

COSMINA

You ask me if I loved her.

The answer is yes. In fact, I love her still.

Even after all these years. Even after what I did.

You know Shakespeare, of course, and his famous line that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. I'm not sure I agree.

My memories of Cosmina are mostly sweet and tender, even all these years later. Like most of us, I tend to downplay the negative and enshrine the positive memories. It helps me live with myself.

Let me describe her for you. She was of medium height and very shapely. Her complexion was fair, contrasting perfectly with her jet-black hair, always worn in a classic 1960s, or maybe even 1920s, bob.

Her face? Angular, but not sharp. Very fine, but not severe. She required very little makeup, just a dark dash on the eyebrows and a subtle touch on the lashes. Her lips were full and naturally red. Her eyes . . . God, those eyes. They were magical. Deep violet. Absolutely enchanting. Seductive.

Yes, she most certainly seduced me, although it took quite awhile for her spell to take hold. Something like ten years. You have to realize that when I met her I was only twelve years old and she was . . . well, she was however old she was.

It was in 1968 that I found myself on a chilly winter night – by Los Angeles standards – stretched out on a park bench near the base of the Griffith Park Observatory.

The environs that night, even though miserable, were nothing compared to the life I had left. Both parents alcoholic, abusive, negligent. I ran away from them, and their ramshackle house in southeastern Kansas, and thumbed my way out West. To make a long story short, I ended up on that park bench, cold, hungry and lonely, and without a penny in my pocket.

And then Cosmina showed up.

She simply sat down beside me, oblivious to the drenching mist and the chill air.

“Hi there,” she said, in that purring voice of hers.

Even at my tender age, her beauty struck me. In the pale glow of the arc sodium lamp above us, I drank in the sight of her face, breathed in the fragrance of her perfume.

“You look like you could use a friend.”

I assured her that I could.

She put her long slender hand in mine and raised me up.

“Come with me.”

I'll never forget the drive that night, in her sleek silver Volvo P-118. By then the mist had lifted and she'd let the top down. She wore a long silken white scarf over her black evening dress, and it flowed in the wind like a long ebony pennant.

It wasn't a long drive. It was up and down, curvy and rolling. She lived in Laurel Canyon, in one of those fine modern houses you might see in Look Magazine. It was moderately isolated, nestled behind stands of trees and brush.

I was sure that she was a movie star, but she said very little and I asked even less.

She gave me a quick tour of her house, which to me seemed more like a palace. There was a winding staircase, chandeliers, a sunken recreation room, a living room large enough to play football in, a kitchen that looked like it came from one of those shows on television, a dining room that could seat a platoon. There was art everywhere – paintings and sculptures – with marvelous abstract forms and bright, primary colors.

All of it was sleek, modern and new, and even at my age, I could tell that the designer who had decorated it for her must have been one of the best.

She made a bath in the master bathroom, putting some fragrant liquid in the water, and told me to wash. When I was done, she had a fantastic dinner waiting for me. I consumed it like air and when I was done with that, she showed me where my bedroom was and told me to get some sleep.

Before I nodded off, however, we had a discussion. More to the point, she interrogated me. She wanted to know everything – my hometown, my school, my parents, why I was in Los Angeles, whether anybody knew where I was.

I answered every question with complete honesty. At length, after having me elaborate on several points, she seemed satisfied and tucked me in.

Under the rich bedding I felt clean, warm and fed, none of which I had known for a very long time. I also felt something else that was alien to me – a sense of safety, peace and trust. Those, I had never before known.

* * *

The years flew past.

Cosmina's lavish house was my home. And she was my only friend. You might think it odd that a boy my age could spend years without friends of my own, but she was the only friend I ever needed. She cared for me, schooled me and nurtured me.

But I had to sing for my supper, as she often reminded me with that sly smile of hers. I had responsibilities, obligations. At first they were minor – cleaning up after meals, ,, taking care of the expansive lawn and grounds, and other household tasks.

In time, they grew more challenging – handling her bank accounts, ordering items for the house, shopping, taking care of her automobiles. In essence, I was her factotum, a word she taught me that meant the person who takes care of everything that needs taking care of – a jack of all trades, if you will.

I asked her about it and she told me that there were things she was just too busy to handle herself.

I wondered, how did she manage before I got there?

All she would say was that there had been a different arrangement, one that ended, and that it wasn't important.

We established a routine. The early evenings were my school time. She taught me everything I would have learned in an ordinary school, and much more. We mastered mathematics, history, literature, science, English. She never used a textbook or any kind of lesson plan -- the depth of her knowledge was astounding, especially in history. And she was demanding. If I were slow or not paying attention, she would slap her hand on the table and raise her voice. She expected only the best of me, and I did my best to give it.

She also taught me etiquette and spent considerable time on my diction and bearing. She always bought me the best clothes, not jeans and t-shirts, mind you, but button-down shirts, cashmere sweaters, twill pants and Oxford shoes. I was instructed to go to the barber every month.

“I won’t have a factotum,” she told me more than once, “who looks and acts like a commoner.”

I thought it was a strange way to put it, but that was Cosmina. She often expressed herself in ways that seemed strange, even archaic.

The later evenings were often devoted to reading, one of her passions. She had a large, extensive library, and we would spend hours there, each of us curled up on a plush couch, warmed by the fire, a book in our hands.

Sometimes we’d go out. She took me to Will Rogers State Park, Malibu, the Sunset Strip. She seemed to know every inch of the city, busy boulevards and obscure alleys alike, and I enjoyed her deft navigation of the streets in her silver convertible, with its purring thrum that always reminded me of her voice.

The best were what she called “nights at the cinema.” She had this huge projector and a basement full of film reels. She’d pick them out herself and we’d watch them, me eating popcorn, she making occasional remarks.

She liked ancient silent films, for some reason, and we watched a lot of those. She’d comment on the actors and actresses, almost as if she knew them personally.

“She was such a slut,” she said about one actress, and “he was much stranger than he looks” about a particular actor. I thought these comments were funny, even though they puzzled me.

And then there were other nights.

These I spent alone. These were the nights when she had to “go out.” She’d leave in the evening sometime around ten and I never knew when she returned. She never told me where she went.

I could sense these nights coming on. A subtle change would come over her, maybe once or twice a week. She would become pensive, quiet, restless, distracted. Sometimes, just before it happened, she would spend hours peering out her picture window down at that amazing infinity of twinkling lights that was Los Angeles.

Then would come the inevitable and terse: “I’m going out.”

* * *

I know you’re dying to ask me: So who was this lady anyway?

She was, and in many ways still is, a mystery to me.

Not that I didn’t try to find out. I was by then a curious kid in my teens. Before then, I had more or less accepted her enigmatic nature without question, but eventually I began to wonder. What about the odd hours she kept? Why did she have no husband? No boyfriend? No job? No mention of relatives? No observance of holidays?

I knew every corner of the house, except for her bedroom – the door of which was invariably closed, and from which I was strictly forbidden from entering. And I never found anything in the house that helped explain her. There were no photograph albums, no boxes of old letters, no files containing personal information, no address books, no college diplomas.

There was literally nothing personal, nothing that contained the slightest hint of nostalgia or personal history.

I knew that was odd, and for awhile it disturbed me. I theorized that maybe she'd suffered a dreadful divorce or painful separation from her family. Perhaps something worse.

But I got over thinking about it. Cosmina had a way of helping me get over whatever was bothering me, without even trying.

To put it in simple terms, she was a joy to be around. Each day, I found myself longing to see her as soon as she awoke, almost always early in the evening. I never grew tired of her beauty, her grace, her soft voice, the way her violet eyes would sparkle when looking directly at me.

I began to notice the way she dressed – those long, flowing silken gowns she liked, almost always black, almost always clinging to her body like a second skin.

I loved the smell of her, even though I can't quite describe it. She had a spicy, exotic scent, and closing my eyes, even now, I can detect it in my memory.

I was confused by my feelings at first. She had been, and still was, a surrogate mother to me. She was a friend, a sister, a teacher, a guardian and who knows what else. But I found out that feelings can morph. They can start out as one thing and become something else entirely.

What can I say? I was a teenager, a virgin, a kid who had never known any sort of love or affection. Of course I fell in love with her. You might be tempted to call it puppy love or a teen crush, but I knew better. It was real and more powerful than anything I had ever felt — then or now.

Lust? Yes, there was plenty of that as I came into the proper age. But it was more than lust. It was love. Passion. Eventually, maybe even obsession.

I'm sure she knew it. She was far too perceptive to have ever missed something like that. But she was coy, subtle. I detected soft changes in the way she would look at me, slight variances in the way her lips moved and her eyes sparkled.

During one of our study sessions, she could tell that I was tense and having difficulty with a geometry problem. She approached me from behind and placed her hands on either side of my neck and rubbed my shoulders gently.

Need I describe my reaction? I was totally embarrassed, but not half as much as I was thrilled.

She finally took her hands away, and before she returned to the other side of the table, she leaned over and whispered in my ear: "Don't be afraid."

* * *

Did I have suspicions? Of course I did. I wasn't stupid.

It was obvious that she was far from normal. She never ate. She never stepped outside while the sun was in the sky. She had no job. She hardly socialized at all.

And she invariably spent at least two nights a week "out."

Like I said, I was a nosy kid – and a very curious one. I couldn't bring myself to ask the question directly. It would have been absurd even to bring it up.

So I spied on her.

One lazy Saturday morning I found myself bored. And curious. She always forbade me to go upstairs to her bedroom. That door was always kept closed, and I knew very well that I was never to disturb her. But this one morning, I couldn't control myself. I crept upstairs, hoping that my bare feet on the plush carpet would muffle any sound I might make.

I stood outside her closed door for minutes, working up the courage. Somehow, eventually, I found my hand on the knob and turned it. It wasn't locked.

The room was very dim, with heavy black blinds that shut out almost all light. But I could see that her bed was fully made and unrumpled.

Where was she?

I poked into her closet. Nothing. Ridiculously, I even looked under the bed. Nothing.

And then my eyes wandered to the wooden chest that rested at the foot of the bed. It was an ornate, antique-looking thing, with exotic inlaid woods in an arabesque design. A series of colorful jewels lined the uppermost edge.

My heart racing, I gently lifted the latch and raised the lid.

Attired in a sheer white gown, she was curled up like a cat in the small space, her eyes closed, her beautiful face peaceful and calm. I saw her chest slightly rising and falling – she was breathing. Sleeping.

A scent reached my nostrils. It wasn't offensive, but very strange. It seemed very old and musty – almost earthy – like the fragrance of a dried rose that has reposed in an old book for a century.

There was something unholy about it.

Making as little noise as I could, I gently lowered the lid and tiptoed back out of the room.

I spent the rest of that day performing my duties around the house. Whatever guilt I might have felt at my invasion of her privacy was superseded by a growing fascination and excitement. My suspicions hadn't been confirmed or denied, but they had mushroomed.

She arose, as usual, at sunset and began preparing for the evening. After I heard her turn off the shower, I crept to the bathroom door. Feeling terrible, like the proverbial peeping Tom, I knelt on the floor and pressed my eye to the keyhole.

There she stood, wrapped in a huge towel, regarding herself in the mirror. She was applying scarlet lipstick and smacking her lips the way women do. Her towel slipped, just a little, allowing me a quick glimpse of her nudity — the perfect swell of her breasts, the tautness of her belly, the graceful curve of her thighs. I tried not to gasp.

Then she opened her mouth to better view her work and smiled – a wide, sensual smile – and I saw what I had never seen before.

Jutting out from the corners of her smile were two long canine fangs. She gently caressed the sharp tip of each with her tongue.

To say I was shocked would be an understatement. Even though I had suspected this very thing, to have it so boldly confirmed was a shock.

It was horrid – disgusting – terrifying – and terribly, terribly attractive.

I crept away from the door and sat on the couch, watching a meaningless program on TV. When she came out, looking her usual sensational self, she approached me, smiling – but not so widely that I could see what her red lips concealed.

She asked whether I'd like to take a drive with her that night. Of course, I answered yes.

Before long we found ourselves in Hollywood. She parked the Volvo on Hollywood Boulevard, and we sat on a bench in front of Grauman's Chinese Theater and studied the handprints and signatures of long-dead film stars. She commented on Douglas Fairbanks, calling him a lewd and repulsive man despite his phenomenal good looks, and on Louise Brooks, whom she described as both fiercely intelligent and fatally rebellious.

Almost as if she knew them.

And then she looked into my eyes.

"I know what you did today," she whispered.

I asked her what she meant.

"You opened the lid, and looked at me inside."

Somehow I knew it would be futile to lie.

"And you peered through the keyhole like a naughty little boy, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"And what did you discover, my little voyeur?"

"I didn't mean any harm --"

"But, you discovered a great deal, didn't you? Now you know what I am."

I nodded again, my blushing face contrasting with her perfect paleness.

I stammered, trying desperately to come up with something to say, but she placed a slender finger across my lips. And then she placed her own upon them.

My first kiss – with her or with any woman – was like nothing I had ever imagined. She slid her tongue into my mouth and with strange agility, guided my own tongue to the tips of those deadly fangs and then pressed, just a little, so that I could feel how fatally sharp they really were.

When she withdrew she directed her violet eyes into mine.

"I have only one question for you, my love," she said quietly.

"Will you stay?"

* * *

I dreamed of her that night, and on many nights thereafter – all of them highly erotic and ultimately frustrating.

Our relationship had changed dramatically. She was no longer a stern but kind guardian, but a potential lover. Now, the way she spoke to me, looked at me, touched me – the way her eyes promised more – was all new.

My dreams and my waking moments seemed to merge. She was all I could think about. She was all I could ever imagine wanting.

My obsession was matched only by my rising curiosity. Although she had taken our relationship to a new level, she had remained elusive about who she was, where she came from, and her past.

I had to know more about her, even than before. While she slept away the daylight, I renewed my search through the house for any clue I may have missed before. In the library, I pored over the titles. Most of her books were romantic novels, a few books of history, nothing of obvious importance. One book – with only the name Rostand

on the spine – drew my interest. It was a 19th century edition of his play “Cyrano de Bergerac.” I wasn’t interested in the play, but what I found behind the book, startled me.

Covered with dust, hidden in shadow, was an untitled book bound in black leather. It had a small brass locking mechanism that promptly broke beneath my fingers.

It was a diary.

I turned to the first page and immediately recognized her penmanship, although written with what appeared to be a quill and in ink that had long ago faded to rusty crimson. It bore the heading, “Bucuresti, 7 Octombrie, 1705,” and was written in a language I didn’t understand.

I leafed through the ancient diary, finding more entries in that language and finally, near the end, something in English. Its heading read: “Cambridge, 15 June, 1801.”

This is what she had written:

The fool believed that he had me trapped, that I was to be his prey. During my slumber, he had placed a wreath of garlic about my neck and a crucifix upon my breast. It was his hope thus to imprison me so that he might enter my chamber and take my life.

I smiled as I removed his superstitious totems. Such things may have harmed me once, long, long ago, but I have since grown so powerful that today they are but pathetic theatrical props. I awaited him by the doorway and relished his expression of dread as he entered my chamber, armed with a stake and a mallet. This too caused me amusement.

The fool, however, did not see the humor of the moment, for I dispatched him with alacrity. I believe there was scarcely a dram of gore remaining within him when I allowed his body to drop to my chamber floor.

These Englishmen are so quaint in their beliefs, so boorish in their self-righteousness. No amount of Christian talismans or idiot ritual or peasant’s beliefs can harm me. How was this man to know that there is only one way to take the life of one such as I? He cannot know my secret. My demise will only come about when my blood is taken by one who loves me, and whom I love. And as I do not love anyone, I do not fear it.

I gently closed the book, put the broken lock back in place as best as I could, and returned it to its dusty hiding place, allowing Rostand to conceal it once again.

* * *

Why did I do it? I had no choice.

Even after all these years – in my present life, back in the Midwest, an eternity away from her and from then – I know it was the right decision, even though it haunts me every single day.

I finally found the courage to follow Cosmina on one of her nights “out.” I had to remove that final veil to assure myself of who – and what – she truly was.

She did not seem to detect me as I followed her Volvo into the city. I watched her stalk, attack, and finally, kill. I saw how she feasted on that old man on Oakhurst Drive, how her violet eyes rolled upwards as she fed. I heard how she growled when she ripped his throat, and how she purred – like a contented and sated cat – when she was finished. I saw what was left of that poor man.

It horrified me. Even though I loved her more than the moon loves the night, I knew I couldn't allow it to happen ever again – to anyone. And I can never forgive myself for having not acted sooner than I did.

In the end, I chose the very night that Cosmina had chosen to become my lover. As I've told you, she seduced me. And it was beautiful – beyond anything I could have dreamed of, hoped for, could ever hope for again.

We made love almost until dawn. She reposed in my arms, resting beautifully, and I pierced her neck with nothing more than a needle. I sipped the tiny drop of blood that appeared. It was sweet -- spicy.

Her death was surprisingly swift, and much more peaceful than I could have imagined.

Before she died in my arms, before her body fell into dust, she turned to me, her violet eyes gazing into mine one last time.

“I love you,” she whispered. “Even now.”

And yes . . . I love her still.

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