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Novena

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We called him The Seltzman. He lived on the ground floor of the same apartment building, and the four of us would giggle as we watched him leave for work in the morning. He wore the same outfit every day--blue coveralls, with his name embroidered in white thread on the front. The coveralls were so worn that even when Tasha, on a dare, tried to get close enough to the white name patch to read his name, she couldn't. The thread was torn, and the name faded and indistinguishable. He would climb into his seltzer truck, the large truck bed filled with crates of beautiful bottles of blue and green, the empties that he collected twice a week. The seltzer bottles were corralled by a thick rope, which kept the crates from moving, but you could still hear the bottles shift, the scraping noise of glass against glass, as he would start up his engine and drive off.

Mrs. Plotinsky was the first adult to sit outside in those morning hours. She carried her ugly beach chair, reeking of urine, and positioned herself outside the front courtyard. When the Seltzman passed her on the way to his truck, she nodded, but never spoke. "Bad man," Mrs. Plotinsky said in her Polish accent, as soon as she saw him drive the truck down the block. "You girls keep 'way," she told us every morning. And we did.

We spent the summer playing handball in the courtyard, careful not to hit Carlita Ruiz's window, since she threatened to pour hot water on us if we hit her "Goddamn window one more time." It was always Teresa who said, "Let's go to Sal's," We would stop playing and follow her down the block to Sal's Luncheonette. Because she was twelve and the oldest, she led without coercion, and we--Tasha, Nancy, and me--followed happily.

With Teresa in the lead, we trailed behind into Sal's Luncheonette.

Depending on how much money we could scrounge from meager allowances, or loose change from our parents' coat pockets, we would order shakes and fries and split it between us.

"When's your dad comin' out?" Fat Sal asked as he wiped the red Formica counter with his grey rag. Teresa tensed at his question, but continued to stick the French fry in her mouth.

"My mom says he has another year to serve, but with good behavior . . ."

"A year ain't so long."

Teresa shrugged, a practiced gesture of indifference. Nancy raised her eyebrows at me--a mistake--since Teresa noticed and immediately pinched her on the arm. Teresa then shot me a narrow glance.

"What did I do?" I asked.

"You know what you did," she said menacingly, and stuffed the last french fry in her mouth.

It was evening, around eight last summer, when the police came for Teresa's dad. Nancy was over my apartment and we sat together on my grandmother's fire escape. We saw the black and white police car pull up to the front of the building, and watched as two officers walked past the urine-stenched Mrs. Plotinsky and Mrs. Carmine, who sat outside perpetually knitting ugly sweaters for some cousin or nephew in Italy.

A few moments later they emerged from the building..

"Ohmygod!" Nancy said, instantly gripping my arm. "It's Mister R." Teresa's dad. He staggered between the officers.

"He's drunk," Nancy said.

"No kidding?" Teresa's dad was always drunk. When he ran out of Thunderbird and the liquor stores were closed, Teresa told us he would drink Vicks cough syrup, which, she offered, didn't taste too bad if you held your nose while you downed it.

They walked past Mrs. Plotinsky and Mrs. Carmine, who even stopped knitting her ugly sweater to stare.

They roughly shoved Teresa's dad into the backseat, then drove off. Mrs. Plotinsky spit on the ground. "Good riddance," she said to Mrs. Carmine, who crossed herself, and went back to her knitting.

We never asked, but it was neighborhood lore that her dad had robbed a liqueur store at gun point in the Bedford Styvesant section of Brooklyn.

Now, at Sal's, Nancy looked up at the big red clock behind the counter. "It's five. I have to get home."

"Me too," Tasha said.

"See ya, dolls," Fat Sal said with a wave of his counter rag, as Nancy and Tasha walked out the door.

Fat Sal was filling up the sugar jars on the tables when he spoke to Teresa. "I hope your Mom feels better."

I saw Teresa cringe. "My mom's fine, Sal," she said.

"I didn't mean nothin' by it. Mrs. Carmine just mentioned--"

"Mrs. Carmine is an ugly, fat, WOP, who better learn to keep her big fuckin' mouth shut."

Sal stormed over to the counter. "You watch your mouth, young lady!" Fat Sal shouted.

Silently, she hopped off the stool. Ignoring him, she turned to me. "You want to come for supper?"

"Sure," I answered uncertainly.

She walked out the door without turning to say good-bye to Sal. .

"Bye, kiddo," Sal said to me with a wink, and he tossed me two Bazooka bubble gums.

I winked back, following Teresa outside Sal's Luncheonette, into the startling warmth of a Brooklyn summer evening.

* * *

Inside the tiled hall of the apartment building, Teresa pulled opened the door to her apartment. "Mom?" she called out.

"Mom?" she said again, this time walking into the bedroom. I trailed. Rose, her mother, was in bed. The curtains were drawn and the room was dim, except for the candles burning on the dresser. Behind the candles stand several statuettes. Rosaries hang from the dresser mirror. Intrigued, I walked over to the dresser and picked up one of the female statuettes. "Those are saints," Teresa said.

"Oh," I answered.

"Don't Jews believe in saints?"

I had no idea whether Jews believed in saints. I only knew that I had never seen these statuettes in my house. "I guess," I said.

Teresa walked over to the dresser. "That's the Virgin Mary," she said. "You pray to her when you need a miracle."

"Why don't you just ask God?"

"God's got wars and babies to worry about. The saints are like his helpers."

I nodded.

Teresa picked up a statuette, showing a man in a long robe. "This here's Saint Joseph. You pray to him for lost causes." She placed Saint Joseph down and picked up another one. "Saint Francis. When you have an animal who's sick, you pray to him." She put him down and picked up another. "Saint Christopher. You pray to him so you don't get killed on a trip."

Teresa picked up the only other female statuette. "This is Saint Teresa. My mom named me after her."

"What does she do?"

"She's the saint of flowers and children. If you're scared, you pray to Teresa and she'll save you."

"Like Wonder Woman," I offered.

"I never thought of that. She's *exactly* like Wonder Woman."

While Saint Teresa bore little resemblance to Lynda Carter, the buxom actress who played Wonder Woman on the television show, I could see how praying to her might make you feel safe, even if she didn't carry around a magic lasso.

"Teresa, baby?"

"Yeah, Mom?"

Rose sat up. Her face looked swollen.

"Oh, hi, Karen," Rose said.

"Hi."

"Can Karen eat over?" Teresa asked.

"Sure, but we don't got nothin' in the house. Run to the store and get spaghetti. I have sauce in the frig. Get my purse. I got a few dollars." Rose nodded toward her closet. Teresa walked to the closet and pulled out a small change purse.

"You got two dollars."

"That's enough. Mother Mary my head is poundin'!" Rose said, slipping down beneath the covers.

"Your head wouldn't hurt if you didn't drink," Teresa said coldly.

"What did you just say to me?" Rose bolted up.

"Nothin'," Teresa said.

"Who the hell do'ya think you're talkin' to?"

"I'll be back," Teresa said, turning her back on her mother and walking out of the bedroom, crumbling the two dollars and stuffing them into her shorts' pocket.

"You talk to me like that and I'll get the goddamn broom! Do you hear me?" Rose shouted to Teresa, but the front metal door to the apartment already slammed shut. "Christ! My

head is poundin," Rose said again. "Do you think you can be a dear and get me some aspirin from the medicine cabinet?"

I got Rose the aspirin, and let myself out of the apartment, wondering if I was still invited for dinner. I jumped down the stairs to the ground floor landing, and see The Seltzman staring at me from the doorway of his apartment.

"I'd like to show you something," he said to me.

"What do you want to show me?" I asked nervously.

"It's a secret," he said.

"I'm not allowed to go into strangers' apartments," I told him.

"Of course not," he said. "But if you want to see it, you'll have to come inside, Karen.

Grandly, he opened the door to his apartment.

"You know my name?"

"Of course," he answered.

It was then that I heard a small chirp, and then a high pitched voice, which shouted, "Come in!" I peered curiously into the apartment and The Seltzman smiled.

"That's my secret. Do you want to see her?"

"Who?"

"My parrot."

Without answering, I entered. The Seltzman shut the front door and bolted the lock. My heart skipped a beat.

The apartment was almost bare. In the living room sat a ratty couch, and instead of a regular coffee table, The Seltzman had taken a piece of wood and laid it between two seltzer crates. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a large metal bird cage. Inside, perched on a long wooden stick, was a green parrot, who was using its curved, hooked bill to climb along the cage. I walked closer to the cage, and it blinked at me with its dark eyes.

"Her name is Isabel, he said. The Seltzman went over to his couch and sat down, propping his feet on the makeshift coffee table. "Isabel, say 'hi' to my friend, Karen," he told the bird.

"Hi, Karen!" Isabel squawked.

I laughed.

"Can I get you something to drink? Would you like a glass of seltzer?" he asked.

"No thanks," I said.

"No thanks!" the bird mimicked.

"Can I touch her?" I turned to The Seltzman. He had one hand tossed over the back of the couch, while the other he rested in his lap.

"Stick your finger in the cage and see if she'll let you scratch her head."

I stuck my finger in the cage and the bird looked at it with disdain. I wiggled it. The bird stared. Then, to my surprise, she climbed down from the top of the cage and nuzzled her head under my finger. She let me stroke her head, and her green feathers felt smooth and soft. I don't know how long I stroked her head before I turned to The Seltzman. He smiled at me as he

rhythmically moved his hand up and down the front of his pants. Beneath his hand, I saw a thick bulge.

"I have to go!" I shouted, immediately withdrawing my finger from the cage. I ran to the door and struggled with the bolt. It wouldn't open. I tugged on the door. "Let me out! I have to go!" I screamed.

"I have to go!" squawked Isabel. "I have to go!"

Calmly, The Seltzerman got up from the couch, walked over to the door, and with a single turn of his wrist, unlatched the bolt. I yanked the door open, letting it slam shut behind me, and run into the apartment lobby and straight out the heavy doors-- smack into Teresa, whom I almost knocked down.

"Where the hell have ya been?" She asked. "I've been lookin' all over for ya."

But before I could answer, she put her arm around my shoulder. "Are ya havin' spaghetti with me or not?"