



# NORTH ATLANTIC REVIEW

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Number 18 2007 \$10

# IN THEIR CUPS

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The Persian on the gold-plated luggage rack ignored Sally when she leaned down to pet it, on her way to the ladies room. Perhaps he'd grown accustomed to her scent, and was already bored by her. In retaliation, she scrubbed her hands to make sure no trace of dander stuck to her skin. She felt clean on her way back and paid the fickle beast no mind.

Sally liked to meet Paula at the bar at the Algonquin because it seemed like such a grand cliché, just over-the-top and theatrical enough to suit their personalities. As for Paula, she was meeting her old friend for two reasons: Sally enjoyed a dry martini almost as much as she did, and the dear girl had information about an old New York City crime case that Paula was researching. Sally came out on this evening to help Paula with her research and to pick the other woman's brain about single, available men who by some cosmic merry magic just might still be loose in this town. Unfortunately, Paula knew she wouldn't be much help with Sally's quest. All of their friends were married or getting married. Even Tony—once voted "Mr. November" for the gals' *Bachelor-of-the-Month* calendar scheme—was engaged. How had they all grown up so fast? Paula herself had been married to Don for nine years; and they'd been together two years before the ring.

When Sally returned from the loo Paula already had round two waiting for them.

Both women knew there wouldn't be any real talk of work tonight. Their "meeting" was just an excuse for a lushy gabfest which one of them would write off on her taxes as a 'business dinner.'

"Let's be bad and suck these martinis down then get another round!" Paula said.

"I'm all for it," Sally replied.

The girls proceeded to slam the cold cocktails down their throats. Paula closed her eyes for a moment and imagined she was a fish under ice. Is the drink delicious, or am I, she mused.

"We forgot to toast," Sally said.

"Dagnabbit. All right. Let me do the honors," Paula said, lifting a water glass. "To your future husband."

"Whomever he may be."

"He's out there, darling. I kid you not."

"Your lips to God. But let's toast to a husband who's real. Yours."

"All right, lassie, let's do. To Don."

"Tell me again how you and Don got together," Sally said as they clinked water glasses. Hydration was key, 'natch. She didn't want to be burdened by having to keep up her end of the conversation tonight, better to hear a nice liquid bedtime story from Paula.

"Did you ever meet my friend Amanda? No? I met her and Don on the very same night. She and Don had been work pals for several years. They trolled in the same investment firm—the one that went under in scandal about six years ago. She and I became fast friends. We used to meet at a different hotel: the Martha Washington just a ways above Gramercy Park. We drank different libations back then. Cuba Libres were the cocktails of choice."

"A bold yet not surprising choice."

"Righto. Anyway, I was desperately single during those days, *desperately* single. I'd just been dumped in a most embarrassing fashion by my ex. He ended up balling an ex-boyfriend of mine."

"Oh, I don't think I knew that. That couldn't have been good."

"No. I used to tell the edited version, as in he 'met someone else.' It was ugly, Sally. I can't say it was not. But I was on a driven path to becoming a happily-wed 'Mrs.' if it killed me. Knew that I had gotten the bad end of that relationship, and that I was a good catch, dammit! I was sure God, or the Mayor of this fine city or *someone* owed me true love after that debacle. Yet I worried that my next relationship would be another disaster. What I feared most was getting involved with someone crazy or the type of man who just didn't truly understand his own nature well enough yet. I had a vision of being in my next relationship for two or three years only to wake up and find that my lover was a schizo, a drunk, a lothario, a compulsive poker player—something utterly opposite of whatever he presented at the outset of our union. Needless to say, my defenses were up! So, one night I was drinking Cuba Libres with Amanda at Martha Washington and she said to me, 'Well, what are you looking for? What's your type?' I immediately responded with: 'I guess I go for the

strong, silent type. Someone decent and good with a touch of mystery and complexity.' 'Well,' she said. 'That's Don.' I knew who he was, of course. At the time I had very little interest in him. We'd gone out in groups a couple of times, but he was so quiet I just couldn't take it. The man was utterly monosyllabic. 'Hi' and 'Thanks' and that was it. I did all the talking!"

"And what's changed?"

"Exactly. Thank goodness you're as patient as he was...*is*, darling, is! I do need to hear the sound of my own voice, don't I? Anyway, at Amanda's prompting, he and I started dating. For the first few months we hung about in a group with Amanda and the fellow she was going with at the time, and some of their friends. It was easier that way. It took the pressure off of dear Don to hold up his end of the conversation. But he was very strong on the longing-looks and affectionate caresses. That's what kept me hanging on. I felt safe with that man from the beginning. It wasn't until New Year's Eve, when Don and I had been together about six months that he finally uttered a long monologue telling me who he was, how he loved me, what he wanted for our life together. And guess what? Your gabby friend here only uttered one word that night: 'Yes.' I didn't have to blather on. I knew he was the one for me. And it was all thanks to Amanda. But it hasn't all been roses, you know. There was a time when Don almost fell in love with someone else."

"Who was she?"

"Oh my goodness. We never really talked about it and I can't be sure. But I am a crime writer and I do know how to do research, darling. I found the clues and I can tell you this: I know she was a seductive young chippie who not only would have ruined my life had she succeeded in stealing my man, but she would've been the absolute ruin of Don, too. A real cuckoo bird, I suspect. Here's the story dear, and please keep in mind that once again, Amanda played a key role in saving my life and bringing peace to our home."

"Did she use physical violence?"

"Negative, sister. Although I'm sure if I'd given her the word she would've. No, this is something I discovered years later through a friend of ours, who can't hold his liquor. He drank what I now call 'the truth-serum margarita' and spilled this tale all over my lap. Apparently, the chippie was a temporary assistant of Don's. Oftentimes on a Friday night during the summer when we would go up to our house upstate, Don would drop her off at the place she was sharing with some girlfriends, which was only a few miles away. I of course have always abhorred day jobs, and would go up to the country ahead of Don, usually on Friday mornings. Anyway,

there was one weekend that I couldn't go to the house. My mother had been ill for months. This was shortly before she died, and I wanted to spend as much time with her as I could. Apparently this chippie had been planning to seduce my Don that weekend, knowing that the cat, or in this case the wife, would be away and that she, the sneaky little rat, could play."

"How awful. Did anything happen?"

"Hold on. Apparently, the night before this particular weekend, the little chippie had a dream."

"How do you know?"

"Who's the crime writer, sweetie? I hacked into Don's work e-mail ... long after this episode was behind us. Anyway, this is the shorthand of how it went. She dreamt that she was in a hospital bed and somehow from her bed she could hear a conversation between Don and a close, female friend of his, the friend who had set him up with his wife. Now this chippie had never met Amanda but clearly the friend in the dream *was* the darling Ms. A. Anyway, in this little chippie's dream, the friend was talking about how happy Don is with me, how good our marriage is and all that. Apparently, the next day the chippie couldn't go through with her plans to snag my husband. She's the superstitious type: curious about dreams, and the occult and all those sorts of things. From what I discovered she actually had an attack of conscience and realized that although Don may have been flirty with her and had some attraction for her—he is a man after all—it wasn't as if he had the proverbial 'wife who didn't understand him.' No, he had a wife who *did* understand him, whom he loved and who loved him back with a vengeance." Paula picked up her drink and stared at it silently. "So, danger was averted. This gal could've lured my darling Don into some horrible situation. We could've ended up a statistic. A mere ten-inch column in the obituaries. But some-how Amanda managed to haunt this young tramp's dream and spooked her into keeping her legs closed, her mouth shut and her hands off my fella!"

"Incredible. But Paula, tell me this: what is your point? I don't mean to be rude, but I'm so lonely I can't tell you how horrible it feels. You're so lucky and I'm so glad for you. But I need *your* help now. I need love in my life and I *do* feel desperate. I can almost relate to this young girl you talk about—except I wish I was still young like that. I don't feel so strong these days. I could be tempted by anyone: a married man, a man in jail, a milkman delivering sour milk. Really, it's bad!"

"Oh, darling," Paula said, finally noticing the sadness in her friend's eyes. "Darling, darling Sally. Forgive me for babbling on about my ancient tale of woe. There was a point to my story; it's just that that

second martini got me off track. By the way, shall we go for round three? I honestly see no reason not to at this point, so long as we remember the antidote: water, aspirin and a chicken salad sandwich before bed. Waiter! Waiter! Thank you, dear. Another round. So anyway, my point was this: Amanda is a doer of good deeds. She does them without thinking, and sometimes she does them in a surprisingly metaphysical way. I honestly think her subconscious *willed* her into the dream world of that young girl who was tempting Don. I know it sounds like a lot of hocus pocus when I say it out loud, but I honestly believe it. She saved our marriage and I didn't even find out how until many years later. And now she's finally found her true love. He came to her in a dream, Sally. She literally woke up on a cold winter's night with the image of a man in her mind. She took out a sketchbook and pencil and drew what she saw. One month later, while she was drinking an espresso at Taylor's, the café on Hudson Street she goes to every day before work, she saw a man who looked just like the one from her dream. It was his eyebrows that drew her in. They had quite an arch, like an old silent-movie villain. But underneath he had the most tender eyes she'd ever seen. They both looked at each other and smiled and that was it. I guess my point is this. I believe that Amanda is a blessed soul. I'm ninety-percent atheist and yet I am convinced that God will take care of Amanda in His mysterious ways just as she takes care of others in her mysterious ways. So for what's it worth, I say: don't worry about how or when you will meet your Great Love. Do some good deeds in secret to spread warmth in this world. God—or whoever the hell is running the show down here—and *certainly* your friends, will take care of you."

A little while later the girls parted on West 43rd Street. Paula walked to Sixth Avenue to catch a cab uptown while Sally walked to Fifth to grab one heading down. Inside the taxi, Sally laughed to herself at Paula's antics. She wondered if Paula called Don 'darling' in bed, or if that word had gotten so over-used in day-to-day life that she had to call her husband anything *but* darling, in the throes of passion.

At that same moment, Paula's thoughts were oddly linked to Sally's. Paula remembered making love to Don that rocky *summer of his temptation*. She *did* call him darling and she did mean it in the deepest sense.

Chet Baker played on the turntable as Don held her close. During "You Don't Know What Love Is," Paula began to cry. Don stroked her hair and sang the lines just as softly as Chet did: "You don't know what love is, until you've learned the meaning of the blues...."

His singing was so unexpected, so practically inaudible she had to nuzzle close to really hear it; it soothed her. But by the time Baker got to

the next tune, "Just Friends" (lovers no more.....) Paula felt an attack of asthmatic-style free-form bawling rising up in her throat, threatening to choke her if she didn't let it out.

She cried uncontrollably till the entire album side finished. Don held her till it passed, even minutes after the needle scratched and jumped with nowhere to go now that the record had ended. They never spoke about that night, to each other or to anyone else.

When Sally returned home, she impulsively lit a candle for the young chippie. She didn't know if the girl had found a love of her own, or if she was alone. And even if she was in a relationship, Sally had no way of knowing if it was a good one or not. She said a prayer and sent it out to the universe, wishing this girl every happiness in the world.

Sally didn't know it, but at the very same moment, the girl was having a dream about her. The chippie had never met Sally of course; she saw this character in her dream as simply a lonely friend of Don's wife. And in the dream, she introduced Sally to her Great Love. He was the owner of a fancy shoe shop on Madison. He had married young, and his wife had died the year before in a car accident. When Sally was shopping for boots that fall she saw him. She didn't know why but she felt a strong pull toward him immediately. She looked at him with such certainty and clarity that he simply had to walk right up to her.

"You look like you know what you want," he said.

"I do. Do you?"

"I do."

Nine months later they said formal "I do's" at Don and Paula's house upstate in Ancramdale. Nine months after that Sally gave birth to a seven-pound boy, Charles the Third. But it was Paula who noted, at the christening, that he looked just like his father. "A Chip off the ole block," she said, raising a glass in toast. Her cocktail of choice at this time was the Gin Rickey. And from that day forward everyone called the boy "Chip."