

Silvana

(1996)

When I was twenty-six, I met a mute woman ten years my senior. She struck me at first with her vitality and physical beauty, then with her delicate attention to the chatter of strangers. More people seemed to talk to her than to anybody else at the reception, eager to pour out their concerns and heedless of their inability to return the favor. She was far from displaying the meekness of those who, accustomed to being imposed upon, listlessly indulge the meanest of people. On the contrary, the spark of her dark gaze answered their meaningless and desperate chatter better than any words.

This woman, it was instantly clear to me, had a will stronger than anyone else's in her vicinity and her gracious endurance of mediocrity intrigued me. I became eager to make her acquaintance. When dinner was announced people scurried here and there, and as she was alone for a moment I stepped in and introduced myself. She shook my hand and released it immediately, thereby giving me the sensation of a fleeting caress.

At dinner, I was not in the mood to talk. Side by side, we silently ate our consommé and once in a while I raised my eyes to meet hers, or she would lift hers and find mine. Conversations—kindled, interrupted, and rekindled—droned around the table.

After dinner, cognac was served in the sitting room and a box of Cohiba cigars was passed around. She took one, that I lit for her. After a few minutes she got up and walked over to the piano. She stood, sculpted in her ivory gown that flowed in columns to the floor, and touched the yellowed keys with her fingertips. Hearing a murmur of encouragement from our hostess, she sat down and prepared to play.

The chords of Satie's *Gymnopédies* slowly filled the room and, with a captive audience, she embarked on a journey into a dream world. At the end of a Schubert *Klavierstück*, her hands lay still and graceful on the keys. She seemed to rouse herself from a profound rêverie. The guests, who had sat in silence to hear her play, began talking again. Night had fallen. The evening had been a success. She walked up to the hosts, kissed them lightly on the cheeks and, with a squeeze of her hand, said goodnight to each.

I followed her out and seized her light silk wrap from the hands of the coatroom attendant. A few people called out goodbye, and so I learned that her name was Silvana. The valet had brought around her car; I dismissed him to open the driver's door myself. Her shoulders and light gown glimmered for an instant in the dark as she took the driver's seat. I was about to speak when she smiled a little mischievously and handed me a neatly folded cocktail napkin, taking me by surprise. She quickly started the car and drove off with

a little wave of her right hand. I unfolded the napkin and saw on it an e-mail address.

That night, as I lay in bed looking up at the stars, I thought about this woman. My nostrils still held her scent, of lavender with a touch of spice. The scent was very faint and, for a fleeting instant, it made me yearn to place my lips on her bare shoulders.

I was a penniless high-school teacher and my invitation to the reception was a token of gratitude on the part of a student's parents after his admission to a prestigious East Coast university. I wondered if Silvana would want someone like me, or if she was used to a lifestyle I would not be able to share. I sank into deep sleep without the answer to my question.

During the week, I rediscovered the Arab world with the students enrolled in my honors course on 20th-century wars. My class period being the last in the afternoon, we had a screening of *Lawrence of Arabia*. I was always curious to see my students' reaction to this old movie and was surprised every time I saw a few of them spellbound.

After class I drove to Silvana's house and the maid invited me to pour myself a drink while she called her employer. The living room was minimally furnished with comfortable chairs, a deep sofa in front of a fireplace, and a large rug. A few works of art graced the walls and low bookcases held works written in different languages.

Along one wall, a cocktail tray on a credenza displayed six crystal glasses. I opened the credenza and found a collection of single malts next to a miniature fridge. I chose an Islay single malt and settled comfortably in a chair nearby.

Five minutes later, Silvana opened the sliding doors of the living room and stepped in lightly. We shook hands a little stiffly. We sat for an hour while I told her about my course work and she showed me a few treasures from her library, books written in Greek and Latin, which she knew how to read. I asked if I could take her out to dinner on Sunday and she nodded pensively.

Several months later, October and my birthday came around. Silvana conversed with me through the music she played for me, the books she lent me and, most of all, the multitude of expressions on her face. After looking at the photographs she had collected of the places where she had lived or she had visited, I felt that I knew Silvana's essence but that something important eluded me.

She cooked dinner for my birthday and we ate in the small garden in back of her house. It was getting colder, but we both liked the outdoors and knew the days were counted before the first signs of winter. That Saturday the weather was splendid, the cold sun shining brightly in a cloudless sky and leaves pulsing on trees with blood-filled energy. We ate early, and sat outside until the sun began to set. A dark shadow momentarily fluttered over Silvana's brow

and, with a sort of animal instinct, I knew she was in the secret place where lay the explanation to what escaped me about her.

I found great pleasure in our occasional Sunday afternoon walks through the woods. There, her grace and vitality seemed to find their natural environment. Of all the words that I had spoken or that had been spoken to me until then, none communicated as much as the silence and tacit agreement between us that day.

Months passed and the first winter frost arrived. Christmas came and went; my students brought back excited accounts of their activities over the break; and January's snow covered all traces of the past year. I stood on my porch, a bowl of steaming coffee warming my hands, and the world felt new and clean. My students and I were pursuing our journey through the struggles that mapped and remapped the Western world in the 20th century.

Winter evenings descended early, and those spent with Silvana glowed with the warmth of the fireplace in her sitting-room and with the sweet smell of chestnuts, Glühwein, and clementines.

At winter's end, some snow clung in patches to the ground while the rest turned to mud. The weather alternated between drizzles and clouds but for me, filled with the positivity of someone who has found companionship, spring had begun.

We celebrated the first anniversary of our encounter by drinking champagne standing in her garden. I looked forward to

another year spent much like this one, as though years now began on the date of our first meeting. I was a little excited and nervous because Silvana was going away the next day for a month, and I was so used to seeing her regularly. She had become part of my existence, and I am attached to the few elements that are utterly dependable in the revolving cycle of time. Just as we expect the Earth to circle the sun and the seasons to follow one another, so I rely on habits and rituals that mark the passage the time.

Silvana was leaving for Italy in search of her family tree. She planned to spend two weeks each in Genoa and Venice, where she hoped to find records of her ancestors. Her parents had her live in a kind of emotional stranglehold throughout her childhood and she knew very little about their families. Consequently, Silvana had always felt orphaned of grandparents, uncles and aunts, and cousins. She had promised herself a journey of discovery before the age of forty.

The month went by surprisingly fast due to my new book project, and one evening I went to the airport to pick up Silvana. The minute I saw her familiar face, I felt the pieces of my life fall back into place. In the car, Silvana revealed not having discovered all she had hoped to find, but her account told me that she was making sense of the fragments of family tapestry she held in her hands.

With the middle of June came her birthday, that we celebrated in the company of her brother and his wife. The four of us ate at our favorite Italian restaurant, where the owner always reserved the same table for our party, whether we were two or four as on her birthday. Silvana looked particularly young with two bands of dark hair falling over her eyes because she was letting them grow. When she lifted her champagne flute to her lips, I admired her strong and graceful left hand with nails trimmed short to play the piano and a single pearl poised on the middle finger.

Silvana worked as a freelance translator of prize-winning books, and I knew that a large part of her income, the house, and the household staff's salary came from her late husband's estate.

When I first learned that Silvana was a widow, I was surprised because not a single picture of her husband adorned the house. Among the few photos she showed me of her life there were, similarly, no pictures of her late husband. I did not know if she kept his memory alive in the sanctuary of her bedroom, which I had never entered.

Silvana was not a neglectful or forgetful person, and I sensed she somehow kept alive people and stories that had deeply affected her life. There was an explanation for her former husband's disappearance from her present life, that I was not keen to discover because I believed secrets were best left buried.

After summer's heat arrived, we sometimes went out boating. We took turns rowing, and both seemed to enjoy the rhythmic effort of dipping and lifting the oars. When it was my turn, Silvana leaned back and let her hand run through the cool water, where it left a miniature trail. Afternoons usually ended with a glass of cold lemonade and jazz or classical music, and we sometimes slow danced under the weight of the languorous air. Most days, my mind was absorbed by the book I was writing, and I enjoyed emerging from my biographies and maps for a vigorous run before our evenings together.

Another autumn and winter passed before the February night in remembrance of which I began writing this brief account. It was a Wednesday night and we had enjoyed a candlelit dinner of chili, country bread, and red wine at the big wooden table in her kitchen. We repaired to the living room and its bright, crackling fire for an after-dinner drink. Silvana handed me a glass and raised hers when something seemed to catch her attention. She put a forefinger over her lips, and I thought I saw her ears perk up like those of a wild animal in the woods.

Her eyes became profoundly sad as she turned them toward and then past me. She shivered, seemingly transfixed, and I would not have been surprised to see her extend a hand to try and reach someone who was obviously there.

The moment passed. Silvana was with me again, and she gazed at me with kindness and compassion. She led me by the hand up the stairs that led to her bedroom.

Strangely, that room was exactly as I had imagined it. A large, four-post antique bed with pale yellow covers and pillows presided in the center of the far wall. Silvana's cat was sleeping at the foot of the bed, curled in a circle. At the opposite end of the room, next to a window, was a round table covered with a dark blue cloth. On the table stood a short pewter vase filled with white roses, a pair of men's evening gloves, and the photograph of a fair-haired man smiling with confidence.

I sat across from the table, in an armchair along the wall at the left of the door. On either side of me were two low bookcases where Silvana kept mementos: a tidy row of notebooks marked "Journal," photo albums, and valued objects. She looked thoughtfully at the shelves for an instant and kneeled to pull out one of her journals.

She sat down on the ottoman at my knees, opened her journal to a page near the middle, and put it in my lap. Her eyes gravely went from the journal entry to the photograph on the night table, before returning to and settling on me. I began reading.

Sunday, February 3, 19—

It is impossible to recount the horror of that night without a deep feeling of disgust at the human race...the disgust I have tried for so long to overcome and that I pray every night will be replaced one day by forgiveness.

Are some acts unforgivable? I forgive our aggressors, because they were on drugs. But I cannot forgive my fellow human beings for forsaking me when I was reduced to the lowest depths of misery.

My husband Andrés and I came home that night, and caught our aggressors in the act of robbing our house. Two pathetic crack addicts looking for money and jewelry in a beautiful suburban home...how could it all go so wrong?

Violence begets violence. Andrés lost his mind in a frantic attempt to protect me and the six-month-old embryo in my womb... A gun was drawn, knives flashed, I suddenly couldn't breathe. A ray of lightning blinded me and I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I was lying in the gutter, a sorry mess. Maybe I should have lain there and looked helpless. Instead, I got up and staggered down the dark street. Men and women walked by...they all stared at me, hurried their pace, and did nothing to help me.

I knew I'd just lost the two beings I cared the most about in the world. The cruel stare of normalcy, indifferent to misery, turned my suffering into agony. The next day, at the hospital, I discovered I had lost the use of my voice.

I closed the journal and lowered my head, devastated. I looked up, and Silvana's eyes met mine with infinite pity and apparent compassion for the loss of my innocence. That night, we became lovers and conceived our daughter.

Tonight, I've returned from the grave of my wife Silvana, who died almost a year ago... I am fifty-one but tonight, I have the heart of a twenty-six year-old.