

Robert Radin

Noche Triste

A Memoir of Anorexia

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For Amy and Max

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Part One:
The Nutrition Almanac

1. June 1978

It was cruise night on Van Nuys Boulevard and my friend Neil Baumgarten was heading over in his Nova SS and wanted me to ride shotgun.

I didn't like cruise night. The glare of the streetlights. The Fords and Chevys with their chrome blower stacks. The bikers standing outside Arby's, their choppers lined up at the curb. The girls driving in and out of the Bob's Big Boy parking lot with their feathered blonde hair and their blue eyeshadow and their lip gloss and their tube tops and their zip-around jeans. But Neil was my best friend back then, so I said I would go.

I showed up at his house a few minutes early and his father invited me in. He told me Neil was still getting ready and I should wait in the foyer.

I saw Neil's sister sitting on the couch in the living room. The curtains were drawn. Her mother was talking to her quietly, but it seemed like she wasn't listening.

I realized I had walked in on a family scene I wasn't supposed to be seeing. Part of me wanted to leave but part of me wanted to stay so I could make eye contact with Neil's sister, so I could exchange a look that would tell her how I felt, let her know I was in love with her and that whatever it was she was going through I would be there for her. But she just stared off into the dark of the room.

Neil finally came out of the bathroom and we went outside and stood on his lawn and looked up at the sky. The clouds were mackerel, that deep-red shimmer everyone attributed to the high concentrations of carbon monoxide and soot in the air.

Sorry about that, Neil said. My sister has this disease. It's called anorexia nervosa.

For many years these words would remain as strange and beautiful to me as they were that night, sounding more like the Latin name for a flower than a once-rare illness.

She can't eat, he said. She keeps losing weight.

I asked him questions but he couldn't give me answers. I imagined anorexia as some sort of virus that was eating his sister's flesh from the inside, but it wasn't a virus; it wasn't something you could catch. Yet she was dissolving. She was wasting away.

We got in the car and drove over to Van Nuys Boulevard. When we were at the light at Kittridge a couple of girls pulled up next to us in a black Trans Am. They looked a little older than us, like maybe they'd already graduated from high school. The driver was checking Neil out. He rolled down his window.

I'm a male gynecologist, he said.

This was his standard pick-up line. He thought it was a double entendre.

The driver leaned over her friend. She had a messy henna-colored mane and sharp teeth. She looked like a vampire.

I'm Mona, she said. This is Gretchen. You guys want to go park somewhere?

We followed them across Ventura Boulevard, into the hills, and stopped on a dead-end street. Neil pulled up the emergency brake.

They're into us, he said. So none of your bullshit.

He was referring to my habit of bringing up unsexy subjects at sexy times.

Fine, I said.

We got out of the car. Neil walked over to the Trans Am and talked to Mona for a few minutes. Then Gretchen got out and he slid into her seat and closed the door.

Gretchen approached me with a look of resignation. She had the same tangle of hair that Mona had, but she wasn't a vampire.

Let's get in your car, she said.

But it's nice out, I said.

We sat down on the sidewalk under a streetlamp.

I've been thinking about anorexia nervosa, I said. Have you heard of it?

It's when a girl starves herself, Gretchen said.

I was confused. Neil hadn't described it like that.

I know someone who has it, I said.

Gretchen drew her knees to her chest.

Mona's going to fuck your friend, she said. So we might as well do something.

As we drove home that night Neil told me he got to third base with Mona.

She knows what she's doing, he said. I'm definitely going to see her again. Do you want to make it a double?

No, I said.

So you're going to stay a virgin the rest of your life?

That's the plan.

We drove past the Busch brewery. The red light on the south building was flashing, which meant they were boiling the malt. I rolled down the window and breathed in the hops. It was my favorite smell in the world.

I wonder if your sister's still up, I said.

Stop talking about my sister, he said.

2. September 1978

I met Julia in Miss Ushijima's 2-D art class. She sat by herself in the front of the room and I sat in the back with a group of stoners. I didn't smoke pot but I knew if I sat with them Miss Ushijima would expect less of me.

Miss Ushijima was an odd bird. She was a gardener as well as a painter and would show up to class with dirt clods in her hair. She taught us color theory and how to blend and cross-hatch and stipple. I did a watercolor of a deer and a charcoal drawing of a potted plant. Miss Ushijima stood next to me and watched what I was doing, smelling of soil and dill, never saying a word.

Julia wore jeans and baggy sweatshirts, but I could see the tendons in her neck and the hollows at her jawbone. I would stare at her for half the class but she never looked up from what she was doing. Every once in a while she would go up to Miss Ushijima and ask a question in a barely audible voice; then she would walk back to her table, her head down and her shoulders hunched.

Miss Ushijima held a workshop at the end of each week. A couple of students would share their work in progress and ask the class for feedback. The week it was my turn I drew a tennis ball from three perspectives. My classmates mistook it for a baseball.

For her workshop Julia showed us a pencil drawing of a mother giving her young daughter a bath. Both the mother and the daughter were looking down into the tub, so you

couldn't see their eyes. This gave the drawing a certain intimacy. I still remember the detail in the mother's housedress, the large cuffs at the sleeve, the buttons up the front. And I remember the mother's hair, the way Julia was able to show the weight of it, pulled back in a bun, and the daughter's hair, shining wet and plastered to her cheek.

It was inspired by Mary Cassatt, Julia said.

The class mumbled something. Nobody knew who Mary Cassatt was.

One morning we were drawing landscapes with pastels and I decided I needed olive green. I could have asked the stoners, but there was a good chance they had eaten theirs. Instead I pretended I needed to sharpen a pencil, and on my way back to my seat I made a detour to Julia.

I'm wondering if you have an olive green I might borrow, I said.

Julia searched my face to make sure I was trustworthy. Then she reached under the table and pulled out a small wooden case. She opened it and inside were trays of pastels, arranged by color and shade. They were so perfect, lined up next to each other like that, still in their paper wrappers. I felt the way I had as a kid when I opened up a new box of crayons. I didn't want to use them; I just wanted to look at them.

Julia picked out the olive green while I studied the landscape she was working on. The trees were blue and the mountains were red and the sky was a swirl of orange and yellow.

It's inspired by Art Nouveau, she said.
I love his work, I said.

When Julia stopped coming to class I searched for her in the hallways during passing periods and on the quad during lunch, but she was nowhere to be seen. I asked Miss Ushijima what had happened to her but she wouldn't — or couldn't — tell me anything.