

Have You Ever Been in Love?

By Karina Alma

The end of a story might not be a good way to begin, but it's better than to begin at the middle because then, I become like a man facing a fork on the road. Do I choose to move back in time to the beginning, possibly, to tell you about the miraculous day of my birth? Or to move forward to the inevitable end, distinctive between us only in the details? If I choose to start at this fork and move back in years, my twenties perhaps, I will inescapably have to move forward again. In having to move forward, I will return us to the middle, which becomes the beginning of my story. Think of it this way, what type of man begins a maze somewhere in the middle? A lunatic perhaps.

I am not that. A man of intelligence, even if born humbly under a great oak tree from the generous but bleeding heart that was my mother's vagina. A migrant farmworker, without a whisper to a soul, she left her line and waddled over underneath the oak. She drew me out from her as if she was pulling out from the earth the very roots of her labor. She died in my teens and I love every single memory that I have of her. I swear, though I know she's a woman of flesh and bone, there's something about her that I feel is holy.

How she managed to birth me, and my big head without a doctor present, is a mystery or a miracle. I wouldn't call my head a watermelon, though it has always been rather large like that of a movie star and the five-finger forehead of a genius. Because I digress to tell you about my mother and the fruit of the earth and my head is not to say that I am starting at the beginning because after all, beginnings are abundantly common. Pick up any novel from Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Kundera or Stephen King and you'll find yourself at a beginning. Yes, I am a reader. I had to be one to become a teller. Rare few that begin at a Borgesian middle, or who like Julia Alvarez (have you read her?) choose to start at the end.

In all honesty, I am no genius. I just thought I'd catch your attention. Maybe I'm delaying my answer to your question. All my reading has come out of pleasure because all I've known is the earth and the piano and the hours spent dreaming with music or words. How a kid from Salinas learns to play the piano is another story. One that starts at the very beginning. Though I am an uncommon common man with probably a decent IQ, one thing I can do is to make women cry while playing melodies on my piano. I have seen this with my own eyes through the smoky haze of the bar.

My piano stands facing a wall tiled with gold speckled mirrors. I look at myself and look at others through this reflection. I've noticed, I resemble a young Marlon Brando. I tried to market on this too. Figured I would double my tips if I played the piano in cuffed jeans and a tight white t-shirt, but the shortsighted manager did not see my vision. I tossed my hands in the air when instead he asked me, *Who is Marlon Brando?* I mentioned *A Street Car Named Desire* and *The Wild One*, but his eyes stared back at me like a couple of pennies in my tip jar. "Stella!!!" I tried to call the heavens for my hyna—means woman in vato lingo. He responded by asking, "Do I know her?"

It wasn't until I said, *Apocalypse Now* that he got it, which means he got it all wrong. That's like confusing *Love Me Tender* and *Jailhouse Rock* Elvis for the bloated white-jumpsuited one in his '77 concert tour.

"Why would you want to shave your head? You're crazy man. You'll scare the women. Don't take this wrong, but you'll look more cholo than evil genius."

I'm telling you, people have lost all sense of culture.

"Do the Adam Levine thing," he advised.

"Lead singer from Maroon Five? I don't look anything like him bro," I pushed back on his stupid suggestion.

"Don't matter. I was talking about his style not the look," he insisted.

"No. If I were to do anyone, I'd be Billy Joel circa *The Stranger*, you know "Only The Good Die Young."

"Yeah, whatever," the fool replied. "The Green Day guy's alright. Don't do the black eyeliner though."

I gave up on the conversation because the young no longer hold memory. It's as if it takes longer for experience to dig her long and tragically red manicured nails into their prefrontal cortex. Their lovely brains are like the frozen yogurt that they love. Minds unmarked by memory and history, smooth like bedsheets and the botox faces of the slender cougars that stalk the outskirts of my bar.

Tell me, why would a woman want to erase that fact that she has lived? That's like writing a story and deleting half the pages to say "There, that's the whole story." Talk about getting stuck in the middle. But you know, time keeps moving forward. It marks itself against all surfaces. Time's gangster like that, and these women try and hide the writing on the wall. But no matter what they do, they can't fully hide their age. Their peek-a-boo dresses expose the wrinkles that gather around their necks, puddle at the chest, and fall to their knees. It's not that I think they're older than me and that I'm some young stud. These are desirable women. But age and time in Hollywood runs differently than in other places. Though I'm younger than they are, I am much too old for their or their daughters' taste which is one of the reasons I haven't met anyone here. How do I know that? Well that's how my story goes. I am a lover of women. I know these things. Couldn't be a musician if I didn't love women. No mystery in that.

All musicians make love to their instruments. The difference among musicians is how. Rhythmic and pounding. Slow and sensitive. Melodic and moving. Rousing and unpredictable. I'm not prone to hard and apathetic though there are women who want that too. I know real music always has passion and if there's passion then there's something, good or bad, tying us together. Women reveal themselves in how they like to be touched and how they like to receive, or some would say, give it. Like a guitar? A bass? A drum? You laugh because I'm a piano player.

But the piano player has the magic of all three. Fingers that stretch to her mind and heart and her clit and vulva simultaneously. The art of dexterous hands. It is simple: the piano is an intelligent instrument. The music of the piano dances with her thoughts, sometimes it makes her remember. The piano moves the balance of yin and yang between the major and minor chords. The piano keeps the rhythm that reminds women that she's rag and bone, heat and mercy. Even if she doesn't want to, she ends up wanting. You see how simple it is? This is when I do admit that I have a certain genius even for a man born from a farmworker in a lettuce field in Salinas.

You want me to return to that beginning. It intrigued you. The thing is, if I do, it'll lead us away from your question.

My piano helps me tell stories. Though half the time it seems no one's really listening; it no longer really concerns me. A piano player at a bar can always use more tips; reason why I decided that Adam Levine's look wasn't too bad. I dyed the tips of my hair blond and bought a few tight button-down shirts and slim-fitting slacks that weren't too comfortable for playing the piano. The slacks cleaved my nut-sack and tightly pressed against my knees when I bent them. The new look was uncomfortable, and the mirror did not lie. I looked like a thirsty piano player from a hotel lobby. I was reflecting on my failed new look when I saw her crying through the haze. She was one of these older women, a few years older than me, I'm sure. She must have been decades older than the young dudes sipping beers or sharing appetinis with their girls, blocking a full view of her.

I've always had this thing for black hair. Hair with the sheen of raven feathers. I noticed her for this reason. Her hair framed her face as if she wore a halo of ethereal feathers tossed from the heights of heaven. I saw her weeping when I sang the following lines:

And if a word from you can bring a better day
Then all I have are these games that I've been playing
To keep my hope from crumbling away

Her graceful face looked like the bust of Nefertiti, her skin leafed in gold with creases marking her grief. Her slender hand covered her eyes. Then she placed one hand over the other on the table and with downcast eyes looked at them. Though all I could see were her large and shimmering eyelids, I swear that I could see her eyes round and distressed and as beautifully black as the ebony keys on my piano.

When I finished playing Mr. Joel's song, I walked over to her, well, by her. I stood a few feet away from her booth and finally sat in one of the red leathered stools at the bar. Michael served me a shot of whiskey without me asking. I could see my reflection in the mirror behind the counter, past Michael's back as he poured drinks for the assembled menagerie of talking heads. The room seemed to swim, crowded in silver, gold, red, black and blue streams of people moving like colorful fish, their fins swaying through the watery smoke. I peered through the smoke into the mirror to gaze at her.

Distinctive. She sat like a mannequin except for her lowered head and her shoulders that shuddered slightly. She appeared like an apparition, until she gently grabbed the napkin underneath her glass of red wine. She wiped her eyes already smudged black and held the tissue below her nose. I quickly caught sight of her eyes. Irises as black as a starless night and as bright as the stars themselves. I thought I saw the slightest twist of a smile rise from the tiny corners of her mouth. Now that was a mouth that held the marks of a woman who enjoyed laughing. I don't know if she smiled at me, but the movement of her lips told me, she knew I was staring at her. I didn't want to make her uncomfortable, and as I was planning on aweing her in some way, I looked at my own reflection staring back at me.

Michael poured me a second glass; one of the perks of working at a bar. Do you know how tequila is processed? It begins with the jimadores massacring the tall and beautiful blue agaves. They dismember her to get to her heart called the piña. They cut her heart out and ferment it to drain out its ardor and sweetness. It's a type of sacrifice to the gods. This ritual is the reason why tequila is sweetly inebriating. Plus, tequila is a truth syrup and the truth of that night is that I knew that I could love this woman as quietly as she moved. She was the type of woman who could make music from her breathing when we laid together. I had no doubt that this woman could cook the perfect scrambled eggs on Sunday morning while I buttered the toast. A woman who probably had grown children in college, who could make stories of her kids' lives. I knew in my heart that

this woman would sing along to my piano. This was a real woman, so rare in my world ever since I moved to Hollywood. A woman who probably didn't exist in Salinas either in its lingering smell of almonds and artichokes.

I considered what to tell her: *Excuse me, I noticed that you're crying. I'm Jorge, the piano man and I have a song for you to make you smile.* My reflection looked at me and thought: Come on Casanova come up with something spectacular. It was then that I realized that in truth, I looked more like old Billy Joel than young Marlon Brando and she: a woman of the Gods. She had stopped crying.

I walked over to the piano and thought *why not.*

"I dedicate this song to the stunning woman sitting at the booth, an upbeat song so I can see your smile." My hands hit the keys and I began to sing:

Uptown girl

She's been living in her uptown world

I bet she never had a backstreet guy

I waited for her reaction through the mirror. I kept singing and stroking the keys, but she seemed to have missed my dedication. The song missed the mark.

As I was thinking about the next song, a lanky man dressed in a slim suit sat across from her. He was probably a decade younger than me. The attendant brought her another glass of wine and blocked my view. I couldn't see her reaction. Did she generously smile at him with a closed or open mouth? They stood up together and walked to the hall. She probably needed the ladies room. When they emerged from the hall, his arm like a weight across her shoulder. They stopped at the bar and as he ordered a drink, his hand slipped to her waist and then to her hip. He gripped her and pulled her even closer.

This guy was groping what should be my woman, but then he gingerly placed his left hand on the shoulder of a striking blond standing next to him. The girl looked at him and they began talking as he loosened his hold on my beauty. You'd expect an argument or a catfight but there was no such thing. My goddess gingerly pulled away while the dude stayed put talking to the blond. My goddess slipped back into the booth and slowly downed her entire glass of wine.

I was still watching her in the mirror when she stood up and placed the slim straps of her purse on her shoulder. My skin pricked when she walked past me, my stomach rose to my diaphragm. I stopped mid-song with the intention of running after her. The man she had been with noticed her leaving too and followed her outside.

I wasn't about to run through a crowded bar after her, but I wanted her to stay. I wanted to know her name. I walked briskly and rushed through the door. The cool air hit my face though I still felt dazed with smoke as if I was still looking at the world through a mirror. She was standing in front of a yellow 69 Camaro. The man buzzed in front of her like an agitated and angry wasp. He raised his hand and aimed for her perfect face. I ran towards them and yelled, "Yo man!" hoping we wouldn't come to blows. But she didn't need me. She grabbed his wrist and calmly ordered, "Stop." He jerked his hand away and spat on the ground when he walked past me. I stood there, stunned until I heard a rat squeak and saw it run up the gutter. I heard the rumble of an engine and I dashed to her passenger window.

"You okay?" I asked through the glass.

She leaned over the clutch and smiled like daybreak. "I'm fine. Thank you." Her voice was muffled.

I began to say my name, but I don't think she noticed that I was still speaking because she pulled the car away. I stood there until it disappeared in the horizon.

I still look for her through the smoke and search for her in the mirror, wanting to catch her reflection while I sing. I'm sure she was listening and heard my dedication. She must remember my piano and voice. Say what you want, there's a chance that she'll come back and then my story can move forward to some typical end, you know, where the guy gets the girl. Long story short and to answer your question: I'm waiting.