

# **Spit the Truth**

## **Dark City Lights: New York Stories**

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THE FIFTH FLOOR WALK-UP HAD never been an issue before. When she moved in the summer after graduation she was surprised it was not included in the amenities: South facing. Hardwood floors. Electric stove. Built-in StairMaster to your front door! After four years of pizza and beer, and in spite of the occasional bout of anorexia or bump of coke, she figured her ass could use it.

They told her not to drive home, not that anyone she knew drove in New York City. They told her to take a cab, not that she could afford one. But no one told her to hire someone to help her up the stairs. She had it all planned out: Friends reruns on TBS, Ben & Jerry's *Chunky Monkey*, expired Vicodin stolen from her

aunt Ginny. She sat down on the stoop feeling woozy, empty, and alone. She wondered if this would be her only abortion or merely her first. She wondered if this moment would become an anecdote she would tell at fancy dinner parties on the Upper West Side or rooftop barbecues in Fort Greene. She wondered how the fuck she was going to get up the stairs.

It wasn't like she slept with her professor or her boss or a married man or a stranger. His name was Teddy. He was a bartender. He made killer mojitos and his dreadlocks smelled like sweet almond oil. He wasn't interested in a relationship. He was an aspiring musician. She felt like everyone in the city was an aspiring something, except for her. Somehow her aspirations got left behind with the boxes of philosophy books in her parents' basement. There they sat, collecting dust with Hegel.

She was wearing black yoga pants and a threadbare Haverford sweatshirt that she had worn since junior high. She'd spent the fall of seventh grade chewing thumb holes into the wristbands while staring with longing at the back of Ari Cohen's head. That was 1993 grunge in suburbia. This was 2003 hell in Harlem. She shoved her thumbs through the holes. Still comforting ten years later.

When had it become fall? It was only 4:30 p.m., but the sun was already threatening to set too soon on what she figured should be an excruciatingly long day in her life. It wasn't exactly cold yet or crisp, but the light had changed from the golden glow of summer to something starker. A little girl in pigtails came skipping past the stoop and flashed her a shy smile. Her mom was close behind her wearing a newborn in a green raw silk sling. They probably thought she was fine, just fine, maybe a bit winded after a run or a Bikram class. Did anybody really know anything about anyone?

She reached for the railing. How did handicapped people survive in this city? It's not like everyone in a wheelchair could afford to live in a building with a doorman and an elevator. Not that she was comparing her present situation to being a paraplegic or a war hero. She had just read an article in *Time* about the first soldiers blown up by IEDs in Iraq. They said when you lose a limb you feel this tingling like the ghost of the arm or leg haunting the empty space that was once full of flesh. She wondered if her womb would tingle with the loss or if it would just return to business as usual, pretending nothing ever happened, like a broken heart that loves again in spite of the cracks.

She had never thought of herself as the kind of girl who would get an abortion. She was the last one to lose her virginity. Sure, she was felt up before she was ever French kissed but those things happen. Sure, she was pro-choice but that was just a position. The reality was that the condom broke. She told him she was on the pill (a lie). She told him not to worry (she was worried). She told him it was no big deal (another lie). Six weeks later she walked into the bar wearing her tightest dress, so he would notice her swollen belly. He didn't. The next morning she called the clinic.

Maybe she should have told him. Maybe she should have told someone. The lady at the front desk was clearly under the impression that a friend would be taking her home. She had friends, but after college they were scattered across the world. Amy was in London getting an MA in directing from LAMDA. Jeff was

sleeping in a hammock on a beach in Laos. Sarah S was a legal assistant in San Francisco. Sarah K was on a pilgrimage to Kyoto to pay homage to her ancestors.

This wasn't exactly the kind of news you shared over the phone or in a group email. She hadn't made any real friends in the city. She moved into her place two months before 9/11 and even after two years, xenophobia was still rampant. She had acquaintances but they weren't the kind of people who would carry her up the stairs.

The wind blew another piece of hair loose from her ponytail. If she had to withstand one more car horn she would probably scream. Everyone in the city was in such a big fucking hurry. She stood up too quickly and braced her left hand against the brown door. There were tiny flecks of silver paint surrounding the doorknob that she had never noticed. They looked like a miniature constellation. She reached into her pocket for the key and jammed it into the lock. The sound of old metal on metal grating from years of lazy landlords and hurried tenants hurt her ears. Everything was throbbing with poor choices.

She opened the door.

A young black boy was hopping down the stairs from the first floor landing. He froze, dropped to a seat on the lowest step, and stared up at her with his mouth agape as if he had just been doing something naughty. This who me? look was clearly perfected from years of being caught in the act. He was probably around ten years old, but skinny, his long arms swimming in the oversized T-shirt sleeves, his slim jeans bunched up around the ankles, riding just above pristine white Nikes that must have been brand new for the first day of school. He had wide-set eyes with long thick lashes like a baby doll. His front teeth were two sizes too large for his mouth.

„My mama says I can play on the steps as long as I don't go outside.“

„Okay.“

She stumbled slightly at the sound of the door slamming shut behind her.

„You sick or something?“

She was always taken aback by how sharp kids could be, how they had no filter, how truth just spilled out of them. She was suddenly blinded by a memory of eating chocolate chip pancakes at a roadside diner with her mother. She was four. She was dipping a pancake wedge into a pool of syrup when a very overweight man pushed through the doors. She had never seen anything like him before and announced at full voice, „Mama, look at the fat man!“ She was promptly slapped. That was perhaps her last moment of raw honesty.

„When I'm sick my mama makes me take my shoes off so my head won't get too hot. She says the fever gonna drip down through my toes and then I'll be all better. You don't look so good.“

„Thanks.“

Even at ten he could catch her hard edge. Was every kid in New York City born with an innate sense of sarcasm?

„You're right. I don't feel so good. Can I sit here with you for a minute?“

„Don't you gotta get upstairs and lie down?“

„I do but I'm not ready yet.“

She slumped down on the lowest step next to the boy. The front hall always smelled like something had been left in the oven too long. The stairs were painted the same swampy brown as the front door.

„You can't take your shoes off now cause it's all kindsa dirty up in here.“

„You're right.“

She swallowed hard, feeling the vomit rise up in her throat, the chili basil sauce from last night's drunken noodles fomenting a riot in her gut.

„I got seven sistas.“

„Excuse me?“

„I got seven sistas.“

She realized she had seen him before amidst the parade of girls in various styles of cornrows tromping up to the third floor on Sundays at noon. She had assumed they were related but not that they were all sisters or that there were actually seven of them. They were anywhere between two and eighteen years old which must have landed him splat in the middle.

„What's that like? I mean, what's it like to be the only boy?“

„It's a-ight. They nice and all but they don't know how it is.“

„What do you mean?“

„How it is to be the man.“

„You're the man, huh?“

„Naw naw, not like, you da man, like cool. I mean the heavy.“

„The heavy?“

„Life.“

„Life? Right, life.“

„Bein' a man ain't no Christmas party. My mama says I gotta win the bread and be stand up. But sometimes I just wanna sit down, you know?“

„I do.“

„My sistas got it easy.“

„You think so?“

„Yeah. If one of them do somethin' bad they can just blame the otha one and half the time my mama can't even tell them apart. But if I do somethin' bad they all know it was me and even if it wasn't me they gonna blame it on me anyway and there's just one of me so that's that.“

„Sounds rough.“

He proceeded to give her what her mother would surely call the fish eye.

„No really. It sounds like you get a lot of the blame.“

„Mmmhmmm. You got any sistas?“

„Nope. No sisters. No brothers. Just me.“

„For serious?“

„For serious.“

„Are you sure?“

„I'm pretty sure. Unless I was separated at birth from my twin and my parents kept it a secret all these years like in one of those Lifetime original movies.“ She watched her reference fly right over his head.

„Yeah. I wish I had a twin, too.“

She could have sworn this moment was the closest to silence she had ever experienced in a city that was never silent. And of course she felt the need to fill it.

„So are you in school?“

„Duh. Why grownups always gotta ask about school? You all miss it or something?“

She had never been called a grownup before.

„I don't know. Maybe.“

„Why?“

„I guess because school has structure. You know exactly how your day is going to go: Math. Science. Art. Recess. Once you get out of school everything gets kind of ... blurry.“

„Like when you open your eyes underwater?“

„What?“

„I did that last summa at the lake by my grandmama's house. My eyes stung like crazy and all I could see was brown.“

„Exactly. What's your name anyway?“

„Jeremiah. What's yours?“

„Tal.“

The fish eye.

„My real name is Talia but everyone calls me Tal.“

„But you ain't tall, you short.“

„And you aren't a bullfrog.“

„Huh?“

„Don't you know that song?“ She belted out: „*Jeremiah was a bullfrog! Bah dah bah...*“

„You crazy!“

„That may be true but it's a real song.“

„Well, I'ma call you shorty cuz you ain't tall.“

„Then I'm gonna call you bullfrog.“

„You crazy!“ He laughed.

She could feel the blood seeping around the wings of the pad. It was less of a pad and more of an adult diaper. Even with seven sisters she figured she would have to wait for Jeremiah to go home before she made her way up. She wondered whether she was the only one in the city bleeding on overpriced yoga pants. She was glad she went with black instead of gray.

„Are you married?“

„What? No.“

„You got a boyfriend?“

„Nope. Why? Do you want to be my boyfriend?“

„Naw, I got a girlfriend. Fayth. With a Y not an I.“

„Oh.“

„I mean, you cool and all but I gotta be real to my girl.“

„Definitely.“

„We could be friends though.“

„I've heard that one before. I mean, that would be nice.“

„Nice?“

„Cool?“

„Dope.“

„Dope? Dope it is then.“

„You tryin' a get ridda me? Cuz I won't go out witchu?“

„No. Not at all.“

„Good. So where was you?“

„Where was I when?“

„Where was you when you got all sick? You out all night partyin'? My Auntie D she like to party all night an' then she come over an' sleep on the floor all day long even when my sista put on In Da Club an we be dancin' all over her. You know that song? 50 Cent is da bomb!“

„He's the one who got shot like ten times, right?“

„Nine times. He a survivor.“

„I thought that was Beyoncé.“

„You know a lotta hip hop for a white lady.“

„I think a lot of white ladies like hip hop.“

„For serious?“

„I think you would be surprised.“

„Like that dude to be or not to be.“

„Hamlet?“

„Shak-a-speare. My Drama teacher say he was like the original white hip hop artist cuz his plays rhyme and he be talkin' 'bout how the system is all kindsa messed up. He spit the truth yo, like Tupac.“

„That's very cool.“

„You a writer?“

„No. Why, is that what you want to be?“

„Uh-uh. I wanna be a firefighter like my uncle Ray. He ran up all them flights a stairs an' saved a whole lotta people before he died. What you wanna be?“

„I don't know.“

„How you don't know? Aren't you already supposta be somethin'?“

„Probably. Got any ideas?“

She watched his eyes crinkle as he looked her up and down searching earnestly for the right answer.

„You should be a teacher. Or a mama.“

„Why?“

„Duh. Cuz you good with kids. Like you don't talk to me like I'm a baby, you talk to me like I'm a man.“

„Thank you.“

„You don't gotta get all polite or nothin'. I just tell it like it is.“

„Spit the truth, right?“

„Right. Well, I gotta go.“

„Really? I mean, sure, of course, you have things to do.“

„Feel better, shorty.“

„Thanks, bullfrog.“

„You crazy!“

She stayed on the step as he ran up. She could hear the rubber of his sneakers squeak against the floor every time he hit the landing and turned sharp for the next set of stairs. She didn't watch but she was pretty sure he was climbing two at a time, racing himself like only kids do.

She brought her knees up toward her chest and slowly unlaced her shoes. She was afraid some other neighbor would walk in and ruin everything by brushing past her or worse yet asking if she needed a hand. There was no way she was willing to sacrifice this moment, this almost memory, for a few more breaths toward recovery. She flexed her toes and gingerly dipped them toward the filthy floor. She could feel generations of women in her family gasping at the sight. The floor was cold. She wondered whether it was a boy or a girl, or would have been. She pushed herself up, grabbed the banister, leaning into it slightly like a crutch, and started her way up. Her sweaty feet left little prints behind that disappeared almost before she could catch them.

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