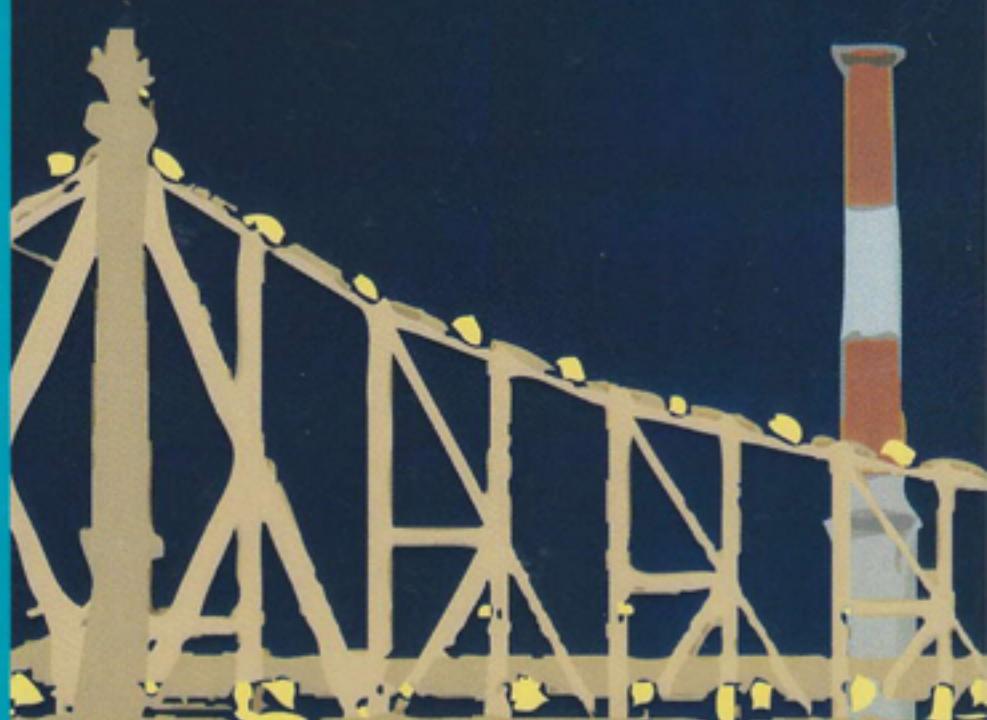


Newtown Literary

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No Going Back

Carly Anderson

We're not sleeping together. It's only our first date," he says with a wink, as he slides his hand a little farther up my thigh. I don't tell him I haven't had sex in three years and that this is my first date in 10. Dating is rough in this big-lighted city.

He orders me a second glass of Malbec, the exact kind he says they served at the St. Jude Winter Gala he attended last Tuesday. He tells me he sat just two tables from Al Pacino and a running back for the New York Jets.

"Exciting," I say, tugging at my skirt.

"Do you like football?"

"Not really."

"I've got tickets to see the Giants next weekend. Great seats. Club passes. Maybe you can come with."

"Maybe."

The waiter delivers a platter of oysters to our table. "More wine, sir?"

He nods. "This time, make it the Pinot noir." I notice the horizontal etchings across his forehead and wonder what thoughts inspired them.

"How old did you say you are again?" he asks.

"I didn't."

He teases an oyster from its shell as I excuse myself from the table. In the ladies' room, I catch my almost-tears before they ruin the mascara I bought just hours ago. I tell myself I can't leave now. I tell myself three years is enough. I tell myself there's no going back.

We walk down Madison Avenue. It's warm for December, in the mid-50s. The air is full of the East River. I can taste it. That and the

wine. He stops in front of a jewelry store and inches towards me. I can see the hairs sprouting from his nostrils. Standing in the middle of this Upper East Side wasteland, he kisses me. I let it happen. A homeless man passes and says, "Good going, brother," and I think they might actually high-five. It's middle school, and there are no class lines, just boys kissing girls. His mouth tastes like fermented Argentine grapes and the Gulf of Mexico.

"You're so beautiful. I don't want the night to end," he says. We kiss again. I forget that it's him and pretend it's Casey, the one I love. The one I'll never kiss again. By the time Casey'd gotten up the nerve to kiss me, we'd already gone on two dates, and at the time, I wasn't sure whether we'd end up as best friends or lovers. We became both. The moment Casey's lips touched mine, the awkward, nervous energy between us dissipated. In less than a year, we exchanged vows next to Lake Cayuga, where we'd taken our first official trip as a couple and where I'd spent the entire three days holed up in our miniature cabin with the stomach flu while he made me laugh with the worst knock-knock jokes ever created.

The lips touching mine now are dry and rigid.

We walk the five blocks to his apartment. He shepherds me along, hand glued to the small of my back. His doorman gives me a once over while calling him *sir*, and we're no longer in middle school. I feel cheap, but keep moving towards the elevator. His apartment is a monochromatic box. Charcoal couch. Aluminum coffee table. Stainless steel everywhere. It's cold and empty. He flips on Sinatra and pulls me into his bedroom, a box within a box. I wonder what I'm doing here and think about leaving, but then he presses himself against me, and it feels good so I stop thinking.

He does all the work while I lie here, fighting back the tears, trying not to remember the things I won't let myself forget: when Casey surrendered to his illness, his body withering before me, and I pleaded with him to take another spoonful of soup; when he could no longer make it the fifteen steps to the bathroom and I changed his bedpan while singing "A Case of You" in my best Joni Mitchell; when I turned up the volume on the television so he wouldn't hear me begging the god I didn't believe in to take me instead of him . . .

"Are you okay?" He pauses for a moment. I say yes but then turn my head to the side when he tries to kiss me. Baby steps, I tell myself. I pull his body closer to mine. For a moment, I am a woman again. I exhale.

I sit up on the bed and pull my dress back over my head.

"I've got an early meeting in the morning," he says. "How about you?"

"Yeah, I have to be in Brooklyn by seven. I should get going."

He ushers me to the door and gives me a peck on the lips. "It was great getting to know you," he says. I nod.

I slink past the doorman, staring at my phone the whole time. I can feel his eyes on me. I can feel Casey's eyes on me, too.

It's past midnight and the R train isn't running anymore, so I take a cab. **N**