

The Lady Who Changed After the Election

Y York

It's 1980, and I'm walking around in circles. He's an actor; he's an actor. What have they done?! He's an actor. See, I always figured the nation could get along fine without my participation. Okay, Nixon was no prize; he also wasn't an actor. Viet Nam? Yes, I was against Viet Nam, but I knew if I ever focused on this stuff, it was going to take a lot of my time. I was busy enough trying to get through the day. Presidential candidates are all same, anyway, right? Except Reagan, Reagan isn't the same, he's an actor. Death Valley Days. Bonzo goes to Hollywood. This is like some joke. But no way he'll actually win the presidency; Americans aren't that stupid. November 1980, I look around, the subway's still running, stores are open, nobody's gagging. My faith in the nation's ability to get along without my participation wanes. I don't know what to do or who to ask. My friends, it's hopeless, all they're thinking about is their next acting job; oh, boy, maybe one of them is planning a presidential run. I call Granny, the only political person I know. She says I should ``do volunteer voik.'' Granny doesn't trust government; she's been taught by experts. Granny changes her party designation every two years in case there's a purge. She says they're all liars and thieves, and that's the good ones. But if I want to feel less helpless I should do volunteer work. I study the ads and end up on the lower east side, with an after-school program. I've never been to the lower east side. This school needs more than volunteers, it needs a miracle. I go into the multipurpose room, and that's where I first see this guy. And I stop breathing. He hands me a form to fill out, says his name which I don't hear and looks at me for an extra second because my mouth is hanging open. I feel a fierce attraction for this person, and something even stranger, I think this thought, I think, I want to marry you. Marriage is a box a young woman climbs into that they bury her in when she dies. I don't want to get married. So this thought that I've just thought, it's like it's somebody else's thought. Mr. X is working some magic spell on a previously rowdy group of youngsters. The children stare with rapt attention while he points to us volunteers on the other side of the room. I wonder what he's saying about us. He tells us how to look into

ourselves for talents to share. I got a talent I want to share. This swarthy, tall, kinky headed type isn't even my type. I like short guys, stocky, with light eyes. Um, Mr. X, could I talk to you for a minute? He looks at me and what it is, what it is, is I've got his full attention, like nobody else in the world exists, including himself. I don't even know how fake that. I am speechless, but the kids summon him away before I am humiliated. I study the form he gave me, searching for some talent to share. Folk dancing. No. Choral singing. No way. Crafts? Nah, you have to actually know how to do something in crafts. Story-telling. This is it. ``Oh, sir, Mr. X.''' I tug on his shirt, ``this story-telling, that's like talking, right, not like real writing where you have to know grammar rules, right?'' He almost replies without acknowledging my jive. During this millisecond, I have apprehension, I don't know if I can marry somebody who's not on the lookout for flying jokes. A joke can kill you you don't see it coming. This is before I know how terminally serious are the volunteers and activists among whom Mr. X travels; he's not used to jive. But he stops his almost spoken word, and a wry smile acknowledges my wee joke, and for a moment he drops his public thing, the wall that protects his secret self, I get a glimpse of the unwalled him, and I want to move in. A wry smile acknowledges my wee joke. Thank you. Assignments are made, we volunteers disperse to meet our kids. My 8 and 9 year-old storytellers are eaten up with shyness. These are not storytellers, but story listeners. Well, I don't know any stories. They wait expectantly. ``Okay, I'm going to tell the first couple of sentences in a story. Once upon a time a little girl lives on the lower east side of New York City. On her tenth birthday, she takes her first solo subway ride. She knows how to buy a token and where to get on the train so it's safe. Does anybody know what happens next?'' What ensues in a harrowing tale of misadventure and unbelievable 10-year-old girl strength, sort of a supergirl, who is variously black, white, Puerto Rican, and Greek-Russian, whatever that is. I run find Mr. X when class is over, tell him that my class went terrible and I think I need a private consultation. It'll have to keep, as Mr. X is on his way to a demonstration. What a coincidence I'm on my way to a demonstration, what demonstration you doing to? He's going to the UN. He's in charge of the Romero puppet. That's where

I'm going. I don't know who Romero is or what's going on at the UN. We don't go immediately to the Subway because we have to go to Abby's to get the puppet. Who's Abby?, I sound so uncool, somebody shoot me and put me out of my misery. I don't think Abby's a girlfriend. She's entirely too nonchalant about me to be a girl friend. There are several other people at Abby's. You know, these people, I don't think they've been voting very long. I have been voting since Humphrey didn't win; whereas perhaps they have been voting since Carter did win. This is a generation with which I am not entirely comfortable. This post hippie, sexually liberated, feminist equality kind of community with unshaved legs and cavalier attitudes about drugs. I don't think Mr. X is sleeping with any of these women, but maybe he's sleeping with all of them, that too would account for the casual way in which he relates to them. Oh, he's as young as they are.* This is very strange territory. Volunteering, demonstrations, puppets, younger men. Well, you only live once, and Reagan's already president, so what could happen that's worse than that, right? This puppet is a ten-foot tall head of Archbishop Oscar Romero, murdered by military death squads in El Salvador, and we're going to take him on the Subway during rush hour. Mr. X, me, the three young women from the organization, and Oscar Romero's head go uptown. I carry the two twelve-foot poles that support the puppet head. Sometimes I love New Yorkers. Somebody figures that the poles are less dangerous on the ceiling than on the floor of the subway, about 20 people help me hold them up. I'm one of the two people supporting a pole when they snap the photographs that will appear in the tomorrow paper. This is not a popular cause yet. There are four or five people marching, so I can't lose myself in the crowd. As the demonstration winds down, and it's hard to tell, I try to set up my private consultation with Mr. X but he's hurrying to a rehearsal. A what? I have stopped going out with actors; you can't trust them, you think you know them and the next thing they're running for president. But I don't think he's an actor; I dive in. Um, I'm in theatre, too. I'm a playwright. Yeah, I had a show about four months ago at the Wonderhorse. This information makes him want to talk to me about something. He'll call me. He doesn't call me. The next week I keep missing him at school. One of the other volunteers says she thinks he's one of the people keeping the vigil at the

UN. Vigil at the UN, boy you'd think that would be in the New York Times. Huh. I take the Subway uptown, and in the crowded train I get into an altercation with somebody who is smoking. Smoking isn't allowed on the subway, and when somebody smokes in a train, it's bad for everybody because there's only one pint of oxygen down there. I tell this guy to put out his cigarette, and instantly I'm in something, New York, everything's a potential something, that's why people mostly keep to themselves. This guy, my offending smoker, he's got lost, homeless, mental-illness eyes. He looks sadly at the cigarette he's just lit. I'll fix it. I squeeze the fire off of the end so he can put the rest back in his coat. He's wearing a charity suit, the cuffs are short, the pants are long. He asks me if I know where the shelter is. I do, it's interesting to me that I know this because I didn't know it until I started going down to the lower east side, where NY keeps its shelters. You know, you see one homeless guy on a corner, you think what a shame, you see a hundred homeless guys outside a shelter, you know this is a real problem. So the shelters are out of sight. My guy is going in the wrong direction, of course. I explain to him how he can transfer at Grand Central without paying another token. He is miserable with non-comprehension. I am about to say, I'll take you, I even picture getting him to Astor Place and then having to walk him the rest of the way to second street. when a young kid in Trotsky glasses (I don't know this term yet) says he'll help my guy get to the shelter. My guy looks at us and asks if they'll have juice there. I give him a dollar, I don't have more than that, metaphorically I don't even have the dollar, but literally I have the dollar so I give it to him, tell him to get juice before hand, confirming that this will occur with Trotsky. I look around; dozens of people have watched this exchange. We all disperse to go our separate lives at Grand Central Station. I go to the UN, and there's Mr. X, marching in a circle with 3 other protesters and a dozen of New York's finest on hand in case they get rowdy. Mr. X asks me to march for him so he can rest. But I But I But I. Sure, no problem. I take a mental note to find out more about El Salvador. If I'm going to have my very own FBI file, I probably should know what's what, right? I don't march very long, I go sit down beside him. Boy, he's tired. I drop my public thing, the wall I keep around myself, the way you do when you want

somebody to marry you, or take you home for a couple of days. He's exhausted, so his wall is down, too. A long silence, after which he tells me what I can do for him, And it's not what I expect. He's a theatre director, he's doing some political performance art to criticize US intervention in El Salvador. What's supposed to happen during this performance art thing, somebody tells a love story set in Central America while Mr. X cuts up a raw turkey with an electric saw. I say, boy what a coincidence, one of my characters does that in my last play. Wry smile. Am I willing to write and tell the story in this performance. Well, of course I am because I'll do anything to be next to Mr. X. because X and Y make such a cute pair of chromosomes. Sure, I'll do it. My thing is still down, he asks - if I'll stay and march while he goes to get some sleep. I say, yes, but I only stay three or four minutes after he's gone. Generally when a girl drops her thing she gets a different response than this. All I got is chilly in Dag Hamerscjold plaza. I don't see him on Monday, and it isn't until Friday that I hear he's in jail on Long Island. He chained himself to a fence at Shoreham Nuclear Power station. They frown on that. I also learn he doesn't have a job; he sort of scams money, tutors rich kids. Does it in some woman's apartment on the upper east side, because his apartment is too crummy. No job is a drag, jail is a drag, a crummy apartment is a drag, but who is this woman who lets him use her apartment for tutoring? Mr. X returns to us, looking tired. He asks how is the love story coming along? Oh, great, yeah I'm almost done, polishing it up now. I haven't started it. He also invites me to a party. There's a party at Studio Henry, whatever that it. Sort of an end of jail celebration. Studio Henry will become the legendary Studio Henry, but then it's just some crummy damp basement slash sound studio, underneath an exotic reptile store that specializes in live cricket food, a lot of which have escaped into the walls. There's a three dollar charge at the door, and Mr. X is no where to be seen. But the beer is free, and the live music is astonishing. John Zorn is playing bebop on the alto, John Zorn will become the John Zorn, the one who makes funny noises and leads Naked City, but I'd never heard of him, so, naturally I think bebop is the music he plays; you can imagine my surprise at my first John Zorn concert when he makes duck noises and blows bubbles in a bowl. He's playing with Dave, somebody

who doesn't become famous, but he also doesn't die and that's something because the 80s is going to be very hard on these musicians. Dave is playing an instrument that's as big as my leg that I think he's put together from scrap metal; because I've ever seen a baritone saxophone. He's honking and squeaking like a heard of rogue elephants, and it's amazing. Music that sounds like a deep-muscle massage, I mean I almost forget to be mad about this 3 dollar entrance fee. But there's more reason to be annoyed: I see other volunteers from the school; he invited everybody, he didn't invite just me.

He asks me if I got a beer. I don't drink. I see you invited everybody; you know, I thought you invited just me. Wry smile. So who's this woman lets you tutor kids in her apartment? He doesn't ask how I know about all that. Says, an old high school buddy. These things I'm saying to him, they aren't casual things; I have taken my interest and placed it squarely on the table. Any fool can figure out he's not interested in me, except I decide not to see it. Mr. X is summoned to man the beer keg. If I keep seeing him at twenty-second intervals, it's never going to add up. I think I wear well, I think I'm better over time, but I'm not going get a chance to grow on him unless I can get him to stand still for five minutes. I stay almost to the bitter end, but some misplaced pride prevents me from helping clean up. I catch a cab home; it's late, and I'm too sad to ride the subway. My answering service calls when I get home. Messages from people I've been avoiding. People who want to marry me, or to take me home for a day. I don't want to go. There is a sameness with these people, A kind of recidivism. Mr. X, he's no repeat.

After my class on Monday, Mr. X pokes in his head and asks me if I brought a copy of the story. I tell him I'll bring it on Friday. On Friday when Mr. X asks to see it, I tell him I forgot it. He is not pleased. Can I call you tonight? I'll read it to you on the phone. His wall is up, his public persona. I think maybe this marriage isn't going to get off the ground. He tells me to call tonight after 11. I don't understand; I don't understand how a person who demonstrates for human rights in El Salvador, and nuclear justice on Long Island can have room in his brain for opinions about some silly love story that nobody's going to hear when I tell it because he's gonna be running an electric saw. I

call him up at eleven thirty. Hi, you in bed. He's not. Well get in bed, it's a bedtime story. He isn't amused. You're not in bed, get in bed, I'm not gonna read you this story, not before you get in bed. I hear the creaking sounds that he's doing it, but boy I can tell he's not pleased. I tell this story.

Paula the Ugly by me

Things have not changed much in the village of Santa Maria in the last hundred years, or in the last two hundred. The men bring home the fish, that the women salt and wrap in leaves to take to market at Ciudad del Oro. They bring home the money each week and place it on the table. It is never enough.

Everyone has something else they sell; vegetables from the garden, hand-sewn lace, chickens, but Juan Miguel sells puppies. His dog Flora makes soft, fluffy puppies that the rich families of Ciudad del Oro buy for pets. No other dog makes such beautiful puppies, even the runt of the litter will sell.

Juan's daughter, Christina, takes the 10-week old puppies to market in her wheel barrow. Buy my puppies, buy these soft, friendly puppies. They will be loyal to you more than your wife. That's a joke her father makes; she doesn't know what it means. The money from the litter keeps the family until Flora pops another batch.

Juan and Christina examine the week-old puppies in Flora's latest litter. Juan picks up a previously unnoticed ball of puppy fluff. ``What will you do with her, Papa?'' Juan displays the pup to Christina. The poor, happy, puppy has a misshapen leg, a misshapen foot, a floppy ear, a straight ear, and furless patches on her face. ``This puppy will not sell, Christina. We can't keep her. Better to put her away now.'' Christina runs beside Juan Miguel. ``But Papa, the people of Ciudad del Oro, they like things that are different. They'll buy her because she's different.'' ``They like things that are different, if they are different and beautiful. Nobody buys an ugly difference.'' ``But she's just a week. Maybe everything will clear up. Just give her a little more time.'' Juan Miguel, not a cruel man, regrets sharing this grownup task with Christina, who is clearly not ready for this painful reality. ``All right, Christina, we'll give the little dog some time.''

As the days pass, Christina watches the little pup, who she secretly names

Paula the Ugly after an old legend. Paula is not achieving beauty, indeed, as she becomes formed, it becomes more apparent that she is grotesque. But she doesn't seem to mind hopping instead of walking, she springs into place as readily as the other pups walk. ``Look, papa she can do what other pups do.'' No matter, no one will buy her. By the time the pups are four weeks old, Paula is clearly the leader. She leads her brothers and sisters a merry chase around their nest, and is the first to attack Christina's shoe when Christina comes to visit them. ``Oh Paula, you're ugly and bad.'' Christina laughs at her ugly charge. ``Sit, girl.'' And Paula does at four weeks. ``Bark, girl.'' And she learns. ``Come, girl, stay, girl, roll over girl. Dance on your back legs girl.'' At eight weeks, Paula is always at Christina's side. Mother Dog Flora favors her deformed pup, too. Choosing to romp with Christina and Paula rather than wait at the dock for Juan Miguel, her usual job. ``Don't worry, Flora, we'll find Paula a home. When people see her tricks, surely they'll buy her.''

Christina wheels the wheelbarrow full of pups to market, Flora and Paula run along side. Christina brings a hoop; when puppy Paula jumps through the hoop as she has so many times before, someone will buy her then.

It isn't long before a rich woman picks up one of the splendid puppies. ``But Senora, look at this one This one is so smart. Surely there is room in your heart for one who is best, is funny and loyal, though not like the rest. Watch this.'' Christina lures ugly Paula to the fore, but the puppy refuses to sit or bark or jump through the hoop; indeed seems to make herself more goofy, one ear up, one ear flopped, and tongue hanging out. As soon as the buyer goes away, Paula leaps through the hoop as if to say, I'll do it for you but don't send me away.

All the puppies are sold but one; ugly, happy, Paula, yaps and leaps around her beloved Christina. Juan Miguel comes from the dock. Christina hands him the money, and Juan slips a rope around Paula's neck and leads her to the sea. ``But Poppa, she'll make money for us by doing tricks for strangers. They'll give her coins like at a circus.'' I've seen no tricks, Christina, child don't make up tales. Christina grabs the rope and gives Ugly Paula her commands: sit girl. But she doesn't. Bark Paula, but she won't. Roll over girl. Just a wag of her

tail. Juan gently takes the rope from his daughter and leads the dog away, Flora nipping at his heels. Christina runs along side, pleading, but to no avail. She tries to be brave but the deepest saddest wail comes from her young throat. Juan turns in surprise to stare at his anguished daughter. Paula the Ugly can't stand to see her mistress in agony. She runs and licks away Christina's tears, barks, and sits, and rolls over, and does back flips in the air. Christina holds out her hoop, and Paula jumps through and and through and back again. Flora barks loudly, saying see, see what my maimed little doggy can do. Juan didn't know there was so much devotion and love among the two dogs and his daughter. He hands the rope to Christina. ``I guess she'll bring in a copper or two.'' He walks quickly away so Christina does not see that his eyes are damp. Christina squeezes her dogs; Paula you are ugly, you are surely grotesque, but I always knew you would turn out the best.

I say, the end. I'm a runner just finished her first marathon, sprinting the last hundred yards. I don't know who won, I don't know my time, I just know I finished, I gave it my best shot. I got him to stay still for five minutes. It is some seconds before I hear the silence. It's just silence, there's a lot I can't tell from it; I think this probably isn't the sort of love story he envisioned, but I don't write love stories, this is as close as I get. It's still quiet. Is his wall-thing down, does he wish I was there? Is his air too still all of a sudden? Maybe he fell asleep. Then he says my name; my name with kind of a question mark at the end of it. And embodied in this short word, my name, I hear his whole self coming to me across the phone wires. He knows I'm not there. His air is too still; I'm not there, and he knows it.

Something's going to happen now between X and Y. I don't know what it's going to be yet, but I know it's going to be all right; I think it's going to be all right.

the end