

The Oldest Story

By Sally Schloss

Word Count: 4,852

It was the dead of winter in Brooklyn, 1938. He was the guy in the cashmere coat with the deep golden tan (where'd *he* been?) who showed up after the party was in full swing. She was the girl in the green organza dress who stared at him. All the other women in the room were glancing discreetly from under their penciled brows. Not her. None of that fake movie star stuff. No bobbed hair, or blazing red lipstick. Her pale hair—straight to her dismay—was thick and long. But, she wouldn't cut it. Boys liked it.

She envied this man his black curls. *He will make beautiful, curly-haired babies. What am I thinking?* When she blushed, the crimson spread down to her creamy throat and poitrine. Had anyone noticed that she'd turned bright red? Had *he* noticed? No, he was dancing with a tall blowsy blonde whose dress accentuated her huge breasts. She sighed. *He likes the gals with the big ones. He'll never like me.* She was slight and small bosomed. She was lucky that the era still favored flat chests, and shorter skirts showing off legs. She had exceptionally good legs. She noticed however, that fashion often failed to reflect real male appetites. Skinny was not sexy. Breasts and hips and asses were sexy. She felt like a boy as she watched Handsome dance with the creature of excess flesh. Fine. If she was not his type, she was not his type.

“Excuse me Lisel, do you want to dance?”

She forgot Simon was standing next to her, mooning. He was in love with her. He had proposed twice. She had gotten three other proposals in the last six months from three different boys, none of whom she was interested in. They were sweet. Dear. But she

couldn't take any of them seriously. Her refusals and basic disinterest seemed to drive them mad, making them more worshipful, and ardent. How awful to be a man. All that courage needed to pursue and withstand rejection—all that blank incomprehension.

Mr. Cashmere Coat was smiling benevolently looking around the room now. The women were like so many iron filings around a magnet. It must be nice to be his type of man, she thought, having the world fall into place as soon as you show up, expecting it.

Believing her body type camouflaged her; she'd continued to stare at him while making judgments. Then a most unsettling thing happened—she caught his eye, but instead of passing her over as inconsequential, he stared back. She refused to do the demure female thing of looking away. She didn't even blink. He walked toward her. She had summoned him. doll-sized Lisel just might be the perfect container for all his curly-haired sperm, after all. *Oh God*. As he drew near, she knew that despite being a virgin and not quite 18, if he desired her, if he actually fell in love with her, she would sleep with him. He was tall, perhaps 6 feet, to her 5 feet, 1 inch. The mountain had come to Mohammed. She wanted to laugh.

Was Simon saying something to her? She moved onto the dance floor and reached up to place her child sized hand in his large one, and felt the pressure of his other hand on the small of her back, guiding her across the floor.

In time, she learned the tan came from skiing in the Swiss Alps. He'd been to Russia. He was a Communist. An atheist. Jewish. Suddenly, Brooklyn wasn't so drab, the Depression wasn't joyless anymore. A man—a catch—named Leon was falling in love with her. He was studying at Columbia to become a physicist, but she knew him as an alchemist, turning her life of dross into gold.

* * *

She was drunk. They'd been to a party at the Rosenberg's apartment and Leon had made arrangements with Karl to use his flat while he was out of town. She tripped going up the stairs. Leon laughed and grabbed her.

"I'm drunk." She giggled.

"You're lovely," he said, pulling her along.

"Are you drunk?"

"No. Just drunk with desire."

She was dazzled. He wanted her, petite Leisel with the flat chest. He wanted her even though his mother hadn't approved and she was a baby and uneducated compared to him. Leon propped her up against the wall as he fished out the key and unlocked the apartment. Before entering, he took Lisel in his arms and whispered, "I love you." She heard the truth of it and she melted in wonder, allowing him to lead her inside.

"Your mother hates me," she said, pushing away from him and plopping down on the couch.

"Who cares what my mother thinks?"

She studied his expression as he stood over her. She didn't believe him, but she could see that he believed it. He wanted her so much that he was prepared to throw his mother under a bus to have her. For a moment she felt alarmed and the thought, *He could do this to me*, came and went. She couldn't hold onto it. *Too drunk*. Lisel, reached for him and he took her hand and gently pulled her to her feet and led her into the bedroom. She wasn't scared of him. She was just scared of pain. She didn't know how much losing her virginity would hurt. She believed that having sex before they were married was

proof of their liberation from convention. They were extraordinary, part of extraordinary times when the world was in need of a sweeping change. They would be part of that change, fighting to alleviate suffering, as well as breaking free of stereotypes that were another form of human bondage. But it wasn't politics that got her into bed. It was his seductive smile and his black curls, it was the charm of his conversation, and the flattering way he said he wanted her.

"Lisel," he whispered, burying his face in her shoulder. He laid her across the bed on top of the covers. He kissed her so hard she couldn't breathe. Then he began to undress her, unbuttoning her blouse and pulling the fabric from her skirt waist. He ran his hands up and down her body. The alcoholic swoon she experienced on the steps returned and her brain chatter began to quiet as she concentrated on the feeling of his hands on her. She was in her body and outside it, watching. She waited for the ignition of her passion. She kissed him back fiercely, hugging his neck, not from sexual arousal, but from her need to reassure herself, and him, that she was swept up in this moment. He fondled her breasts and she could hear his breathing quicken. Then he lifted her skirt and she shocked them both by saying, "No."

"No?" he echoed. She thought she saw anger flicker across his face. Then he collapsed beside her. "What is it Lisel?" he said.

"I...I..." but that's all she could say. Now she was tense, stiff, and she felt she had ruined the moment. She was a child. You don't treat a grown man this way. She caressed his arm. "I'm sorry Leon. Can we try again?"

He took her hand and put it on his sex. She was shocked by how hard it was. Where did men put it when they wore their pants? Did they fold it up against their stomachs, or strap it down on their legs? How could they hide it?

“Lisel,” he moaned, calling her back to him, calling her outside herself. It was hearing her name said like that that finally excited her. Then it happened so fast. He was straddling her and pulling off her panties. His heaviness pressed down on her and he spread her legs. She felt herself ripping and she screamed and he screamed, and then he fell against her so that she couldn’t breath again.

“I love you,” she said, wondering if she had missed something and was this it and was she normal? Leon stroked her face and hair, murmuring her name and then fell asleep. The sex over, all she felt was love. She wanted to live in Leon’s arms, to touch him every moment she could. He beamed at her and tolerated her affection, as she twirled his curls in her fingers, and kissed his neck and cheeks. He in turn called her his pussycat. Now that they were lovers, physical intimacy became her daily drug. Not the sex itself, which was always disappointing, but the touching. He loved to catch her around the waist and lift her in the air like a child. She would look down laughing at him as she slid down his body until their lips met. But Leon was busy, between school and his driving business and helping out at his mother’s deli when he could. If they wanted to be together in their own place, they had to get married. Yes, yes, and yes she said, not believing in her own good luck. But how could they afford it? She supported her parents, and sister. It was agreed that her paycheck would go to her family. His income would take care of the rest.

* * *

They drove up to Niagara Falls for their honeymoon in his old black Ford.

Lisel stayed in the car with the heater running while Leon ran into the office to get the keys to their cabin. It was already dark and the night air was chilly; even so, she rolled down the window and stuck her head out, straining to hear the sound of the Falls, but no such luck. She had no idea how far their cabin was from this wonder of the world. She was hoping for a view.

Their cabin was one small wood paneled room with a bathroom. Above the double bed was a framed amateur painting of Niagara Falls. So, Lisel thought, they did get a view of the Falls from their room after all. The bed was soft and lumpy with springs that made noise whenever they moved. She didn't care. When they lay in each other's arms the mattress sagged, rolling them toward the middle of the bed and each other.

She awoke to Leon exclaiming, "Did someone slaughter a goat in our bed last night?"

Leon was laughing. What was he talking about? Eyes opened, sitting up she saw that the sheets were smeared with blood, that Leon had dried blood on his hands, a streak on his face. She pushed back the covers and looked down at her bloody, naked, inner thighs. Oh my god! She had gotten her period last night! She must have been bleeding when they made love. Mortified, she ran into the bathroom and took the first shower watching her blood stain the water and spiral down the drain. She washed her hair knowing it would be wet all day. She would braid it and pin it up. "You look like Lady Godiva," Leon said, parting the curtain, admiring his slim, naked wife.

"Shoo." She covered her breasts with her hands and turned slightly so he couldn't see her ugly appendectomy scar.

"Yes, my little drowned pussycat." He obediently closed the curtain.

It was warm in the sun. She didn't get cold until they were standing on deck in the prow of The Maid of the Mist covered in spray from the thundering falls. As the boat came dangerously close to the edge of the wall of water, she thought, *This is when we die, I was too happy.*

"Is the captain drunk, do you think?" she shouted to be heard above the roar. Leon laughed, shaking his drenched head, looking exhilarated. She pressed into the shelter of his body, digging her fingernails into the palms of her hands. Her fear rose, gathering momentum from her certainty that the boat was out of control. She couldn't speak now. She pictured them plunging over the precipice, the boat, the size of a toy, falling perpendicularly, a sight as sickening as bone breaking through flesh. She shrieked as the boat swerved, realizing, too late, that it was slowly turning back from the danger, which The Maid of the Mist did every trip, giving the tourists a thrill, and a story to tell. Leon pressed her tightly to him; she threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest. *Oh, Thank God, Thank God.*

She didn't like heights, or walking up slick rocks while holding onto ropes. Leon, on the other hand was an eager beaver expressing joy at each close up view.

"More than 6 million cubic feet of water falls over the crest line every minute in high flow, and almost 4 million cubic feet on average," he yelled to her, quoting from the brochure.

On a deck twenty feet from the billowing torrents, in a wind of up to 68 miles per hour, Lisel closed her eyes against the whip of water lashing her, fearing again that she and Leon were thumbing their noses at death. Leon leaned into the danger. He leaned

further over than anyone, clambered up the steps faster, as if this force of nature was powering him. Seeing him in profile, with his wavy black hair blown back, his Roman nose, his lips reddened by the chill water—he looked like a god to her.

Leaving The Cave of The Winds, a hot thick plop fell on Lisel's head out of the clear blue sky. She raised her hand to her hair and was horrified by the wet, dirty smear of bird poop.

“Leon! A bird just crapped on me!” she looked at him horrified.

He laughed.

“It's NOT funny. It's disgusting. I could get a disease.”

“It's good luck,” he said. “Didn't your mother ever teach you a *positive* superstition?”

“No,” she said distracted, looking frantically around for a washroom. She had to get this off her *now!*

Trying to remove the offensive poop, it smeared deeper into her hair, some falling onto her shoulder. A sink in a public restroom was inadequate.

“It's no use, Leon. We have to go back to the cabin. I have to wash my hair.

“Whatever you want, Lisel.”

She checked his expression. He didn't seem annoyed. He was having a good time at Niagara Falls. The poop hadn't fallen on *his* head.

“How long will you be?” he asked, back at the cabin.

“Oh, maybe an hour.” *That wet hair of yours will make you catch your death*, her mother always scolded.

“Do you mind if I walk over to the bar and get a drink while I'm waiting?”

“Not at all.” She said, missing him already. “Take your time.” She looked at his happy face and closed the bathroom door.

An hour and a half later they were seated at Schimschack’s restaurant at a table with red and white checked tablecloths. Lisel loved the pot-bellied stove, and how everything looked like the inside of a farmhouse—a far cry from Brownsville in New York. It felt like the Depression was happening in another world. They were in some magic land of plenty, where tons of water fell freely, and there was food, and comfort, and love, and the real world was so far away, that maybe, just maybe, they would never have to go back. She wished.

They were famished from walking all day and skipping lunch to save money. The food was real American home-styled cooking, the meats and vegetables supplied by the local farms. As Leon wolfed his food, she wondered if he did anything without speed and enormous appetite? He was in a fabulous mood and Lisel was pleased that she could make him so happy. Looking at Leon, eating his hot apple pie, she felt such love that she suddenly wished they were alone so she could jump into his lap and wrap his curls around her fingers, covering his face in kisses, laughing at his annoyance. “Enough Lisel, enough!” But she wouldn’t stop. Not for all the tea in China.

She heard women’s voices talking excitedly and laughing. They were being too noisy she thought, looking at them as they announced themselves to everyone in the restaurant. They were finely dressed and a few years older than Lisel. She imagined they were privileged coeds. Lisel wanted to go to college, but they couldn’t afford it. Maybe later. She looked at Leon who seemed to be staring at the statuesque blonde with the big

breasts. Lisel's perfect mood deflated. She felt like kicking him under the table. She watched as the blonde approached with her friends, trailing behind as they thinned into a single line to navigate between the tables. Quickly catching up, she bumped into the friend in front of her and dropped her clutch just a few feet from Leon. Bending over to pick it up she gave Leon an eye full. Lisel wanted to jump up and slap those exposed breasts and scream, "Cow! Put those disgusting fat udders away!"

Straightening up, The Cow looked Leon right in the eye and smiled. Lisel seethed. She placed her hand with the wedding ring on top of Leon's, and as he turned back toward her she saw the corners of his mouth twitch, suppressing the grin that he now falsely offered to her. Did he think she was an idiot? That she would accept a smile that didn't belong to her? Staring at him, she was seeing a different man. Not the man she married. She withdrew her hand and rubbed her wedding band with her fingers. Had she just made a terrible mistake? Could she get divorced as soon as she'd gotten married? Leon appeared to be oblivious to the tumult of her feelings. How could she have been so wrong about him?

She woke up with bad cramps the next morning. She felt anxious and blue. It was her period, she reminded herself. But it was more than that. She looked over at Leon lying peacefully asleep beside her. Ordinarily, she loved to watch him when he slept, admiring him, pinching herself at her good luck.

She dragged herself out of bed and went to the bathroom. When she turned on the faucet and water streamed out the tap, tears streamed out from her eyes. Shhh, shhh, she told herself. She didn't want Leon to hear. She sat down on the toilet and clutched her

stomach, bending over from the cramping. Behind her eyes she could feel the start of a headache coming on. *Oh God*, she prayed, *not a migraine, please!*

She sent Leon away. “No, no, you go have a good time,” she said from under the covers. “I’m going to stay in bed and nap.” Leon was fully dressed and brimming with energy. Looking at him made her eyes hurt, like looking into the sun. He sat down next to her on the bed and took her hand.

“You sure?”

“Leon. I’m used to this. I know what I need. A dark room and quiet. Just go. I’ll be fine.”

He bent over and kissed her forehead. She felt indifferent. She just wanted him to leave.

“Okay,” he said too enthusiastically. And before she could say Rumpelstilskin he was gone. She felt bereft. Weakly crying, she fell asleep.

She woke up hours later in a panic. *What’s happening?* She looked at the clock on the bedside table and saw that it was 4:00 in the afternoon. Where was Leon? She realized he’d left her alone all day. Had he come to the door and whispered *Lisel, are you awake?* No, he hadn’t, because she was a light sleeper, she’d have known he was there.

No, he was too busy with the blonde to think about his wife.

She couldn’t help herself. She was imagining them together. She saw Leon walk into a small crowded bar filled with smoke and tourists, with honeymooners snuggling in booths. He looked around as he always did when he entered a room, and he noticed a single woman in her early twenties alone at the bar. What a happy coincidence! It was the blonde from the restaurant.

Lisel began to pace as she pushed the scene forward, directing it through his eyes.

He looked at the blonde's large swelling chest, and slim waist, her tight skirt coming to just below her knees, her exposed calves and ankles. Perhaps she was waiting for someone. A good-looking gal like that couldn't be here on her own.

There were two seats beside her. He chose the seat that wasn't right next to hers.

"I'll have a Scotch on the rocks," he told the bartender. He was watching her discreetly in his peripheral vision.

Only he wasn't so good at discreetly watching, Lisel thought, remembering him openly staring the night before, remembering his suppressed smile before he turned and beamed at her. Her rage repeated like a gag reflex. She wondered if she was going to throw up? *You are too emotional Lisel*. Her mother's voice in her head now. *You make yourself sick*. It was too late to stop. She went on.

Leon looked at the woman's scarlet lips on her wine glass, her hand running down her leg to check her stocking seam, no ring on her finger. He reached for some bar peanuts. She was looking at him. A slow smile spread across his face.

"Penny for your thoughts," she said.

"I was just thinking about the fact that the Falls' produces enough water to fill one million bathtubs every minute."

"Liar. You were thinking about me."

Oh he would like that, Lisel thought. *A brazen blonde*.

He now had permission to look directly at her.

"So what brings you to Niagara Falls?" he asked her.

“A lark, a good time. I thought I was coming here to see the Falls with my friends—but apparently I was wrong.” She cocked an eyebrow at him giving him a coy, insinuating look.

He laughed, thoroughly enjoying himself.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

She needed a waspy name, an American name... Laura.

“Laura,” she said.

“Laura? Is that your real name?”

Yes, Lisel thought, that sounded like Leon, the way he flirts.

“As real as it needs to be.”

“Okay. Then guess mine.”

“Oh I don’t need to guess yours. I already know it.”

Oh she hated this woman!

He unconsciously slid his fingers up and down the sides of his cold, sweating glass while he paused and looked at her breasts. There was nothing subtle or gentlemanly about this. She arched her back and stuck her breasts out further, pretending to stretch. He was already seeing them naked, already touching them.

“Don’t you want to know what your name is?”

“Yes, of course I want to know. But I think I need to move closer to you. That is if you don’t mind. It’s getting so much noisier in here.”

“Is it?” she said. “I hadn’t noticed.”

He slid onto the stool beside her. He gestured to the bartender to refill her drink. He was acting like a man who didn't have a tight budget. What the hell. He was on his honeymoon.

“Okay.” He placed his arm on the back of her stool and was now facing her. “So, what's my name?”

She turned toward him her crossed legs touched a leg of his trousers. “Sexy Remy.”

He burst out laughing and repeated, “Sexy Remy. I love it.”

She laughed too and took a sip of her drink.

Lisel felt like she was hallucinating.

“So, Sexy Remy what are you doing at Niagara Falls.”

“I'm here on my Honeymoon.”

“I should have known,” she said, with a sigh.

“You're not going to run away now, are you?”

“Yes, in fact, I am.”

As she slid off her stool she bent over and whispered next to his ear, “Too bad, Sexy Remy.”

He was electrified by it. Before she could slip away, he put his arm around her waist and pulled her to him. She didn't resist. He put his hand on the back of her head, into the silk of her hair, and brought her mouth to his for a kiss. He didn't linger. He tasted her and let her go. She didn't say another word. She turned and walked away. He watched her ass sway as he followed her out the door.

Lisel frantically pulled her clothes out of the dresser drawers and into her suitcase. She quickly swept the bathroom of her few toiletries. Every time she imagined Leon with the blonde she went crazy. She had to get out of there!

Packed, she left her suitcase inside the cabin door and walked swiftly to Reception at the motor lodge, hoping to find the concierge. She needed directions to drive back to Brooklyn. She needed a map. She had to compose herself. She couldn't look like a hysterical bride. If she did, they'd keep her there until they found Leon.

She stopped a few feet from the entrance. She realized she couldn't drive back to Brooklyn without killing herself, or someone else. She wasn't such a good driver. And she couldn't read a map as she had no sense of direction. What was she thinking? She sat down in the street. There were no sidewalks, just some landscaping around the rustic lodge and a strip of pavement. That's where she sat, right there for all the world to see. You are crazy, she told herself. Yes, crazy about a man who is cheating on you! She burst into tears. Sitting in the street, crying like a baby, she was lucky no one saw her.

A tiny voice crept in; *What proof do you have?* The tears stopped as she considered this. *No proof.*

After a moment, she picked herself up and walked back to their cabin, a bit of her hoping that he was there, even beginning to worry about him. She opened the cabin door on an empty room. Miserable, but calmer, she sat down on the bed.

What if he didn't come back because he's dead? What if he climbed up a wet staircase, and slipped? Or leaned too far over a viewing platform? Maybe he wasn't dead. Maybe he was injured and needed her? Her remorse was deep and immediate. She

ran from the cabin in the direction of the Falls, quickly finding the path they'd walked for the past two days—a ten minute stroll—five minutes if she ran.

“Leon!” She shouted, waving. He couldn't hear her. “Leon!” she yelled relieved, just happy to shout his name. He was silhouetted against the scarlet sunset and the grand sweep of the Falls. He was alone. *Alone. Alone.* She ran up to him laughing.

“Lisel! What are you doing here?”

“I missed you,” she said, smiling up at him. His arms went around her. “I woke up and you weren't there. Why didn't you come back?” a hint of accusation crept into her voice.

He smiled down at her. “I wanted to let you sleep. I thought I'd give you a break from me, and let you have the day alone. You were so miserable this morning.”

As they linked arms and headed back to the cabin, she said, “I thought something had happened to you.”

“Me?” he laughed at the absurdity of this. “You are such a little worry wart. What could have happened to me?”

“You could have slipped, and fallen to your death.”

“What an imagination.” He affectionately squeezed her arm into his side.

“Such things happen,” she said.

Foolish. It was all foolishness. She felt like a child that had awakened from a bad dream to realize that the real world was a better place.

After supper, back at their cabin, they quickly undressed and got under the covers. Lisel was exhausted. No hanky panky tonight. Leon seemed content to simply hold her until they both fell asleep.

When she awoke the next morning she felt happy. She looked over at Leon, lying on his side, facing away from her. She gently lifted the covers in order to slide forward and snuggle up behind him. Her hand froze. She saw long red scratches running down his back. She carefully laid the covers down, keeping his skin exposed. She stared. Maybe a minute passed. Maybe two. Then she positioned her hand over his back, not touching it. In the air she spreads her fingers to match the width of the red marks. *The blonde has bigger hands than mine.* She raked the air above his back tracing the scratches from top to bottom. Then her nails bit into his flesh and clawed over the scratch marks. "Ow!" he said, startled out of sleep. She repeated the painful journey down his back, watching his body stiffen as she dug deeper. He lay still, remaining silent, while she drew blood.

The End