

Islanders

Ammiel Alcalay



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to Gilbert Sorrentino (1929-2006)
in good memory

I know that peace is soon coming,
and love of common object
— Edward Dorn



THE TABLE

He struggled to remember the table, a big table, unpainted, unstained, with simple legs, the whole thing cluttered with papers, objects. In the corners stacks leaned precariously, pens, pencils, scribbled notes surrounded by magazines, radio parts, half-used matchbooks. The table he had now was neat but his fingers picked and scratched at the damp label on the wet bottle that sat before him. Her arm stretched in front of her, then shot down past her mouth and the cigarette there as she spoke. “Five letters, they buried gasoline and shells and everything under the pyramids, each letter in Egypt stood for another stash.”

The young man picked at the label. The woman spoke of her son, how he was privy to secret information, the day he left, her eyes looking past the bottles lined in rows before the dismal light that rose behind them, gazing at the water on another shore. How firm her skin was then, her waist thin where her full legs met as if rising further in a perfect X, her breasts held by a black satin cloth wrapped around and tied, the ends of the knot down her brown back swinging and waving as she walked. But that was a long time ago, when the railroad stopped right in front of the hotel, now just a figment in the imagination of the old or a faded photograph in the plate glass window of the barbershop. Her boy wore white from head to foot and she stood out against him as they walked arm in arm on the thin border of wet grass that led to the beach. She spoke to him as if she knew those last few dollars would last forever.

War of the Worlds, she heard *War of the Worlds* at the diner while she took an order from an older driver, his breakfast at night. Months and months already since she had smelled the wildflowers that grew up

on the hill past the quarries, hundreds of pads filled with scribbled coffee, bacon, eggs, toast, jelly, jam — honey, an egg in my milkshake, ice in my coffee, sugar in my tea, you and me.

She went with them across the dark lot, the lights against the dull road accompanied by engines, shifting gears, a steady fog around the bend that led to the tunnel, beyond the dim apparition of buildings rising in a soft glow. They always showed her pictures of their kids and she knew their names as well as what they did. She walked home alone across the road to her bungalow by the marsh, lay in bed and watched the lights and shadows as they came through the thin curtains and ran across the ceiling. Word of marches came, and hordes of troops. The older drivers talked, the younger ones were eager, scared and eager.

“A bastard,” she said as the young man looked up from his almost peeled bottle at the glowing orange tip that hung past her lips, “but smart, and they’re the worst,” she said, nodding in agreement with herself.

The young man thought to make a story of it,

the woman, the son she had, some years they lived, the things that happened around them, but he also kept thinking about the table, where it had been, and couldn't remember, the size of the room, what wall it leaned against and the things that lay on it. His day had been long, the streets hot, filled with other sweating bodies, his feet ached and names repeated themselves in his head. Two stories he had read years ago stuck to him, and as he looked at the bottle and the woman he thought about the men that wrote them, saw the men themselves, in long overcoats with cigarettes, hunched over coffee in some diner, their rooms, filled with smoke, crumpled papers, completely removed from what they were writing about, the people they wrote of never imagining they were being written about, the idea that someone was recording the facts of their lives, the circumstances they lived in.



As if it had meant nothing, he would stay away. Occupy himself. The city seemed almost enough. It

was hard to believe there were people scared to walk in the city. And that there were, after all, only other people, walking. He sat one morning with a man on a corner, the man watching the traffic, he watching the man's lips slowly speaking of a daughter, a few lines in an obituary page, the grave never seen. The man's eyes, unused to being closed, hand holding a paper bag. There was work, always he'd heard, an honest day's pay for an honest day's work. Exactly where this had come from he never quite knew or bothered to find out. He never minded work, doing it with a sense of pride, that things could get done and he would be the one to do them. There were stories that people would read and say, why yes, this is very good, but that didn't really matter much, not as much as the turning out, of more. The constant work involved, the involvement, then. There were people who liked to see him for the stories he told, saying, yes, he's such a character, isn't he, and where on earth does he meet all those crazy friends of his. Others were more like brothers or sisters, with not that much between them that had to be said.

Somehow, though, nothing fit. The stories themselves, it was useless to fight. These things he felt. That when he wasn't with her there was an emptiness, a finality, desperate almost.

"It's hard to keep up tradition," he said, holding the flowers. "Nobody does it anymore."

"They're beautiful, they are," she said, smiling. And then there were those other flowers, her mother's face full of defeat, her tears freely on his shoulder as his, too, on hers.



It seemed senseless to go to sleep as the sun rose. There were things last night he was supposed to do tomorrow that became impossible to even consider, now that tomorrow had already become today. So he would walk, maybe there would be work. The sun had just begun its ascent, the light hitting the buildings at peculiar angles making the bricks yellow, the fire escapes dance. The white paint on the front of the bar was thick and chipped, the age of it, its actual substance. He pushed open one of the swinging

doors, struck for an instant by the darkness, the darkness of this place.

“Top of the morning, Cap.”

“How goes it?”

“You know, the usual. And when there’s a little extra . . .”

“That’s about right.”

They sat in silence for a minute or two before he asked: “Any work?”

“Well, I believe I might fit you in a little later.”

“That’s good, don’t let anyone ever say you’re not a scholar and a gentleman.”

He stared out the window, the thoughts beginning with the silence, the staring out through the window, as if he was seeing doors, one after another, but never again, like before, just things reappearing. He held two fingers up to the bartender and kept staring out the window, the trucks roaring by, postmen beginning their day, the street coming to life, watching the sun, now bright, now shining, as the day became, through the window, whatever would become of it, he watched the day.