

Topics of Conversation

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How to recognize a story?
There is so much experience but
the real outcome tyrannizes over it.

—SYLVIA PLATH,
from a journal entry dated December 28, 1958

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Italy, 2000

From the shore, the sea in three pieces like an abstract painting in gentle motion. Closest to the sand, liquid the pale green of a fertile lake. Then a swath of aquamarine, the color you imagine reading the word: *aqua* as in *water*, *marine* as in *sea*. Finally, a deep blue, the color of pigment, paint squirting fresh from a tin tube. Sylvia Plath, writing in her journal the month she met Ted Hughes, the day, no, the day before: “What word blue could get that dazzling drench of blue moonlight on the flat, luminous field of white snow, with the black trees against the sky, each with its particular configuration of branches?” No matter the snow, the black trees. The sea was that color, the color of *what word blue*.

I was reading Plath’s journals that summer because I was twenty-one and daffy with sensation, drunk with it. And for the kind of person who goes straight from a major in English to a graduate program for study of same—that is, for me—*The Jour-*

nals of Sylvia Plath, 1950–1962, republished that year, unabridged, counts as pleasure reading. They met, Sylvia and Ted did, in February, and were married in June, on the sixteenth, Bloomsday. That was on purpose. On purpose and a dead giveaway—that they shouldn’t have done it I mean, get married. The youthful symbolism of it. Or one of, anyway. One of the dead giveaways. This was, I was, in Otranto, in August. The sea was three shades of what might have been called blue and I was both on vacation and not.

Camila’s parents were Argentinian psychoanalysts and I was on vacation in that they had paid for my flight from New York to London and from London to Rome and from Rome to Brindisi and for the train from Brindisi to Otranto and also for the resort at which we were staying, which was tiered and terraced, smooth-walled and all-inclusive and so theoretically I could order, from the lounge chairs, whitewashed and wooden-slatted, as many drinks as I wanted. Though practically I couldn’t because the reason the flights and the train and the room had been paid for, the reason I was with Camila and her parents at all, was that Camila had twin brothers, seven years old, and it was my job to mind them. Matteo and Tomás, Tomás smaller and fairer and Matteo, his torso tanned, his hair dark and curly, always getting mistaken for a local. Because of the name, too—Artemisia’s father was Italian, hence the spelling. They lived on the Upper West Side, Arte-

misia and the boys and her husband, Pablo, they were of Argentinian *extraction*. Camila and I were friends, was another point in the vacation column.

The first two weeks were the hardest. The boys had a nanny back in New York, also Argentinian, but August was her month off, too, and with me at first they had mutinied, as children will do when surrendered to new authority. They couldn't have known precisely why I was reluctant to run from their room to their parents' room, double-checking what it was they were and weren't supposed to be eating and watching, how late they were or weren't supposed to stay up, but they must have sensed it, my reluctance. My all-encompassing apprehension. Artemisia had given me only parameters—not too many sweets; keep an eye on your wine, they'll try to tip it into their Coca-Cola—and a different woman would have understood this as license, a different woman would have known, from Artemisia's eye makeup, from the long shift dresses she wore, sleeveless, from the bracelets that busied her arm, slender and golden, from her sunglasses and scarves, from the fact that Pablo had only ever spoken to me directly three times and never about the children, that the rules were mine to make. But I was an uncertain girl, weak of will and ego, and I wanted Artemisia and Pablo to like me, Artemisia in particular because it was immediately obvious, from her shift dresses and her bracelets and also from the way Pablo angled his head

when he spoke to me, so that his eyes, and he was already short, were looking not quite at my face, that her approval would be the harder won. I lived in fear, those first few weeks, that Tomás and Matteo, Teo we called him, so that they were Tom and Teo, the *o* in *Tom* narrow, closed, so that it sounded not at all like an abbreviation for the American *Thomas*, would run to their parents and tell them their new nanny was just awful and couldn't they send her away. Like I was in some knockoff Henry James novel, some knockoff Merchant Ivory adaptation of same.

And so that was the first week, me trying to deny them this treat or that privilege and them complaining and me giving in immediately, buying them *bomboloni* in the morning and *cornetti* in the afternoon and them having no appetite for dinner at eight and demanding to stay up for the eleven-fifteen movie on Retequattro, the boys whining, *So what that it's rated red*, which is how Tom and Teo fell asleep watching *Basic Instinct*, me thinking, Well surely it's been edited for broadcast and certainly it's been dubbed and really how much Italian can they actually understand, even with the fluent grandfather, the cognates. Like the *language* was the problem. I did keep my eye on my wine.

The second week was worse because they'd tired, already, of getting what they wanted, the desire, in these cases, being not merely to get what one wants but to feel as if one is getting *away* with getting what

one wants, and so they began to create actual trouble, trouble of the damaging-the-hotel variety, which is how I found myself, on the evening of the tenth night, yelling, for the first time really *shouting* at Teo to stop using the serrated dinner knife to try to liberate the feathers from a pillow. He responded wonderfully, stopped right away and only cried a little, ate his *frutti di mare* quietly, didn't ask after a gelato or a chocolate profiterole. And the whole time: his eyes wide, a small smile on his lips, pink and wet, hoping for a smile in return, a nod of approval. It's true what they say, children really do crave boundaries. By *they* I mean Artemisia.

The day before the serrated-knife incident, early afternoon, the boys, sun-drunk from a morning at the beach, asleep, small Speedos sandy, limbs splayed, breathing deeply, drooling, I'd knocked on Artemisia's door. Come in, she said, and I opened the door and found Artemisia in her bathing suit. Come in, she said again, because I had not yet crossed the door's threshold. I stepped into the room and Artemisia turned away from me, bent to untie the knots of fabric at her neck and at her spine that were holding the top of her bikini in place. Close the door, she said. I did and when I turned back around she was facing me. Her breasts were heavy and low, freckled, her nipples the color of walnuts, roasted, wrinkled, too, in a way that suggested they might have a similar texture. I mean none of this critically. Her nipples

pointed not down but ahead. All of this I absorbed in a second, half, my eyes flying up to meet hers. I'm wondering, I said, about discipline. How you usually discipline the boys. The boys, Artemisia said, crave boundaries. All children do. The precise boundaries matter less than the fact of their existence. Tell them, Artemisia continued, what it is they must not do and when they do it anyway, she shrugged, punish them. As she shrugged, her breasts perked and then flattened. Her hands were on her hips and her fingers framed a gentle fullness, not a proper roundness but a kind of visible exhalation, evidence, the only visible on her body, that she'd twice been pregnant, given birth. Her feet were shoulder width apart and her thighs, also freckled, did not quite touch. Punish them? I asked. I was looking only at her face. Yes, she said, a time-out, no dessert, penalties of that sort. She shrugged again. Though I suspect you will not need to go even that far. If you raise your voice. She smiled. They are timid boys. They are very eager to please. She bent down and I saw she was beginning to remove the bottom of her bikini as well so I nodded quickly and turned and left, closing the door behind me, forgetting to thank her for the advice she had given me, forgetting even to acknowledge it.

So then it was the third week and the boys had gotten used to me and I to them, opposing armies on Christmas morning agreeing to an armistice, trad-

ing presents, one *cono alla vaniglia* in exchange for forty-five minutes of playing in the sand, no swimming, Nanny wants to read for a bit. I was watching them from my lounge chair, this was a day or two later, when a shadow fell across my legs. Boundaries, no? The voice belonged to Artemisia. You tell them that they can play in the water but that they must not swim and indeed, that is precisely what they do. I nodded. Teo was splashing Tom and Tom was turning to run. Keep your feet on the sand, I'd said. Stay where I can see you. Artemisia bent and her shadow moved up my body. Sylvia Plath, she said, reading the spine of the book I'd placed facedown on my knees. Not a very good poet, she said. But yes, an interesting person.

It was that night, or maybe the night after, after I'd fed the boys and put them down and had dinner with the family and Camila had left to meet friends she'd made on the beach and Pablo had left to see if he could use the resort's telephone to make an international call, that Artemisia again approached me. I was sitting on the terrace, onto which both my room and the suite's living room opened, a glass of white wine on the table in front of me and also a few sheets of paper. In my right hand a pen, blue, my second and third fingers stained with its ink. Artemisia was wearing a white linen shift and she was carrying a bottle of white and also a glass and she asked if she could sit and when I said yes I could feel the vein in

my neck begin to throb, just slightly. I'm not, she said, disturbing you? And when I said no she asked what I was writing and I said, A letter to my boyfriend, and then, Or, not my boyfriend, we broke up, before the summer. This was not quite accurate. I'm going to graduate school, I added. He didn't want to follow you? Artemisia asked. I laughed and she frowned and I said, quickly, It's just that I'm young and he's got a job in New York and it didn't, a helpless hand gesture, come up. If we'd been, and here I paused because I hadn't yet lied outright and didn't want to, didn't want to lie to her, and yet explaining the situation also seemed impossible, but then Artemisia smiled and I stopped talking, relieved. *Ready*, she said. You were going to say, *If we'd been ready*. Ready to get married, yes? This was not what I had been going to say. Of course it was true that I wasn't ready to get married, but this wasn't the problem, the problem was that my boyfriend, who was also my former professor, already was. Nevertheless I nodded. No one is ever really *ready*, she said. She removed, from a pocket in her shift dress, a pack of cigarettes, a brand I'd never seen in the States, Diana, the package white, trimmed in pale blue, and asked, Do you mind? She was already lighting the cigarette, even as I was shaking my head no, no, of course I didn't.

My first husband, she said, exhaling. I met him

at university, in Buenos Aires, while I was completing my bachelor's. I, too, had decided to go to graduate school, for psychology. I had been accepted at Columbia. Very prestigious. Especially for a foreigner. Someone not fluent in the language. She poured herself a glass of wine from the bottle she'd brought, took a sip. I suspect, she said, that Camila's admission was due in part to my own. Given her more limited powers, intellectually. Her lack of extracurricular interests. Though I do not know how heavily a parent's graduate attendance weighs on a child's undergraduate application. And of course Pablo was once a professor there as well. This may have counted more. She took another sip.

It was late, almost midnight. We ate late because of the heat and even now it was still warm enough that neither of us had sweaters on. Artemisia's shift was sleeveless and I was wearing a tank top, spaghetti-strapped, and olive-green shorts with small cargo pockets just above the hem. As she spoke I nudged my tank top down so that no skin was exposed between its bottom and the top of my shorts. My legs had been perched on the seat of the table's third chair, but now, feeling the weight of her gaze on the expanse of my too-pale flesh, I crossed my right leg over my left, hooked my right foot behind my left ankle, tucked my feet beneath my chair. As she spoke I watched her lips move, watched her neck. I wished,

despite the heat, for a blanket to drape over my lap so that the contours of my lower body might disappear entirely beneath it.

Artemisia's judgment, what she had said about her daughter, it was harsh but I did not dispute it, both because I believed it to be true and also because I was familiar with the Pérez family policy, which was honesty in all things. If she was telling me this she had certainly told her daughter as well, in the same spirit in which Camila had told me, during our first week in Otranto, that she would rather spend her time with the six young Greek tourists she had met on the beach than with me and her brothers; the same spirit in which she had, during the first months of our acquaintance, informed me that I should never wear heels with straps, even T-straps, because the place on my ankle where the circular strap hit shortened my calf and made it appear not only pudgy but meatlike, not a calf but a shank being served on a platter of shoe. It wasn't that Camila and I weren't friends, it was, precisely, that we were. And if both of us had imagined my taking care of her brothers as a way, the only way, to spend this last summer together, given her money and my relative lack thereof, it was Camila who had first realized that to preserve the friendship she would have to abandon me. Or not to preserve it, for the friendship was lost anyway, in the fall I would go to graduate school and Camila would remain in New York,

but to honor its memory. So yes, it's true that when I think of Camila that summer, what I see are the backs of her thighs as she walks away from me, down the beach, toward the Greeks, or maybe they were Germans. But at least I don't see her treating me like the help. This I now consider a kindness. Anyway I didn't dispute Artemisia's judgment, instead I nodded and sipped my wine and Artemisia continued. My boyfriend at the time. I met him at university. He was not a fellow student. He was a professor. My professor. Perhaps now the situation would be seen differently. But at the time I was not at a disadvantage. Or I did not see myself as at a disadvantage. We did not begin our relationship until after I had completed his course. And in any case the problems that developed were not related to this initial power imbalance. She shook her head. Not in my opinion. They would have developed no matter. In any case. But I was saying. When I moved to New York, he followed me. He would not admit to this. He was not the kind of man who would follow a woman to a different town. Much less to a different country. But it so happened that he was offered a fellowship for one year to teach not at Columbia but at Sarah Lawrence. The university gave him a leave of absence. We married. For reasons of a bureaucratic nature. Perhaps visas were easier to obtain. Possibly the taxes were lower. In any case. When I left Buenos Aires, it was with him.

We didn't live together, in New York. Sarah Lawrence had already set aside for him an apartment and I refused to commute. And this separation, it—it brought something out of him. A kind of jealousy. The difference between jealousy and envy, do you know it? She did not wait to see if I would shake or nod my head. Envy is wanting to acquire the thing you do not have. Jealousy is wanting to keep the thing you do. It was a side of him I had not seen before. He had been, during our relationship up to that point, Artemisia paused. I was going to say *kind*. And that, too, is true. But the more accurate term is *fatherly*. I did not see it immediately. Did not see that I was looking for a father figure. You see I had an excellent relationship with my father. I still do. And it is usually those who have bad relationships with the parent of the opposite sex who seek a romantic partner to fill that role. Usually, but not always. Because it can also happen this way; it can also happen that one becomes stuck. This is what happened to me. It was my father who had loved me most tenderly, who had shown me the most affection, and so it was he, when I began to separate from my parents, that I sought to replace. And Virgilio was that replacement. Virgilio. Artemisia smiled. Even the name signifies.

In Buenos Aires, we hosted dinners together. He would invite his friends. Professors, writers, poets, ex-politicians, important people. This was 1975, '76.