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Summer Day

by Harley April

This is how the world opened up like an oyster. It was while I was walking along Seventh Avenue, somewhere in Chelsea. There was La Nouvelle Marcel. I wasn't even sure what it was, but the chef, in his black-and-white checked pants, was outside, pretending to take a cigarette before the dinner shift. His eyes shifted about, this way and that, as if he was looking for smoke. There was none, only the heat of the afternoon.

Of all the faces I had seen that day, none resembled my former classmates whom I had lately begun to search for in crowds. I had spent most of the summer peering at strangers, but I never could discern any resemblances. Some days I walked about certain I would meet someone I knew in the flood of faces. I came up empty by the end of the day.

Next door, at the CND Haircolor group, a trim man sat in the window talking on a cellphone, as if he were in some sort of silent daytime movie. It made you, if you thought about it, not want to go inside.

I don't know what made me sit down on the steps next to the chef, but I heard him sigh deeply when I did. The steps, right in the middle of a city block, were most unusual. People walked by as if we didn't exist. It had been years since I had sat on a step and fished through my backpack for a crumpled pack of Marlboros, but now I felt that there was one waiting for me if I just reached inside. There was something about this chef I knew well, from the worried eyes to the neatly trimmed beard. He reminded me of someone I used to cook next to. I was really waiting for my husband, but it seemed that I had worked with this chef in this kitchen. The name embroidered on his pocket could have been his. His name could have been Pino. There was no need for words. It was as if, right there on that perfect summer day, we were having an unspoken dialogue of finishing off an unseen cigarette together.

My husband came bouncing down the street wearing a colorful shirt, which annoyed me immediately. In the somnolence of the warm afternoon, the chef vanished. I collected my belongings and stood up. My husband looked at La Nouvelle Marcel.

"Do you want to go inside and have a drink?" I asked.

"No," he said. We stood there in front of the place—all mirrors with a chalkboard out front, the evening's specials written on it. It had that funhouse look, though the mirrors weren't distorted. We were two reeds in a wave of passers-by.

"Come on, we're going to the movies, remember?" he said.

By then I had forgotten how I ended up on the stoop in the first place. My backpack was bulging with the scented candles and incense I had

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bought down the street. I was thinking of some sort of love fest, full of exotic aromas and muted colors. My husband often barged into my daydreams like that, wearing the wrong piece of clothing or putting the wrong song on the radio. Now, again, I felt he had roused me from a dream.

Regarding the chef incident, I really felt I didn't owe my husband any explanation. I waited as he ordered his usual extra-large popcorn. I didn't offer to help him carry his 32-ounce soda cup to the seats, though we had to walk up three flights to get to the actual theater.

Not that he had done anything wrong. He had been on time, which was rare. Once we got settled into our seats and the darkness fell, I took his hand. As usual, it was fleshy and warm, and it closed around mine, a soft shell. There was something comforting in this sharing of silences, which was as tangible as our colorful arguments; I loved how our unspoken feelings of anger or annoyance transmuted into love when we sat down in the dark with the smell of popcorn all around us.

* * *

I don't know what I was thinking. The chef being thin while my husband had a paunch. The chef was taciturn and serious, while Donat (I always called my husband by our last name) was quick to provoke an argument. In any case, I hadn't run off with anyone; I hadn't uttered a single word to him.

* * *

What happened that summer was I tried telephoning several friends from the past. I saw a big name on a movie screen and wondered if it was the same person I befriended years ago at a late-night screening of *Harold and Maude* and had later lost touch with. I wondered about the first boys I kissed, or who kissed me, especially the awkward ones who went on to engineering or medical schools. I wondered whose families were blooming right in my neighborhood, whose kids were going to school with mine, what type of wives the good-looking boys ended up with.

I revisited dreams during the day. I took long walks with my dog in the summer heat. Once, when a strange cocker spaniel approached, I stood there and hollered at it. I heard my voice, loud on a silent street. The little brown spaniel looked at me and left; later, when its owner came in search of it, I hollered at him too.

I felt as if I were in someone's black-and-white dream. All I could think about was apologizing to this stranger and his dog. I circled the block again and again so I could introduce myself and apologize.

People appeared and disappeared in my life, never giving me a chance to apologize or explain. All I ever wanted was for people to like me, but most times, especially when I went off about something, I never got the chance to be nice.

Harley April, a resident of Westchester, New York, balances her time between a multitude of interests and projects, currently including: writing, reading, candy-making, taking care of her pet Scotty dog, Gracie, working, and swimming. Her work has appeared in *The Westchester Review*, *Wild Violet*, and the *Penman Review* among others.

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