

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

Mark Routhier

A POUND OF BRIE

"Let's go to my parents' place. We'll walk. It'll be fun." Annie was talking to me, but she was reacting to her business partner and my close friend, Gary.

Inconsolable and despondent, his words hung in the thick summer air: "Two thousand dollars." He stared, unfocused, out the bank of windows to the mostly darkened apartments on the south side of 22nd Street.

A coke deal gone bad. They decided to split the debt. A thousand each.

I was afraid to ask what happened. I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want to know.

"Okay, I'll go." I had no idea what Annie had in mind. Her parents lived at 92nd and Park Avenue. Walking seventy blocks with her at 1 a.m. sounded better than moldering in the deadened atmosphere of Gary's parents' 4th story walk-up. Gary, his girlfriend, Megan, and Annie were camping out there for the summer while his folks vacationed.

My job painting tugboats and barges required me to live on them for a week, then take a week off. I'd join these vessels en route from oil refinery to distribution destinations around the waterways of New York and New England. The job separated me from my friends enough to notice the constant cocaine use was slowly robbing their joy. The botched drug deal plummeted them into this new level of despair, especially Gary. I knew my old roommate well enough to leave him alone when nothing could change his mood.



I usually arrived late Wednesday afternoon and slid effortlessly into their daily summer schedule:

- 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. – Slowly wake. Wander into the kitchen. Coffee. Eat something.
- 4:30 to 6 p.m. – Smoke a few cigarettes. Prepare the evening's eight ball or two for personal use. Prepare some bindles of various quantities to sell. Study the Village Voice for the evening's entertainment choices. Answer the door for the occasional friend who was trusted enough to have the address. Exchange cocaine for cash. Maybe do a bong hit.
- 6 to 8:30 p.m. – Dine out.
- 8:30 to 1:30 a.m. – Meet people. Sell cocaine. Arrive at chosen venue.
- (*It was a great summer for music. U2 and Echo and the Bunnymen had just released "October" and "Crocodiles." The Talking Heads and the B52s had just released "Remain in Light" and "Wild Planet." The Gang of Four had released "Entertainment."*)
- Drink, smoke, snort, repeat. Return to the apartment.
- 1:30 to 2 a.m. – Gary prepares the freebase.

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- 2 to 4 a.m. – Freebase cocaine while watching two episodes of Mary Tyler Moore followed by two episodes of The Twilight Zone.
- 4 a.m. – Bedtime.

As a child, I watched episodes of Mary Tyler Moore Friday nights at 8 p.m. with my mother, feeling cozy and safe, especially when my father was travelling, which was often. Something about having my mom to myself, enjoying Mary's shenanigans together, felt like a hug. Freebasing cocaine with Mary Tyler Moore a dozen years later was delightfully twisted. Pretzel logic.

Even with my half-of-the-time participation, I would only last until Sunday. After four nights of this debauchery, during the early afternoon when my friends all slept, I'd gather my belongings, quietly leave the apartment, walk to Grand Central, and board the train to my brother's place in East Norwalk, Connecticut. There, I'd sleep a lot, go for a couple runs to detox, and refresh for work on the boats Wednesday.



Gary plunged onto the couch, sighed deeply, and studied the popcorn textured ceiling. Megan half-smiled at Annie and I, and half-shrugged. This lack of commitment to gestures suggested a boredom I'd not seen before in Megan. Annie and I left.

We descended the four flights of stairs, headed left on 22nd and left again on Park Avenue. Annie chose to walk barefoot. She tucked her right arm through the crook of my left and we walked north. I scanned the sidewalk, steering her around glass shards and whatever else might wreck her feet. We talked about everything, solving the world's problems, as one does fueled by cocaine. I remember none of it. I had fallen for Annie's blond bob and big blue almond-shaped eyes. I loved her rat-a-tat laugh and her lunatic high-pitched call to friends, GeeGeeGee (hard G). She bit her nails to the quick. I wanted to put them in my mouth and suck the rawness away. When she smiled, I wanted to lick the eagle creases around her eyes and bite her crinkled, freckled nose. It took us ninety minutes to get uptown. We arrived at her parents' apartment slightly before 3 a.m. and crawled under the comforter on the bed in her childhood room. I wanted to spoon her body into mine, kiss her neck, suck her earlobes, but the relationship was sexless. I was inexperienced, and she was infamous among our friends for her signature credo, "Sex is overrated. I'd rather have a pound of brie."

We woke midmorning. Her mother and father were gone, like they'd never been there at all. Maria, the housekeeper, greeted us in the kitchen, shook her head lovingly at Annie after a long hug, said a quick hello to me, and disappeared to her chores.

Annie asked me to help her up on the counter. The bottoms of her feet were pitch black and leathern. My stomach pitched. Those feet on the immaculate kitchen counters. My tongue spilled out of my mouth, "Blech."

"You alright?" as she rooted through the high cabinets.

"Yeah, yeah. Just... Nothing," as I recovered from the flash of nausea.

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She loosened tie-strings on midnight blue anti-tarnish velvet bags and peered inside at the bowls and platters.

“What are you doing, Annie?” I asked.

“What does it look like, Mark?” Not mean or snarky, but business-like.

“It looks like you’re getting ready to steal your parents’ silver,” I said.

She shot me a doleful smile (still crinkling her nose, me still wanting to eat it) and said, “You’re very perceptive. They taught you well at Choate.” The sides of her overall shorts were unbuttoned revealing side boob and bare hip. How was I turned on and disgusted in equal measures? I rattled my head trying to unstick it.

Annie misinterpreted my discomfort and said, “It’s just shit they never use and will leave to me anyway. Don’t worry so much.” Only child.

“What about Maria?” I said.

She handed me two covered bowls and a small platter, “That should do it. Help me down.” I gave her my hand. She jumped off the counter. “She hates them as much as I do.” I assumed she meant her parents, not the silver which we slid into a Bulgari shopping bag she found in the pantry.

Back in the bedroom, she slipped on some old Keds from her closet, yelled “Bye, Maria,” and we left.

Annie managed to talk the guy at the pawn shop up to \$650 from his original offer of \$450, considerably less than their worth. When we got back to 22nd St., she handed Gary the cash and when he asked where she’d rustled up the money, she told him not to worry about it.



Thursday, three days before my regular Sunday departure, I could stay around no longer. This wasn’t stealing twenty bucks from your mother’s handbag as a fourteen-year-old. Ripping off your parents’ silver to cover a blown coke deal crossed into the embarrassing. My crush and my revulsion were taking jabs at each other. I made up an excuse about my brother needing me to help with something out in Connecticut and left.

The end of summer nearing, my visits became more sporadic. Gary, my cheerful, funny prep school roommate, had become mean. Megan, usually sparkle-eyed and quick to laugh, had become dark, downhearted, guarded. On the surface, Annie was the least changed by the excesses of that summer, but I no longer saw her as I had before. What was the malaise, the self-loathing under Annie’s dazzle, her bright chirping? Where had it come from? I didn’t stick around to find out. I ran.



Years later, Annie and I reconnected over Indian food on 6th St. in the East Village with a couple, friends of mine who’d never met her. They were charmed by her. I walked her home. She asked me up. I turned her down. I’d heard she’d traded cocaine for heroin. I couldn’t afford to risk redeveloping a taste for that stuff. She was found dead in her downtown apartment six months later at 36 years old, her ebullient exterior and her silent, hiding pain extinguished.