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LETTI PARK

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How beautiful Elena used to be! A beautiful, slender girl, black eyes, dark brown hair, taut as a bowstring, face flushed as if she were constantly pinching her cheeks. Elena was strong, brave, cheerful, and edgy; she was always on guard. She wore skirts on top of slacks like a gypsy, cheap jewelry, no makeup, and her hair was as matted as if she had lain in bed all day, smoking, flicking ash on the floor, spreading her legs. Evenings, though, she went to work in a bar on a street with broken cobblestones, dilapidated houses, open front doors, locust trees to the right and left, and birches in the courtyards. In the winter it smelled of coal and in the summer of gorse and dust. Elena was one of those who, in the evening, put her hair up into a bun with a pencil. She would put a rust-red skirt on over a pair of mint-green slacks, unlock the bar, and sweep the cigarette stubs out with a broom. She'd get herself a beer and switch on the music and the string of colored lights draped in the branches of the locust tree. Later everyone would come by. Elena was the most beautiful girl on the block.

Elena was standing in front of Rose at the cash register in the market hall; Rose recognizes her too late; she recognizes her only after she's already put her

strawberries, sugar, and cream on the conveyor belt. Had she recognized Elena sooner, she would have gone back and looked for something else to buy, but it's too late for that now. Paul has just come up too and put his things next to hers, canned fish, tobacco, and a bottle of Port. Elena doesn't turn around to look. She's gotten heavy and old, phlegmatic, slow; yet unmistakably Elena – almond-shaped eyes and hair like snakes, you can tell her skin is warm just by looking, and she has always been taller than all the others – but it seems she's got involved in something. There's someone with her, an Indian, stocky, energetic, and strong, possibly with a tendency toward violence, and looking a bit down at the heels; he has dusty flip-flops on his feet and his flowered shirt is stained. The Indian straightens out the items on the conveyor belt. Hands them to the cashier and takes them back from her; he also packs them into a bag; Elena just stands there. Her mind elsewhere. Arms hanging down. Tomatoes, basil in a pot, candles, and rice. Cigarettes. Two bottles of whiskey. Elena takes a purse from her bag and opens it like a book. She raises her head and looks at Rose. What does her expression say? Rose can't tell. Elena looks like a sad giantess. A sad, enchanted giantess.

Good grief, Paul says. Damn it all. I can't understand the slowness of these people. And the shitty cold in this store. It's like a freezer in here. This is the last time we're ever coming to this place, Rose. You hear me? Strawberries... Your delusional notions about still needing this or that.

Nobody can pronounce the word strawberries with as much contempt as Paul. He leaves Rose standing there and goes over to the newspaper rack; it's not too

cold to leaf through the periodicals. The Indian has become aware of a slight, filament-thin vibration. He takes the purse out of Elena's hand, casting a glowering look at Rose. Does he know how beautiful Elena once was? Does he have the slightest idea? And would things be any different if he knew?

Rose.

Paul is calling to her, and suddenly Elena has become aware of something; she turns her heavy head from Rose to Paul and gets the connection. Paul is holding up a newspaper, a tabloid in which he's looked up his and Rose's horoscope. For Paul, what Rose's horoscope says is more real and true than anything Rose herself says, and if the horoscope says she should think carefully and finally tell her partner the truth, then Rose can prepare herself for a difficult week. Paul holds up the paper; the headlines report cannibalistic murders, approaching barbarians, and rising water prices; he calls over to her, You should take some time off, Rose, slow down a little, and Elena turns her head back to Rose.

Rose and Elena had nothing in common except for the look that Page Shakusky had given each of them. The fact that each had been an image in Page Shakusky's eyes. A vision. Rose, you see, was attending the university, and Page Shakusky discovered her; he had stopped her as she was hurrying home from the university campus with no other goal than to make herself something to eat at her desk while she went on studying. Rose had been hurrying past Elena's bar, and Page Shakusky had jumped up from the lop-sided garden table where he always sat and had stopped her. Drunk, of course drunk, he was never sober in those days. He said, What a pretty, graceful

girl you are with the walk of a giraffe and the charm of a songbird; everyone is staring at you. Rose didn't believe any of it. She shook him off and hurried on, ran up the stairs to her apartment and once there, locked the door from the inside. She allowed people to pay her compliments but she didn't fall for them. Page Shakusky persisted for quite a while. Mornings he would be lying outside her door; after she left her apartment, he would climb up on her balcony and wait for her to come home; he wrote her countless letters full of promises, vows, and suggestive personal remarks. Rose would put her hands up to her ears and close her eyes. She was somewhat reticent and busy trying to stay afloat in her life, and she knew that Page Shakusky was in reality much the same, except that he had thought up a different strategy. Getting involved with him was quite out of the question. He tried for a while longer, and then he stopped because he had discovered another convent-school girl, and then, suddenly, he got involved with Elena. And that was something different. He fell for Elena, fell to his ruin. Elena seemed to be free of any readiness to surrender. In fact, she seemed to be quite free. After six weeks she broke Page Shakusky's heart; she broke it in half, and quite casually into two pieces, and then she stuck the pencil back into her hair and turned on the string of colored lights and sat down outside her bar door as if nothing had happened.

The Indian paid for his and Elena's joint purchases. In a way that made it seem as if they had been going shopping together their entire lives, as if he had always paid for himself and Elena. Paul tossed the newspaper back on the pile and comes over to the cash register. The cashier is blonde and young; she picks up the strawberries and

looks vacantly into Rose's eyes. Paul is going to ask her what she does; he asks every young cashier the same question.

Rose is reminded of Letti Park. Page's present for Elena, but she can't remember whether Elena had already left him by then or whether she only left him after this present. Left him with or because of this present. Elena had spent her childhood in Letti Park; she had told Page about it. And Page had gone off and had photographed Letti Park for Elena. In the winter. An ordinary, dreary park on the outskirts of town, a piece of fallow land, with nothing to see, snowy paths, a deserted circular flowerbed, benches, and a vacant lawn. Bare trees, gray sky; that's all there was. But Page had reverently retraced the trail of Elena's childhood. He had gone to see Rose to show her the photos – she was able to open her apartment door to him now that he had stopped his intense, careless courtship of her and was going with Elena – and she left the cup from which he had drunk tea with rum while showing her the photos standing on the kitchen table for days. He had pasted them into a book with great care and written the words, Letti Park, in a wild script on the cover of the book and below that – for Elena. For my Elena. Rose thought that one got such a gift only once. But in spite of that, Elena walked out on Page sitting with his head down on the lop-sided garden table; he was still sitting there in front of the bar, at seven o'clock in the morning, barefoot, eyes red from crying, and drunk. Later he vanished from both their lives. Rose moved away. Elena gave up her bar. The string of colored light bulbs hung a while longer in the locust tree branches. Rose hasn't been back there for a long time.

What is it you do actually, Paul says to the cashier.

And the cashier blushes gracefully and says, I am studying economics; why do you want to know?

Rose puts the strawberries, sugar, cream, port, tobacco, and the canned fish into paper bags. Paul points at Rose and says, Her horoscope says she should take some time off, and the cashier laughs and says, We could all use some time off.

In Page Shakusky's book for Elena the park was black and white with not a soul in sight. A twilight realm. A floating, suspended, celestial world. Vague shadows among the trees and signs on the paths you couldn't read. Page's nostalgic longing for Elena's childhood, one longing of many.

Rose leaves the bags sitting on the counter and walks off out of the supermarket to the parking lot. The Indian has already stowed his purchases in his car trunk; he slams the trunk shut, inspects his back-up lights, kicks a tire, then he gets in. Elena is already sitting in the car; she's buckled herself in; she's looking straight ahead.

On a piece of paper that Page Shakusky had slipped under Rose's door at four o'clock early one morning back then, there was a sentence she still remembers even today: In my dreams all the people have your face. Page Shakusky had written this sentence to Rose. Even with all his failures there was something indestructible, something bright about him, and Rose suddenly, ardently hopes that wherever he has landed he is doing well. It can be enough to have been a face in the dream of another person; it really can be like a blessing, and she hopes that Elena still knows

some of that; that Letti Park still matters – the wintry pictures, the promising shadows, the paths into uncertainty.

Behind her the sliding doors open and close again and Paul comes out and says, What are you waiting for, Rose.

The Indian steps on the gas so abruptly it verges on contempt. Rose takes one step forward; holds up her hand. What is she waiting for?