

Inner Loop

It might have been her. I'm almost sure it was her. Why wouldn't it be? She needn't have died, although I've always supposed she did. Same square face, just a little jowly now, with the merry mouth pulled down. Same auburn crop, grown ashy over the years, like a dampened fire. There wouldn't still be freckles. Not in her forties. But the girl holding her hand looked like a freckled daughter – nine, ten maybe.

They were turned back from the flight to London, just as I was, along with the other two hundred passengers thronging the departure lounge. Thousands across the terminal were informed there were no flights into the UK – some network outage, apparently. The Brits were stranded. Locals like me dispersed into hotels, motels, homes. I checked into this bleak roadside room, which looks out on the inner loop linking the freeway to the airport. The sheets smell of disinfectant. The TV remote is sticky. Every morning I take a cab and circle the inner loop back to the airline's desk, where I'm told 'no dice'. There are shouts and sobs all around me, but I take it calmly. I have shelter. I navigate the encampments of furious sleep-deprived travellers who've spent the last two nights curled like insects on the terminal's floor, waiting for their grounded planes to take flight.

Where is she, the woman with the auburn crop? I haven't seen her again. Perhaps she's given up. Perhaps she had nothing pressing to do in London, so she's returned home with her daughter to their townhouse in the historic quarter. She'll have a fashionable breed of dog, a job in tech, a thriving social media brand. I could look her up online. But I won't. I promised myself long ago I'd never do that.

Or she could be here, in this motel. On the other side of this stippled and flimsy wall. I can hear raised voices and the drone of TVs from every direction. All motels are concrete boxes subdivided into smaller boxes, where sounds bounce around like crazy. Some voices come from years back, dim but unquenchable, especially in the middle of the night. Voices saying things like ‘*What do you see in Rebecca?*’

Headlights strafe the thin curtains. The inner loop is always in use, carrying people through this strange transitory quarter of the city, the place where no-one lives. Out on the strip there’s an all-night burger joint, a dry-cleaning kiosk, a tragic bar. Not like the bars of Edward Hopper, curvilinear and gleaming, beautified by melancholy patrons in tobacco-scented nights. It’s more like a gas station, a place for people to be hooked up to cheap beer while the minutes of their lives tick past. Who the hell would seek out a bar on the inner loop?

So I stay in my room and recall the Spaniards Inn. Highgate was miles from where Prav and I lived, but worth the walk most weekends. We could only afford a half-pint each, which we’d drink outside, standing at the barrels, watching the larky British people. They’re not buttoned-up at all, the Brits. That’s a myth. Before my exchange programme I pictured the guys wearing top hats, the ladies in pastel gloves and hats, like Queen Elizabeth. Londoners came as a shock – so loud and coarse and scruffy, such a multitude of languages and accents. They are rude if they like you, extremely polite if they don’t.

She was based in Highgate. I’ll say her name, just to myself: Angela. She moved around a lot within that enclave. Always some new rented room in a rambling red-brick villa, always a new crowd of cronies - other exchange students, or interns, or members of a band she liked. I got the feeling she ingratiated herself by always having something to offer – she was a

resourceful cook, a fixer of fuses, a planter of seeds, a seller of vintage treasures. Whenever we visited, she would be in another high-ceilinged shabby kitchen, throwing herbs and powders into bubbling saucepans, playing Nirvana on a cassette-machine while people lolled at the long table set in the bay window, rolling joints and waiting to be fed. I never particularly liked her housemates, but they were so transient that it didn't matter. I never particularly liked Angela, and that was more of a problem.

We were both twenty-something postgrads pursuing the same course, living abroad for the first time, thousands of miles from home. We ought to have gelled, but our friendliness was superficial, circumstantial. She was good to me, I must admit, during those first rough months of homesickness. She found street markets and navigated the subway as though she'd lived in London for years. She told me she had nothing back home worth missing. Learning from her, I gradually got the knack of the city. We'd walk through it on summer nights, getting a feel for its secret landmarks, its elegance and squalor.

But I was suspicious of her. And she was contemptuous of me.

Then we met guys. That was the problem right there. Guys.

The crop-haired woman from the airport – let's call her Angela – has a daughter. Which means she did find someone. She always wanted to be attached. She fixated on musicians and actors who crossed our paths, until she met one particular guitarist and went all in. She was crazy about him. Matthew, that was his name. He was an anthropology student who played pub gigs in a not-great band, just when outfits like that were getting signed-up by speculative record companies trying to cash in on Britpop.

Angela was high on it all. She was going to quit her course, apply for British citizenship and make herself indispensable until Matthew married her. I could just picture her in her blue jeans and plaid shirts, cooking in the vast kitchen of some country estate, standing at the hob the way she always did, feet apart, steadying herself like the captain of a ship while red-headed moppets played around her. Matthew would be off on tour.

Maybe that's what happened. Although I've never heard Matthew's name again. And I have reason to believe Angela didn't make it to the English countryside. In fact, I'm pretty certain that she's dead. I should know – I watched her die.

Prav was a dental student I met at a university function. So sweetly handsome. His parents had travelled to the UK from India with high expectations for all their sons. At the age of twenty-one Prav had taken the bold step of finding his first girlfriend. He snuggled next to me at various Highgate dinner tables, glancing at Angela's housemates and taking off his glasses to polish their lenses with his shirt tail. Everyone liked Prav. For all his shyness, he could be pretty funny when you got to know him.

Angela liked Prav. She was instinctively indulgent towards all men, and motherly with it. He got the largest portions and the topped-up wine glass. She asked him to look at her teeth, and opened her mouth wide so he could peer inside.

'Very bad,' Prav joshed her. 'I'll pull them out with string if you like.'

'Get lost. I've got American teeth. We've heard of fluoride.'

'Ok, you're blinding me with the dazzle now.'

She flicked him with a dish towel. I was actually charmed by their flirting. I knew how monomaniacal Angela was about Matthew, so her attentions towards Prav were merely a courtesy, in a roundabout way a compliment to me. It didn't happen that evening, the incident that set me on the repetitive inner loop of lifelong rumination. The 'teeth' evening was fun. It happened a few weeks later, at the end of another boozy dinner.

Matthew had joined us for once, and Angela's attention seemed entirely focused on him. Prav and I sat together, but he was drawn into conversation with the guy next to him, and on my other side two girls were giggling together while surreptitiously dividing a pill. So for quite a long time I was trapped on the long bench, my back to the window, with no-one to talk to. Prav kept his hand on my thigh, but I was still alone. Angela sat on Mathhew's lap, facing the window, stroking his neck. I didn't think she even glanced at me. But she must have done. I wonder if something snapped that evening, or if in fact she had always despised me.

As we got drunker, the configuration around the table shifted. The music grew louder. The girls stood up and started dancing, knocking things from the kitchen surfaces. Matthew sloped off to some rendezvous. The guy next to Prav got up to go to the bathroom, and just as he did, before Prav had a chance to turn to me, Angela slid into the vacated spot. I've wondered many times if Angela was motivated by anger at being abandoned by Matthew, even for one evening.

With my back against the windowpane I watched Angela lean towards Prav, as though to say something confidential. I could see that underneath the table she was tapping his shin with a bare foot. Her toenails were painted orange.

What I heard her say was 'Can you tell me something?'

And sweet Prav said 'Sure.'

‘What do you see in Rebecca?’

I think what split us up was our overwhelming mutual embarrassment. We never acknowledged that I had overheard the question, and Prav never referred to it. But the question squatted between us like a toad. What, in fact, did he see in me? I was a chunky midwestern girl with nondescript hair in a ponytail. I was homesick, socially awkward, uncertain of myself. And I had a friend who was not a friend. It was this last point which was so damning. Prav was too straightforward, perhaps too young, to grasp that someone could inspire enmity without necessarily deserving it. For someone to ask such a question, there must indeed be something wrong with me.

He didn’t have any sisters. That made a difference. He just didn’t understand girls.

Angela dropped out of our course, to pursue her devotion to Matthew. I didn’t meet her again. Our concerned tutor tried to interrogate me, but I said we’d lost touch, which was true. We originated from two different US universities, and there was nothing to connect us. I moped around, survived, met other guys, had fun. My time in London ebbed away. I could have got out unscathed, and if I thought of Angela now it would be with a pinprick of irritation and regret. Because I’d have a different sort of life, a life beyond my own inescapable inner loop.

But I did see her again, by chance.

I think I saw her. I think I did. Quite a lot depends on that.

Although, looking at it another way, it hardly matters who it was. Only my reaction matters.

I was on a train, in the evening. London's outskirts were full of tiny local stations, old and poky, served by trains with only two carriages. Tracks sometimes ran through gullies between streets, so you could look straight into people's sitting rooms and even see the pictures on their walls, and sometimes ran along high embankments, so you could peer down onto gardens and roads. That evening I was on a high embankment, and the train was dawdling in one of these parochial stations. I was drowsing over a free paper. My flight home was a couple of days away.

I glanced across the empty platform and down onto a narrow approach path. I couldn't see much, what with the dusk, the fencing and the obscuring weeds. There was a lot of overgrowth and trash, and the path was unlit. But I could make out a girl's head bobbing up the steep incline. She had a cap of auburn hair, and Angela's jaunty gait. A plaited leather strap was visible over her shoulder, just like the strap of Angela's book bag. She might have been wearing a plaid shirt. But I just don't know. I have reconstructed the moment so often in my mind that the image is furred and blurry.

I saw two guys approach from behind, and jump her. She folded immediately, just dropped straight down below my line of vision. The guys seemed to feast on her, raising their fists and driving them downwards in silence.

The train's door stood open. The seconds oozed by. Then there came the electronic ticking warning of closing doors, and then they swooshed shut. It all seemed to take a while. And in that time, I did nothing.

I looked around at a few other passengers, who were chatting to one another, or reading, or dozing. It must have been a weekend. No crowds, no hurry. No-one else saw.

I stood up, too late, and moved towards the doors. The train slid forwards and picked up speed. No-one had a cellphone in those days. I thought, just what the hell should I do?

I thought, '*What do you see in Rebecca?*'

And I sat back down.

I never heard Angela's name mentioned again. I resumed my life in the States and found a diplomatic job in DC as planned. Got married, divorced - the usual. I wondered all the time what anyone saw in me.

I saw the girl folding, over and over again.

On the inner loop of my conscience I've passed the same milestones every day – the evening light, the electronic ticking sound, standing up, sitting down. Nirvana. Orange-painted toenails and a slender arched foot - decades ago, far away.

I have put off this trip to London so many times, but my department was insistent. I thought it would be ok.

I'm only supposed to pass through London on my way to Cheltenham. I can white-knuckle a few train rides, I guess.

Flights are back on. I checked out of the motel, took my last cab along the inner loop. My thoughts are quieter in daylight. People get mugged: I got mugged in Chicago one New Year's Eve. Shit happens. I'm not responsible for every act of violence in the world.

She's ahead of me in the queue at the gate. Cropped hair, green dress. A little heavier these days, but still with the capable sea-captain stance. She looks like a woman who can cook, plant a garden, run a business. The girl holds her hand, bobs at her side.

I would like to walk ahead and tap this woman on the shoulder. I'd like to start again, free myself, get off the loop. If I call 'Angela?' and she turns around, then I'll know. If she looks at me, I'll remember her eyes.

END

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