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## The Silence of a Sound (San Marco)

She didn't even smoke. The policy had been in effect for years, but she'd just learned of it and a protest, she said, was called for. We were at the counter at Aardwolf's on Hendricks and Cedar. The train blasted its horn as it approached the Atlantic Boulevard crossing. It'd be upon us in no time and the velocity of her rant intensified; she wanted me to hear every word.

In those days Smarty was good for a laugh. We'd been knocking about Balis Park for several months, who knows why. The protest forgotten, she wanted to be statues. Those? Yes, those. Next thing you know we're posing like the Kite Kids sprinting around the square with a bronze cocker spaniel forever chasing our heels. I felt foolish standing like that and told her. A sweet piercing of virginal sunlight illuminated her face. Don't you wish we could always be like this? Maybe that's why I wanted to be with her. Half hour more?

More like an hour, and then we stood under the clock where Carlo and Balis merged like tributaries. Smarty drifted around the oaks, down the sidewalk, and between two cars to a wooden pole with a thousand staples stuck stuck stuck all over it. A handbill said Your Hair Looks Great. At the bottom were phone-number tearaways. I messed with her hair and that got her mad but she was grinning too and telling me I didn't have permission to touch her hair and I never knew how to take her one moment to the next. She wore a pixie cut and everyone said we were twins, even after I had the makings of a beard. We kept that one going a long time. She tore off a tearaway and, We'll do this for the protest, she said. A moment later she wanted to go around the square but stay in the shadows, a sort of grown-up version of Step on a Crack.

Under the marquee of the San Marco Theatre, we avoided the path of the shining sun. The canvas shop awnings made the journey past Pure Barre, The Snob, and Taverena easy. Smarty turned into the coffee shop, the one we were going to protest, for lattes with white chocolate. What happens if I smoke outside, she asked the barista, a man who handled cups, zarfs, and lids like they were fine china. She doesn't smoke, I assured him. But what if I do? For a time all he did was smile. Finally he said he'd tell the manager. What will he do? She isn't serious, she never is. He drummed his fingers. You'd have to ask him. We intend to, I said, nudging Smarty out the door to make the crosswalk before the sun did.

We were still laughing under the portico of Indochine. At the corner of San Marco and Naldo we waited more than an hour for a cloudy eclipse of the sun, taking in the teardrop-shaped park dreamed about our lives to come. Don't go to college, she said. She had a look like we'd never see each other again. Don't be silly, I said, and reached for her hair. She moved away with a snarl.

The cloud arrived and we dashed over the crosswalk, skirting the roundabout, to the other side where the sunshine gave us only the narrowest line of shade beneath the awning of Rosie True, where Smarty fingered through the racked clothing on the sidewalk. Forgetting the game, we went into Pizza Palace and ordered slices and Duke's beer and sat against the wall beneath a painting of a scorched landscape with a man in a sombrero walking down a dusty road. We imagined he was Clint Eastwood in *A Fistful of Dollars*, his eyes, which we could not see in the painting, squinting at soon-to-be-dead hired hands. Don't you love this place? As long as she could remember, she'd come with her parents or friends. I'll bring my own kids here, she said, and tell them about the day we walked around the square in the shade.

We crossed the street to the park and sat on the edge of a lozenge-shaped fountain. Hold my hand, she said. We'll pretend we're lovers. I couldn't bring myself to ask why; she'd already clasped my hand and was imagining what everyone thought of us, the cute couple, the darlings in the park. I could've played the part better, draped my arm across her back, but that would've spoiled her fun. We look good together, she said, satisfied. I gazed at her bare knees and agreed.

We put out flyers for the protest and walked from the square beneath a clear night sky to Hendricks Avenue, past the white facade of Southside Baptist, which seemed to us to be the wall of a fortress or monastery, and touched every red-ribboned lamp post we passed. At Jack Rabbits we skipped over to where some boys were playing tennis and went between the courts and the Knights of Columbus and cut across the shell-covered lot to Aardwolf and imagined how grand the protest was going to be. She'd bought stakes, poster board, and paints. We sat a long time, sort of grinning at each other, and she returned from the bathroom and said, there's nothing interesting in there, what's in yours? I didn't know but came back and reported there were chalkboards above the urinals. What do they say? One said, I met sex here. I don't get it, she said. Forget it, I said. Then she got it. What do you think about when? . . . Another chalkboard said, Drink for those who can't. You didn't answer my question. I know. You can tell me. Couldn't she guess? She'd worked halfway through a pint of Glamour Muscles. The wailing horn at the Atlantic crossing made me sleepy. She smiled. I dreamed about you. Me? Yes, you and me. I knew at once how I felt and wanted to say it. Hurry, then, say it. She looked right at me with an unfathomable look I longed to understand. The train roared past. Her lips moved in ovals, oblongs, and circles and then closed in silence like the vanishing train. No matter how much I begged, she refused to repeat what she'd said. She was upset that I didn't hear it, like I'd betrayed her or broken her heart, but she was never serious. She was silent on the winding walk through a residential neighborhood, where all but a few windows were dark. And silent on the ringed fountain in the center of the park. Three bronze lions lounged in the center, looking on. I don't like it when you're mysterious, I said. She blew a raspberry and sighed. We spent the night making protest signs.

A few hours later we sat outside Maple Street Biscuit Company. At least I can smoke here, she said. You don't smoke. I know, she said, but we're talking about freedom, right? At the appointed time, we held up the posters. A man came by asking for a cigarette, which neither of us had. Another man was excited about the protest. Have you read Pessoa, he asked. We had not. The best protest is the imagined one, Pessoa would tell you. In that protest anything can happen, you bend it to your will; the world, he said, becomes exactly what you want it to be. We offered him a sign. He declined, saying he was going to an event at the Hyatt on Coastline. By noon, we had given up and sat on a bench with the signs strewn about our feet. She leaned against my arm. You have permission to touch my hair. For some reason, I didn't. I'm going to miss this, I said. When do you leave? Next week. I'm a Kite Kid, she said, and my kite has plummeted to earth.

A few years later I saw a man who looked like Rusty Yates and found myself craving a slice of pizza. I drove to San Marco for the first time since returning from college. For twenty minutes I stood outside wondering if I'd got lost and where was the Pizza Palace. I tried to imagine it back into existence. I went inside and saw Smarty. Her hair was down to her shoulders and she'd filled out in the hips. She hugged me and introduced her husband and their child. Of course, I declined to sit with them, but it's nice seeing you, I said. As I ate alone, I found myself staring at her husband; she could've done better. Not with me, no, that'd be stupid. But someone who loved the way she laughed, like right now, her telling her kids about what it used to be like.