Marilyn

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Marilyn

In the morning after I get up, generally around nine-thirty, I always go to a certain cafe to have my breakfast and to read the newspaper. It's a ritual for me. It adds a certain structure to my life that I've come to expect and helps me to face the day. When I get there—I buy my paper at a little stand across the street—I go out on the terrace and sit at my table. It's my mother's table actually—she's always had a table there, even before she was married—but she never has breakfast there. I used to have my own table, but I had to give it up. That's all behind me now, though, so there's no reason to talk about it.

This particular morning is quite beautiful. The sun is out, almost smiling, the sky is a story-book blue, and a few white clouds shaped like chaise lounges are moving lazily across it. The terrace is crowded with middle-aged ladies and bearded gentlemen dressed in turn-of-the-century fashions. Jeffery, my waiter, an unemployed actor who looks remarkably like Sigmund Freud, takes my order—raw oysters with hot sauce and a cup of coffee—and I am just opening my paper to the op-ed page when I notice a woman sitting at my old table across the terrace. For some reason, I just know in my mind that she is twenty. She is dressed in designer jeans and a colorful cotton blouse. She is slender and very pretty in an artistic way—close-cropped dark hair, full red lips, a small Irish nose, and two earrings in her left ear. She wears no make-up, not that any amount of make-up could possibly cover up her black eye.

I can't help chuckling to myself behind my paper. It must have been some fight. The eye is swollen to nearly twice the size of the other. It is jet-black at the center and fades out to purple, then to pale blue, and finally to a greenish-yellow around the edges. Everyone is staring at her. The ladies are biting their lips and shaking their heads. The gentlemen are all nodding and a few are muttering to each other. The young woman seems cheerfully embarrassed, as if she gave more than she got. She blows me a kiss and winks coquettishly with her good eye.

It's funny how appearances can be deceiving. She seems like the gentle, soft-spoken type, but there must be a tiger hidden in her somewhere. She looks me straight in the eye and licks her lips. It's been a long time since I've gone out with a woman like her. Clips of porno movies start flashing through my mind. It's embarrassing. I get up to go speak with her—I want her phone number—but someone calls my name. I turn. The cafe manager, dressed like a monk, asks me if I still want my table. The ladies and gentlemen all tap their coffee cups against their tables and yell "Here! Here! One or the other! One or the other!" I reply quickly, not even sure of what I'm telling him, but when I turn back

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around the young woman is gone. I go to her table. There are streaks of blood on the table top, and a note addressed to me is wrapped around a used tampon laying on her breakfast plate. I gingerly lift the note by one corner and try to read it, but the writing is illegible—red ink smeared with brown blood. Jeffery calls me. My breakfast has arrived and I return to my mother's table.

In the morning when I get up, I always go to a certain cafe to have my breakfast and read the newspaper. When I get there I go out on the terrace and sit at my table. They always have my newspaper waiting there for me. It's my mother's table really, and her newspaper, but she never eats breakfast there. I used to have my own table, but I had to give it up. It's quite convenient for me to go there, as my mother always pays my bills.

This particular morning is quite beautiful, even if the sky is slightly overcast. The birds are flying around upside down, lugging stones up into the trees to build their nests, and everything has a fresh, clean smell from the rains that fell the night before. The terrace is crowded with men and women doctors in white coats with stethoscopes hanging from their necks. Jeffery, my waiter, an unemployed prison guard, takes my order—an English muffin pounded with a hammer, and a cup of coffee—and I am just opening my paper to the comics (I read the front page at home) when I notice a woman sitting at my old table across the terrace. For some reason, I just know that she is twenty-five. She's wearing a sleeveless sun dress. She is slender and very pretty in an artistic way—short auburn hair, high cheekbones, full red lips, and a model's nose. She's wearing a touch of make-up. Her left eye is black and her left arm is in a cast. She can't be long out of the hospital.

The doctors are all watching her with a standard, clinical gaze. She averts her face and eats her breakfast furtively, as if eating were some terrible crime and she wanted to avoid attention. After she has cleaned her plate (the doctors nod knowingly) she pushes it away and picks up a baby from her lap and sets it on the table in front of her. The baby whimpers and motions toward her. She pulls the strap of her dress off her left shoulder, exposing her breast. The breast swells, bulging out over her casted arm until the tiny brown nipple is at the baby's mouth. The doctors murmur. The baby sucks at the breast and begins to grow as the breast begins to shrink. I can see the woman's heart pounding in her chest. The doctors lift the ends of their stethoscopes in the air like antennas to listen to her heart beat. The baby grows into a man wearing an expensive tuxedo and a top hat while the woman's breast shrinks until it is nothing but a nipple attached to her chest. The man climbs down off the table and adjusts his tie. The woman smiles at him like a whipped dog that knows it's going to have to lick its master's hand come supper time. He backhands her across the face, knocking her from
her chair onto the pavement. I wince and smile. I can’t help myself. Watching them is horrifying yet satisfying, almost as if I can feel the pleasure of delivering the blow and the pain of receiving it. She clutches at his leg. He kicks free. The doctors all make notes on little pads sitting in front of them on their tables.

I don’t know why, but I get up to go to her. Someone grabs my arm. I turn. The cafe manager, dressed in judge’s robes, is speaking to me, but I can’t make out what he’s saying. I feel as though I’m at a mental hospital in a gulag. I jerk my arm away and turn back around but the woman and the man are gone. Jeffery ignores me and the doctors all stare at me and shake their heads.

In the morning after I get up, generally around nine-thirty, I always go to a certain cafe to have my breakfast and to read the newspaper. When I get there I go out on the terrace and sit at my table. It’s my mother’s table really, but she never eats breakfast. I used to have my own table, but it seems like I had to give it up for some reason, although I can’t remember why.

This particular morning is quite beautiful, even if it is raining. Occasionally, there’s a flash of lightning followed almost immediately by a deafening clap of thunder. The terrace is crowded with pimps dressed in cheap black suits with dark blue shirts and white ties and prostitutes dressed in kinky lingerie, and the rain isn’t making anyone wet. I’m not particularly hungry this morning—I was out most of the night and ate breakfast before I went to bed—so I tell Jeffery, my waiter, an unemployed abortionist, to bring me a large glass of tomato juice with broken glass in it. I am just opening my paper to the lifestyles section (I read the comics at home) when I notice a woman sitting at my old table across the terrace. For some reason, I just know that she is thirty. She is dressed in a conservatively styled skirt and a plain white blouse. A gold, heart-shaped locket hangs on a chain around her neck. She is slender and looks as if she would be quite pretty in an artistic way—auburn hair pulled back out of her face, fair skin, high cheekbones, and full red lips. Her left eye is swollen shut, her nose is taped, and her upper lip is split on the left side. She’s wearing a neck brace and her right arm is in a cast. It must have been some beating.

A strange feeling of dread creeps over me, as if my eyes were tunneling back into my head and my throat were swelling shut. I hide behind my paper. I can see that the pimps and prostitutes are all staring at her. The prostitutes all say in unison ‘‘horrible, horrible’’ and the pimps all answer in unison ‘‘you gotta do what you gotta do.’’ The woman looks around at them and half-smiles, as if every mark were a badge of honor or as if she knew something that they would never know. She rips the locket from her neck, opens it, and holds it out, showing the picture inside to the crowd, but it’s too far away for me to make it out. The pimps and prostitutes all smile knowingly. The woman sets the locket on the table

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and snaps her fingers. It disappears. She smirks at me, then scoops up a handful of scrambled eggs from her plate and throws it at me. It splats onto the table in front of me, only it's not scrambled eggs anymore, it's semen. The pimps and prostitutes all look at one another and nod their heads and start pelting me with their half-eaten breakfasts. Eggs, French toast, bagels, English muffins all turn to semen when they hit me. My clothes and newspaper are dripping with musty goo. I yell for help. The woman points at me and laughs. The cafe manager, dressed like a fire marshall, drags a heavy hose onto the terrace and hoses me down with gasoline. A pimp throws a lit cigar at me and I burst into flames. I climb up on my table and scream, "I'm innocent! I'm innocent!" The woman strolls over and hands me an Oscar. The pimps and prostitutes applaud.

In the morning when I get up, generally around nine-thirty, I always go to a certain cafe to have my breakfast and to read the newspaper. When I get there, I pick up a paper that someone has left and go out on the terrace and sit at my table. It's my mother's table really, but she seldom has breakfast here so I usually have the table to myself. I used to have my own table, but I had to give it up. I didn't want to—having your own table at this cafe is sort of a tradition in my family—but I didn't have much say in the matter.

This particular morning is quite beautiful. The sun is already hot, and the day promises to be a scorcher, which should keep most people off the street and out of my way. The terrace is crowded with the usual assortment of late risers: retirees, wealthy professionals, and housewives downtown on shopping sprees. Jeffery, my waiter, a second-rate actor (I've seen him in a few plays), takes my order—a Danish and a cup of coffee—and I am just opening my paper to the want ads (I like to verify that there aren't any suitable jobs available before I read the news) when I notice my ex-wife, Marilyn, sitting at my old table across the terrace. She must be doing quite well for herself; she's wearing expensive casual clothes. She is still slender and pretty in an artistic way—close-cropped dark hair (I think she's changed colors), high cheekbones, full red lips, and two earrings in one ear.

I slump behind my paper to avoid being seen and to block my view of her—the memories are bad enough. I thought she had stopped coming here for breakfast. I feel sick to my stomach, as if my wrists had been cut and my life were ebbing away. Petty little scenes from our marriage flash through my mind. I'm as embarrassed thinking about them as I would be if everyone on the terrace could see them. I glance around the sides of my paper to make sure no common acquaintances have spotted both of us (we divided up our friends along with everything else) when I realize just how ridiculous I'm being. I've done nothing criminal. I was pretty damn good to her most of the time, and it wasn't easy, either. I'm
overcome by the desire to speak to her. To prove myself right. To hear her tell me that I wasn’t a monster. I set my paper down and start towards her table. She looks up from the toast she’s buttering. I make a special effort to seem small and unthreatening. “Hello, Marilyn,” I say.

She glances around the terrace as if she’s looking for someone in particular.

“Nothing to worry about,” I say. “It’s only me.” She squints her eyes against the sun and stares at me. I feel as though for all my walking I’m not getting any closer. I pick up my pace.

“How have you been doing?” I call out, wanting to keep the conversation going since I’ve already started it.

She peers around, shrugs, and goes back to buttering her toast.

Sweat starts popping out on my face. “Marilyn! Marilyn!” I shout. “I’m over here! Look at me!” I reach into the pockets of my sport coat. “I brought you candy, flowers!” I run to her, panting. I’m cradling a box of chocolates and a bouquet of flowers in my arms like twin footballs, like newborn babies. She sets her knife carefully against the edge of her plate.

“Marilyn!” I yell. “Look at me!”

She glances around at no one in particular and starts eating her toast.

—Michael King