

Matthew Di Paoli

### Museums

It was sunny out and March had been cold, so it was clear, and cold, and sunny. From the limousine, everything looked burnt gray. Mason stared straight out as the limo carried him three blocks from his childhood home to the church. He wore black Ray Bans and a slate suit.

It was strange sleeping back in Queens the night before, he thought, and the dog was getting old. She had begun to form strange growths on her body that the vet and his father felt weren't worth removing, so it was hard to pet her down her back. He remembered her as a puppy, chasing ping-pong balls and shitting in the basement when she felt unappreciated.

The church felt so familiar to him as they pulled up. So many childhood prayers left unanswered in those rafters. Though to be fair, he thought, they were mostly about girls and baseball. In front, a bulging group of his friends, late twenties, unsure whether it was appropriate to laugh or smile, waited for his cue. And to the right, his extended family, somber and shocked because they hadn't been there. The only people who'd been there were in that limousine. That's the way she'd wanted it.

Mason stared straight into his own reflection in the tinted window and into the mirror of his own sunglasses and on and on like that until no one stared back. He realized his father was already out there, shaking hands, receiving embraces, consolation prizes for a life forever altered.

\*\*

When his mother could still talk, there was a brief period when she came home and Mason assembled an aluminum bed for her in the living room. He placed Oreos next to it on a makeshift nightstand. She'd started eating them with ginger ale because it calmed her stomach.

That one night she was home, she clumsily lifted her knit cap above her eyes. A few strands of her hair fell out like a baby who'd just begun to grow it. Her hands weren't working real well, so she used them as blunt objects as if holding wooden blocks.

"I want you to take pictures," she whispered, maybe not wanting his father to hear.

Mason brought his camera most places. Now 27, he wasn't ever sure what to tell people he did:

*"I'm a photographer."*

*"Oh really? Like in museums?"*

*"No."*

Photography wasn't how he paid his bills, anyway. He did that by substitute teaching.

"I don't know if I feel—If that's a good idea," he said. He looked at her. She'd gotten so small and soon, he knew, she wouldn't be there at all. The bed squeaked metallic as she fumbled at her side for an Oreo and Mason

wedged it between her fingers. “You want me to take pictures of you like this?” He knew how private she always was. He hiked the blanket up to her neck because she looked cold even though the house was warm.

“I’m going to be better soon, better and I’ll want to know how I looked. Don’t you think I’m going to get better?”

Mason hesitated. He looked into her cloudy eyes. She was barely able to hold them open. “Yes. Of course.”

“I’ve been energy healing and my Chinese friends say I’m getting better.”

Mason’s mother had become involved in Chinese medicine over the last several years, which is why she hadn’t gone to the doctor at first. In a way, Mason blamed them. He did his best not to blame her.

Now, a bit of Oreo stuck to her chin. She drifted in and out of sleep. As she did, Mason clicked photos of her inconceivably fragile body, her hands, long and frail like a bird’s.

\*\*

After the funeral, all Mason’s friends went downtown to his favorite bar. It was the only straight bar for blocks. They drank whisky and talked about things unrelated to death—movies and styles of pants.

“Where’s the girl?” asked one of his friends.

It was something that bothered Mason. They’d only been together for a month but still, it bothered him—it wasn’t like a dinner reservation she could change. “Rain check,” he said and walked over toward the jukebox.

He placed his whisky on the machine and was flipping through LP’s when a pretty girl with dark straight hair and pale skin came up and hovered over his shoulder. She looked like the kind of girl who had opinions.

“And what do you do here in your suit?” her accent was German and she had a drunken lilt in her voice. Her drink was nearly empty.

“Where? In this bar?” he responded.

“In—” she looked around the room. “Life.”

He fumbled around in his pockets, pulling out two camera lenses. He kept different lenses in different blazers. It was a filing system of sorts, beholden to weather and mood. “I’m a photographer.” He handed her the lenses and she looked through them with a certain sense of wonder. She saw him in rose and in green and then in rose-green.

“You photograph me?” She struck a starlet pose. There was something very pure about her and it reminded him of Man Ray’s early portraits when he photographed his lovers and even through lens and frame, you felt as if you could touch his desires.

“No, not today,” said Mason. He didn’t have his camera anyway, he thought.

One of the men from her table came over and grabbed the girl’s torso. He said something to her in German and they both laughed, then he went to the bar.

“Boyfriend?” Mason plucked his drink from the top of the jukebox, swirled the ice in his glass and downed the rest.

“Him? No.”

Impulsively, she leaned in and kissed his cheek. She took him into her arms for a moment as if trying to quell something dark and cold deep within him. He tasted her warm breath, inhaled her body, which smelled of berries and vodka.

“Is there something we can do?” she said.

He felt every word on the tip of his nose. “You and me?”

She nodded.

Mason thought of his girlfriend and felt her absence more deeply in his inebriation. “I wouldn’t know what to do with you,” he said.

She smiled. “Well, if you figure this out, I will be here by the music.”

\*\*

The next day, while substituting, a student walked up to Mason under the pretense of getting a tissue. “Is your real name Mr. T.?” she asked.

Mason had taken to letting the children call him that because it was easier and he liked referencing pop culture before their time.

“It’s Tancilio,” he said, finally.

“That’s Italian.”

“Yes.”

“I’m Greek.” She pretended to blow her nose.

“Ok.”

A moment passed between them.

“What do you do?” she asked.

“I’m here teaching you.”

“No, like in real life?”

The question struck him in a way that made him feel small. “I don’t know. Nothing I guess.”

“I’m going to sit down now,” she said.

\*\*

That night, Mason’s girlfriend came to his apartment. He cooked penne a la vodka and served it on little black plates with Japanese characters on them that he’d gotten on sale. They drank white wine because that’s what she preferred.

“So, how was it?”

Mason forked some pink pasta into his mouth. “Pretty boring. They had me teaching math and I can barely figure out the tip on a bill.”

“No, I meant the—with your mom.”

“Oh. Well a lot of people came. That was nice. My father gave a nice reading.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah, I had the chicken Marsala at the dinner. That was a mistake. You’d think you couldn’t make the day worse and then—bad chicken Marsala.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t—I wasn’t there.”

“I’m sure there’s a better place to meet my family.” Mason tried to seem understanding. In a way, he was; but it wasn’t the people who came he’d remember the most. It was the ones who didn’t.

He got up briefly to grab cheese from the fridge; but there wasn’t any cheese, just film—rolls and rolls of film undeveloped in the icebox. “How was your day?”

She held up her fork, extracting one of her long blonde hairs from her pasta.

“Do you want to go to the bedroom?” he asked.

Her face was small and pretty, each feature illuminated differently by the box lamp halfway across the room.

“Sure,” she said.

As they made love, he felt very far away. She closed her eyes and he watched her clenched face as he moved.

Afterwards, she covered herself. His chest hair matted with sweat and he felt cold. Lying on top of the comforter, he replayed the metallic sounds of the box spring in his head, staring up into the white ceiling, knowing there was nothing beyond it and that no one was staring back.