

## Something Else

*May, 1967*

Becky Kaplan, her long, slender body, carried with entitlement, the high and might hauteur of a dancer, certainly the arrogance of one, white arms with a thinness almost tragic, legs, shapely, stretching out forever, high breasts, rounded, very long dishwater colored hair wildly curling all down her back, arched brows above small blue eyes missing nothing, registering it all, the soft, rounded planes of her face ending at a pointed chin, the curve of the mouth looking like someone who wants to devour everything in the world and disdain it at the same time, hugged her knees to her chest as she sat at the window seat of the Public Library on Capitol Avenue.

Her erstwhile friends, The Canto Literary Club, sat behind her pretending to read Hemingway, (one girl rebelled and read *Women in Love*, instead) but really looking out the window with her, waiting for the something they had all been promised would come. That something came sooner than they thought, roaring up to the front of the building on a 1947 Indian, making such a racket that the heads of the homeless, who hid there during the day, turned, and the girls rushed to the window, putting their hands on the glass, breathing on it and frosting it up with their condensed breath.

-Becky, don't run right out there, Valerie, a Greek girl with hips the size of Rhode Island, cautioned.

-Oh, forget it, Caroline the only real blond in the group told her, she's about to get de-flowered. Let her run.

-I am not, Becky announced, rising from her perch on the window seat, stretching her long frame. The girls watched the impossibly beautiful body of Becky with its waist tapered to the smallest rounding of hip to thigh, wishing they could, for one second, be inside Becky's body. None of the group would admit to jealousy because she was so difficult and her slightly long Jewish nose saved her from being unbearable. She wore pink pedal pushers, tight on her calves, and a white halter-top with a strapless bra.

-Becky, I wish I could go along as a fly on the wall, or something, said Ellen.

-Ellen, they don't have walls outside.

-Ok, but don't run. Stroll—amble—whatever. Make it look as if—

-As if you are a Hemingway heroine, which you are, said Anna Marie, the quiet one with darkened eyes, looking as if she haunted the back stacks of a library night and day and never slept without a book in her hand.

Becky, looking fresh and saucy, fifteen years gracing her like yellow silk, handed her notebooks over to Caroline,

-Keep these until I get back.

-Think of the vast sexual experiences Becky will have in Europe with exotic men who complain of draft in the winter, Anna Marie said.

-I've got to go, Becky said.

-Oh for Christ's sake, Morgan butt in, we're stalling you. Morgan, the one group cynic, the one who had a real job, her brown eyes large, but looking small, a shoulder length bob with the deep wave over her left eye, hands looking as if they were forever searching for the cigarette she'd just put out—she always stood as the voice of reason.

-I'm going, Becky announced to the girls, who took a deep collective breath and stood glued to the window.

The man on the bike revved the motor, gunning it with the kind of impatience that only young girls cannot resist.

-We'll watch you go, Ellen said with the same reverence she used to recite Hail Mary's at St. Sebastian's on Lenawee. She often said her prayers in French. She thought it gave her a pathetic quality—it helped her identify with Jean d'Ark, with her hair cut in a short bob with bangs—like she imagined her French role model wore.

Becky glided out of the main room of the library into the hallway to the heavy doors at the front, pushing through the turnstile, feeling the amusing air of May stroke her face as she stepped out. Life could be all that she thought it could be if May stayed the same as it was this day. All she had with her was the little pink wallet she'd stuck into the back pocket of her pedal pushers. As soon as the door shut behind her she ran—down the steps and right up to the curb.

Back at the library the girls huddled as they watched Becky from the library window.

-He looks like James Dean.

-More like Brando on acid.

-You don't even know what acid is.

-Oh, yes I do.

Hank sat on the bike; the word *stoic* comes to mind.

She coughed from the fumes rising from the exhaust. The Indian on the front of the bike was lit up. She put her right hand on the mouth of the Indian, as if to shut it up.

-Get on, Hank barked, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He was a man, all of twenty-eight years old, his dark, curly hair, wild enough but combed straight back—green eyes that knew how to make a girl feel naked, make her tremble and get all prickly inside, eyes that knew what women wanted and how to give it, eyes that missed little but gave nothing. Try me, his eyes said, pushing into the secret places you tried to hide from, but pushing anyway, enticing eyes; a lean muscular body, built for survival on a bike, in the jungle, on the pavement, in the streets.

The day secreted the heavy odor of flowers-crocuses, lilacs, roses; lilies. Becky got onto the back of the bike as Hank shifted into gear. He wore penny loafers clean and polished, faded jeans with a crease in them as if he'd ironed them. They took off in a cloud of smoke, exhaust and fume. Becky tried to look back at the library window to see the girls, but they went too fast, her hair whipping cuts into her face, the wind forcing her to lean into his back, her thin arms hugging tight around his waist. She never knew where they were going.

All the trees sprouted tiny, pale green buds, the humid air seeped into lungs and faces and bodies making them sweat. The speed of the bike and the world pulsing past them as she held onto Hank, going fifty, maybe sixty miles an hour, took the thoughts right out of her mind and tossed them negligently into the air.

They sped through downtown past strip malls and rundown house and empty storefronts and then the terrain changed to farmland and trees and the outer edges of campus. Hank leaned the bike dangerously close to the ground bumping onto a dirt road down a steep embankment and halted, his right foot dragging on the grass as he shifted down, stopping at a clump of bushes nestled by the Red River. He got off the bike

leaving Becky to sit alone on the back, catching what little breath was left, trying to formulate a sentence.

-Wow, it's hot, she said, and got off the bike, her legs weak, thighs trembling with exhaust, feeling as if she were still on the bike, her heart bumping inside of her.

Hank lit a cigarette from the pack of Camels tucked into the sleeve of his white T-shirt.

-Your folks know what you're doing?

-What do you think?

He rolled the pack of cigarettes back into the sleeve while she watched his chest ripple and relax, smoke twisting into the dead air.

-There must be a million mosquitoes.

-Yeah, Hank said, slapping a mosquito into death. A little speck of blood appeared on his tanned arm, brushed with a gloss of golden hair.

-Come on and sit down.

He walked over closer to the river and sat on a grassy place underneath a clump of trees.

-I've been reading Henry Miller, she told him.

-So what?

She sat next to him, mingling her soft smell with the faint musk odor coming from his arms. Looking out over the river she saw lily pads, heard frogs, watched a mother duck and two ducklings swim by as if they were dancing Giselle. The water smelled grassy, seedy—like old water in a green bottle sitting in the garage.

-What do you want from me? he said, his hand on her thigh.

-I don't know.

-Oh, don't be so fucking obtuse, Becky.

Hank put his arm behind her and pulled her into his body—she sucked in the warmth from his shirt and skin, felt the hot breath on her face. He leaned in and kissed her, his mouth all warm and soft, the tongue tasting of coke and salt and something bitter she didn't recognize. After the kiss he leaned back against the tree looking at her in the way that made her feel totally weak and exposed and excited.

-I bet you haven't read Kerouac yet, have you?

-Yes, I have.

-Remember Sally with the skinny, skinny body and the beautiful box? He leaned toward her, his face an inch from hers.

-You got a beautiful box?

-Of course I do, she said.

He jumped up and went over to the bike, pulling a small book from the dirty pouch on the side, along with a bottle of coke.

-Want some?

-Sure.

-Come and get it.

She got up, went over to him standing by the bike. Reaching her hand out, he snatched it away and laughed.

-Want it?

-Yes.

-Come and get it.

He held the bottle behind his back.

-Give it to me, she said.

She reached across him and grabbed the bottle.

-Here, baby.

Hank watched Becky take a long slow drink, the warm liquid sweet burning down her throat with an acid aftertaste, then flipped through some pages of the book, his smudged hands with the long fingers, bent head looking vulnerable, finding a page turned down at the corner.

-‘All that old road of the past unreeling dizzily as if the cup of life had been overturned and everything gone mad. My eyes ached in a nightmare day.’

He threw the book onto the seat of the bike, stood leaning against it, breathing heavily.

-Oh, come and sit down Becky.

She sat.

-I just want to know—

-Know what?

-What are you thinking about?

-I’m not thinking about anything. Sometimes there’s just nothing. It’s just one long, fucking winding road of nothing.

-I’m always thinking *something*.

-Sometimes nothing is better than something.

He pulled her toward him, Hank leaning against the tree with Becky encased in his arms sitting between his legs. He held her tight, and she let her hand rest on his chest, feeling his heart, his breathing; his right hand caressing her left arm up and down.

-I think about the war and what's going to happen.

-Oh, do you now? You think about the war? Voice laced with sarcasm.

-Can't you even talk about it?

-I don't even talk about it with my best friend.

-Aren't I your best friend?

She turned in his lap, lifting her hand to touch his head, that beautiful glorious head--his fine, dark curly hair that made her ache. She put both her hands on his head and mussed it up, letting her fingers move all over, while he allowed it-- leaned into it.

-Your hair smells.

-Brille Cream.

-You still use that stuff?

-Yeah. I ain't no hippy.

-I like hippies.

-Yeah, why? They're a bunch of lazy asses who don't know shit.

-They're not all lazy.

-You're not a hippy, Becky.

-I would be if my parents would let me.

He laughed.

-God, you're so—

-So what?

-Stupid.

-Maybe.

She smiled. Becky grabbed his head with both hands and forced him to look at her-- she saw into him—those green eyes—transparent—searching—pleading—hunting.

-You don't know what you're getting into, girlie.

-I don't care.

-You will.

He reached a hand underneath her halter-top to touch her belly—the energy of his hand strong, hot, something electric snaking into her to a place she didn't know about. He kissed her again, this time he let his tongue explore all inside of her mouth, soft, warm, reaching, teasing from her throat a little noise of desire. He stopped kissing her and leaned back against the tree.

-I just got out of the psychiatric ward at St. Lawrence. He lit another cigarette.

-Want one?

She took it, even though she didn't smoke.

-Never mind, don't want to start that now, he said, grabbing the cigarette out of her hand.

-Hey!

-Forget it Becky.

-What were you doing there?

-What difference does it make? He threw his butt into the bushes and tucked her unlit cigarette behind his ear. She wasn't sure if he meant the cigarette or the hospital.

-The hospital, I mean.

-I know what you mean.

-Well, it doesn't matter to me. I mean—I know you're not crazy or something.

You're not crazy, are you?

Hank contorted his face into shadow of a mask.

-Ha ha. I'm as crazy as a loony tunes, crazy as a ghost on Saturday night, crazy as the red sky in October. That's the crazy I am.

-Oh, stop it. You're not scaring me.

-Ha ha.

-Well, I don't care.

-Care about what? His tone and mood changed.

-The mental institution. Who cares?

-It wasn't a mental institution—it was a psychiatric ward. You don't even know the difference. He smiled.

-I know the difference.

-What's the difference, Becky? People die and you don't even love me.

-I do love you.

-Love is impossible.

-No, it's not.

-I say it is.

He looked at her, contempt curling his mouth.

-I tried to commit suicide, now what do you think about that?

She grabbed him without thinking, her hands pulling his head down into her lap so she could hold his body inside of her arms, encircle his head with her hands, kiss his

sweet eyebrows and feel the planes of his face, trace the profile of his nose and chin with her finger, the sensitive tips feeling his cheeks; the stubble of beard, lapping sounds from the river poising a counterpoint to her movement. Out in the distance of the woods an owl caressed the air; she heard a train blow out a warning from the tracks on Pennsylvania Avenue.

-You can't possibly understand a man with a cynical nature.

-My best friend is a cynic, Hank.

-That's her. Not you.

-I'm not a cynic, I guess, I'm a—

-Spoiled rich Jewish girl.

-I'm not that spoiled.

-Oh ho. He laughed deep in his stomach. She could feel the ripples of his laugh move into her body.

-Well, my parents love me.

-Oh, they do, do they? That's just blood money, girlie. You read a lot, but you don't know anything.

-I know what I know.

-And I like what I like! Hank got up from her lap and stretched out his body so she could see the whole length of it.

-I love music, he exploded, turning back to Becky still sitting on the ground. The space between the notes is more important than the notes themselves.

-What a beautiful idea.

-Yeah.

He laughed.

-I love music. I play music, Hank.

-‘ I dream of women, women in slips and slippers. At one point that awful haughty bitch who was my wife..’ he stopped. Know that?

-You were married?

-God, Jesus Becky. *Desolation Angel*.

-Desolation Angel?

-That’s the name of his book. You said you read Kerouac.

-I did. I do. I—

-Stop it, Becky. Don’t try to lie and impress me, it’s boring as hell.

She looked down at the ground watching some busy ants carrying pieces of earth too big for them. He stood over her, his penny loafers eye level to her gaze.

-I didn’t mean to hurt you. I can be really mean sometimes.

-Why?

-Because I love you. I’m always mean to people I love.

-I love you too.

-No, you don’t. Anyway, I told you, love is impossible.

-But you just said you loved me.

-Maybe I lied. Maybe I’m fooling myself.

The timber of his voice carried something that shot through her like jagged glass cutting her skin and making her bleed. He leaned down to lift her chin up with his hand. Her heart felt tight, she thought she might cry, but she stopped it. The touch of his hand, the catch in his voice got her started. The way the sound brought excitement from his

throat right into the middle of her body—the curls of his dark hair around his ears and down the back of his tanned neck, the way the curls felt brushing her cheek when he leaned down to kiss her again.

-Becky, are you ready for this?

Her throat so tight she couldn't talk.

Hank was standing.

-Come here, he said.

Becky averted her eyes.

-Do it to me now, she said.

-Oh, shut up Becky. You don't even know what you're talking about.

-I'm ready to find out.

-It makes no difference to me.

He kissed the inside of her ear with his tongue making her shiver.

-Just relax, for God's sake.

-Ok.

-Relax. Relax.

Looking at him, so still, unsure of what to do with her body and her arms, she flailed against him, thighs and legs bumping into one another, her long thin arms hugging his neck, the day taking up the heat of her thought like water evaporating into air.

Hank stopped kissing her.

Becky watched him pick mud and grass off the sides and heels of his loafers.

-These are new, he said, I just got them.

-Why don't you wear motorcycle boots?

-I hate boots.

Cicadas reached a high pitched whine as the heat rose around them, all the sounds of the woods converging into that small space between a tree and a river and his Indian bike alone against a bush.

-Come here, he said; cajoling an errant child.

She moved forward into the circle of his arms, trapping her inside, holding tight. His hips thrust into hers making her feel the hard thing inside of his jeans. Leaning back against the taut strength of his arms Becky caught a glimpse of the river, the mother duck playing circles with her two little ones, dipping and rising, bobbing her head up and down, in and out of the water. The babies imitated their mother, shaking water off their comic little tails, swimming around mother in tighter and tighter circles.

Hank's arms squeezed tight around her waist holding the small of her back.

When he pulled her close it was insistent, demanding.

-You're so thin, he said, like an antelope.

She took in a breath as he undid her bra from behind, cupping her breasts with his hands. His flesh against her breasts, nipples hard, his hands hot, the heat moving all over her body, warm skin against skin, they leaned in on each other, face touching face, Hank's hands all over her belly and her breasts, him leaning his head on her shoulder, kissing her neck and her shoulder and her eyes and not stopping for a moment to ask her anything.

He pulled off her halter-top and threw the bra and top onto the ground.

-They'll get dirty, she said.

-I don't care.

She stood before him, topless, like a naked antelope watching the green eyes of the jaguar coming to hunt her down.

-Take your pants off, he said, unzipping his jeans. The sound of his zipper echoed in the dead air. She removed her flowered underpants and the new pedal pushers she just bought at Maurice's with money from her grandmother, throwing all of it on the ground next to the bra and halter-top. Everything could get dirty now.

When she stood up Hank presented his body naked to her, giving it to her like a gift, the present of his stunning form, the muscular chest covered all over with fine dark hair, his shoulders and arms well-developed, physically powerful—she left her fear on the ground with her clothes.

-Look at me, Becky.

-I am looking.

-I mean, look.

He stepped forward and pushed her head down to look at his penis, hard, standing out from his body as it were separate from the rest of him. He guided her hand to touch him. She touched with just the tips of her fingers, feeling the wetness on the tip; running her palm along the length of it, and thought of her father.

-Haven't you seen a man's penis before?

-Once.

-Was it like this?

He put his hands on her back and pulled her forward, kissing the edge of her hairline about the forehead, kissing along her cheek and finding her mouth, plunging into her a hand, moving it up into her vagina until she let out a cry—she could not remember

what talking was. A jolt of energy moved through her, pipelined to her soul, wiping out her will to resist—he was shot all through her body. When she looked down it was not his hand inside of her but all of him, belly to belly, his force driving into her, the feeling of it stopping all emotion or reflection. They were still standing. He picked her up with him still inside, kneeled onto the ground, rolled over so that he lay on top of her, pushing. Becky closed her eyes, unable to move or fight or wonder, his arms, his kisses all over her ears, forehead; eyes. The energy of his thrusts took everything away—the day could be night—it didn't matter. Breathing became a sympathetic parcel each one gave the other.

Ground prickled her back, grass smelled damp and sweet, purple flowers with a honeyed tang, crude river odors, but then she forgot about it.

Hank came inside of her as she recited a prayer.

-What are you talking? He asked, breathing heavily into her ear.

She panted underneath him. Everything went wondering still.

-I am so surprised, she said,

-You feel like a woman, now?

What happened to her excitement? It got all sluiced off in the breathing, the humid static moment, his hot effort, the calmness of the river, his shoulder bones biting into her chest, his legs holding hers down flat onto the ground, the feeling of his eyelashes on her forehead, her ideas of goodness and reality bit into this gift of death.

He jumped off, stretching his fine-looking body, went out further toward the river to take a piss.

-Well, what do you think of that?

He said nothing. His scorn could completely undo her.

She watched his back as he pissed.

-I am a Desolation Angel, she said,

-Oh, don't get all mushy about this, for Christ's sake.

-Of course, she told him, sitting up. Well, thank God, I'm glad that's over.

-You might bleed, he said, pulling on his jeans.

She got up, her thighs suffering, worked over, as if she'd just played two hours of tennis, and went over to her clothes lying in a lump on the ground. As she put on the flowered underpants she looked for blood.

-I didn't bleed.

-You will.

Becky pulled the underpants down to check again and saw spots of pink, two small round bits of blood the size of a penny. Fastening her bra she watched him pull the white T-shirt over his head, grab the pack of Camels, tuck it into the sleeve; stick his wallet into his back pocket.

-Ready?

He came over and kissed her on the cheek.

Looking out over the river everything reminded her of something else.

-Get dressed; I'll take you to McDonalds.