

Rates & Vessels

Donatella came to stay during the summer I started looking around and noticing all the things I hated in our apartment: the water-logged magazines, the windows caked with dust, the pamphlets for hot springs and ski lodges hung on the fridge that we would never, ever go to. The spring before, I grew two inches and all my pants turned into capris, but no one was looking at my legs the way I wanted them to. I didn't have the kind of height like Lydia's from down the hall, the kind that made the saleswomen at Macy's lower their eyes in jealousy. I know this because once we went shopping together, and only together did I force myself to look in the mirror: my legs bowing inward, my arms paper white. I bought a stupid red halter so I didn't have to keep trying things on, then went home and stuffed it in the bottom of the trash.

The summer Donatella came was also the summer Lydia started picking fights with the boys at the corner while looking up at them through half-closed eyes. She perfected a strut that made cars honk at us, her closest to the street, me hidden in her shadow. I knew I wasn't the one getting honked at. But being jealous of Lydia was not a new feeling. It distracted me from the fact that everything had suddenly come into focus, as if I had adjusted the lens of a camera and could now see clearly the ugliness of even the smallest things: the dust on the table, the chipped paint at the bottom of the YMCA pool.

All Lydia really wanted was a summer of tiny shorts and boys brave enough to steal their fathers' convertibles. She wanted to be a girl from *Grease* or *Dirty Dancing*, and I didn't know how to help her. I didn't even know how to put on lipstick correctly ("dab, dab *blot*, Marnie!") She was not interested in the things I could help her with, like trivia facts about the body or which cut of meat to buy at the grocery store.

The summer in the suburbs of Chicago was not hammocks and water sprinklers. It was the kind of heat that made you want to take your clothes off as soon as you put them on. So hot that one July in middle school we cracked an egg on the hood of Lydia's father's car, and it actually sizzled. But Lydia did not want to crack eggs on cars this summer. She was restless, angry. At the lake she started to swim past the buoy, maybe to catch the lifeguard's attention, or maybe because she was just bored.

Just when I was sure the entire summer was going to be watching Lydia swim past where I could see her, she dropped the news:

“Donatella is coming to stay with us.”

We were sitting in her kitchen eating carrot sticks. Her mother, Maria, was always serving us vegetable platters and slapping our hands our way from the boxes of cookies.

Donatella was Lydia’s old Italian grandmother, and she was terrifying. I knew a few things about her from her previous visits. Like how throughout the day, she drank nine espressos out of the same tiny blue cup, which she washed out at night while listening to “Hungry Heart” by Bruce Springsteen. She had a catheter and an IV and an oxygen tank, which she wheeled around like a child in a stroller. Lydia’s family hated her. Maybe it was because she could assess how many pounds, to the ounce, Lydia’s mother had gained, or maybe because she left smears of chocolate all over the sheets (she had a habit of eating truffles and smoking a cigarette before bed). She wasn’t supposed to smoke, but everyone was too scared of her to tell her otherwise, and besides, no one knew what was exactly wrong with her. She refused to tell anyone about her medical situation, even as she acquired more and more gear.

“Donatella is coming?” I asked, like the answer might have changed.

“You know it.”

Lydia was always telling me things I already knew. I was the one who told her how Abraham Lincoln died from Marfan’s Syndrome and how humans have miles and miles of veins, but the problem was that Lydia didn’t really care about the things I was an expert on.

I said, “Maybe it will be fun,” and Lydia just rolled her eyes.

“Marnie, do you know she’s ninety-one now? She apparently has been trying to kill herself slowly with large doses of Nyquil.”

I tried to imagine Lydia at ninety-one, but I couldn’t. Today she wore a black velvet headband, and the humidity had made her red hair double its size. I couldn’t even imagine her at her mother, Maria’s, age. Maria was still so beautiful, in fact, that she got discounts at the grocery store. Plus, she never made orange juice from frozen concentrate. My mother, on the other hand, was queen of the TV dinner. She spent most of her time on the couch in the dark reading shitty romance novels she bought at the pharmacy.

Today Maria was wearing an actual pleated apron and scrubbing a pan with vigor, water sloshing everywhere.

“The whole thing is terrible, Marnie. All she has in the house are pudding cups. Her neighbor called to tell us,” Maria said.

I didn’t really believe it. I couldn’t imagine Donatella eating anything besides a three-course meal out of a china plate.

Lydia hopped up on the counter and kicked her legs back and forth. She was good at pretending like she cared about absolutely nothing. I think sometimes she forgot that I had known her for years, that I had seen her cry in the kind of disgusting, gasping way where absolutely no one can still look good, about things she now claimed hadn’t bothered her at all. Like the time someone stole her radio from the beach. Or the time Tommy Collins told everyone her underwear was the ugliest he had ever seen. Even now, every time her parents fought, Lydia snuck down the hall and climbed into my bed. In the morning, she always left while she thought I was still asleep.

The afternoon Donatella was supposed to arrive, Maria ironed all the lace doilies, which I didn’t even know she owned. Lydia’s father, Harry, came home early from work to dust. Everyone wore the same expression, their faces scrunched up and sweaty, as if they had been lifting weights all day.

“She probably won’t even notice,” Lydia said.

She was chewing bubble gum while polishing the silverware, and I could smell the gum from where I was sitting. It mixed with the bitter, chemical fumes of the polish.

“You better spit that out before she gets here,” Maria said, arranging the sugar cubes so they formed a perfect pyramid in their bowl. Lydia rolled her eyes again.

The buzzer finally rang. For a split second, no one moved.

“Do you think she needs help up the stairs?” Maria asked.

“No, you know Nonna. Don’t ever help unless she asks for it.”

Lydia spat her gum in the trash. We could hear a slow scraping on the stairs, then a few long shuffles.

Donatella looked exactly the same as the last time I saw her, except maybe a little wrinklier. She was wearing a floor-length fur jacket and bright white tennis shoes, which looked like they had never been worn. A tube of oxygen snaked up her nose. The lower half of her face was smeared with orange lipstick, like a toddler had done her makeup.

She looked Maria up and down, then said, “Well, don’t you look... healthy.”

Her voice had a sort of static to it, like an old record player. Then she turned to Lydia.

“Lydia, bella come sempre.”

Then finally, to me.

“Who’s this?”

“Ma, you remember, Marnie, don’t you? Lydia’s friend.”

Donatella’s sharp eyes darted back and forth across my face. They were a pale blue.

“I don’t think we’ve met before,” she said to me, “You’re such a tall girl. So tall! I would’ve remembered you.”

I felt blood rushing to my cheeks.

“Nonna, you’ve definitely met Marnie. She’s always at our house.”

“No, I would’ve remembered.”

“She wasn’t always this tall,” Lydia said.

Maria mouthed, “sorry” across the table, then put her hand on Donatella’s bony shoulder.

“Ma, sit down. Harry will get your bags. I’m boiling water for tea.”

“Tea? When have we started drinking tea?”

Donatella unbuttoned her coat and flopped herself into one of the arm chairs.

“Why are there so many stairs in this goddamn place?” She was looking at me like I should answer her.

“I heard they were going to install an elevator next year,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter, I’ll be dead by then. What’s your name again?”

“Marnie. We’ve met a few times.”

“You don’t look like a Marnie.”

“Well, that’s my name, ma’am.”

Lydia was covering her smile with her hand. In fact, I hadn't seen her smile so wide all summer. She said Donatella was the only one who ever told the truth. One time, Donatella asked Lydia if she thought her father was having an affair because he brought home a bunch of roses. She told Lydia that no man brought home a gift without feeling sorry about something.

Maria brought out Donatella's coffee, which Donatella downed in one swallow.

"So Ma, the neighbors said you weren't... feeling well?"

Donatella slapped her hand against her leg.

"Io sto bene. Non è vero!"

Maria once showed me a photo of Donatella at sixteen on the beach in a halter bathing suit. The photo was glamorous, but she had too many wrinkles for a sixteen year old. It looked like she was born to be old.

"What do you mean, it's not true?" Lydia asked, typing rapidly at her phone without looking up."

"Erica and I got into a disagreement, if you must know."

Lydia's father began to rub his eyes aggressively. He seemed to have an allergy to Donatella, because every time they were in the same room, he looked like he needed to take a Claritin. Harry used words like "sensitivity" instead of "allergy" to make horrible things seem a little nicer. He was the opposite of my father, who was a butcher and was always trying to scrub blood out from underneath his fingernails.

"What do you mean, 'a disagreement?'" Harry asked.

"Well, it was a bit of a spat."

"A spat?"

"For Christ's sake, the woman spends her days cutting out paper snowflakes. How can you blame me?"

"Ok but Nonna, what exactly happened?"

"I can't remember."

"You can't remember?" Maria asked.

"I can't remember."

Harry began to scratch his scalp viciously. Donatella narrowed her eyes at him.

“What exactly did Erica tell you, Harry?”

“She told us all you were eating were pudding cups. She said your driving was a menace to the neighborhood.”

Donatella set her cup down with a clatter. I jumped, and hated myself for it.

“*Zutt’u’ basciament’! Vedi caciuunca!*”

Seeing Donatella yell was actually a relief. So much of what was scary about her was the possibility of what she could do or say. She reminded me of a Jack-in-the-Box.

“Ma, Ma, it’s ok. We just wanted to check on you.”

I hadn’t realized I had been drumming my hands across the table until Donatella turned to me like I had something she wanted, which I did: a distraction.

“What’s the matter with you, *alta*?”

“Marnie just gets a little anxious sometimes,” Maria said.

“Is it your heart?” asked Donatella, “The heart is the weakest instrument in the body.”

“Nothing is wrong with her, Nonna,” Lydia said, examining the nail she had been chewing on. It was wet with blood.

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Our apartment was only a five second walk from Lydia’s, but I dreaded that walk every day, tried to make it go as slowly as possible. Our door, which in a fit of inspiration my mother had painted a dull gold, was still covered in Halloween decorations even though it was July.

The apartment was dim as usual. It smelled like cigarette smoke and old meat, and I saw a foot sticking off the edge of the couch.

“Ma?”

A cigarette dangled off her mouth, unlit. Her eyes were smeared with eyeliner, even though I could tell from the looks of it she wasn’t going to leave the house today, but at least she had tried. I guess once she had been beautiful enough that my father, upon meeting her at a bowling alley, accidentally dropped the bowling ball on her finger when he went over to say hello. Her finger is still a little crooked. He said he never got her an engagement ring because he had already given her one, which I don’t think was actually all that romantic.

“Gary brought something home for you.”

“Dad’s here?”

She was on her third coffee and Kahlua. I could smell it on her breath and I took a few steps back.

“Marnie, Marnie, Marnie,” my father called out from the back of the apartment. He rarely came home this early- he usually went to the bar without even taking off his apron until the owner told him he had to start bringing a change of clothes. He scared people away when came in looking like he just killed someone. My dad didn’t go to the bar to drink, just to be somewhere other than where my mother was. I used to go with him, because I didn’t want to be around her anymore than he did. After last summer, he said I couldn’t come anymore, said I was getting too old to wear shorts and not expect it to be distracting. Every time I thought about that, I got angry.

“Hey, bud.”

He had changed out of his apron into a t-shirt. He kind of looked like John Travolta from *Grease*, if John Travolta smelled like meat and had big blue circles under his eyes.

I followed him to the kitchen. The kitchen floor was always covered in a layer of dust and crumbs. No light. Every-time I opened the shades, my mom went around closing them again.

My dad opened the freezer, and took out a plastic grocery bag. I could see the frozen blood that had gathered in the creases. It looked heavy, but he tossed the bag from hand to hand.

“What is *that*?”

“This, Marnie, is a cow’s heart.”

“A what?”

He was always bringing me things I didn’t know what to do with: a dull pocketknife he found at the junkyard, a jean jacket with the sleeves cut off. He had told me a few times he wished I was a boy. It seemed like he was less disappointed for himself and more sad for me that I had gotten the short end of the stick.

“I can tell you what you’ll learn in that biology class of yours in two seconds, pumpkin: the heart is just beats and rates and vessels.”

I looked at him.

“How did you know I was taking biology next year?”

“Maria told me.”

My dad pulled a beer out of the fridge and popped the top off on the lip of the counter. It left a tiny dent.

“Where did you see Maria?”

“I bumped into her, she needed a few short-ribs.”

He took a long swig of beer.

“She came into the shop?”

“Yes, which reminds me, Marnie: never order short ribs when you can order sirloin.”

My dad always gave me advice about meat cuts as if they were proverbs.

“I’m not stupid.”

“You brought home a cow heart to prepare me for biology class?”

“Nah, I don’t care about your biology class. It’s a delicacy, and we’re going to grill it.”

My father was one of those people that hid crazy things by doing crazier things to distract you from the first.

“I’ll teach you how to make a marinade. That’s a good thing to know. ”

“There is no reason for me to learn how to marinate a cow’s heart.”

Beer foam clung to his mustache.

“Don’t tell your mother,” he said loud enough for my mom to hear, and handed me a Corona before smashing his bottle against mine.

"Cheers, baby."

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Four days later. I went over to Lydia’s to eat breakfast, even though I hated how she always tried to get me to drink coffee. I hated coffee. Lydia drank hers black with two biscotti, leaving wet crumbs all over the table and a pink stain of lipstick on the cup.

“Hello?” I called out. Maria and Lydia were usually there, even if Harry left for work early.

“Who is it?”

I recognized Donatella’s voice immediately. I had a weird feeling that she was holding a knife.

“It’s Marnie.”

Donatella walked out from the back of the apartment, which was exactly the same lay out as mine. It always surprised me, a parallel universe of clean floors and Glade plug-ins.

She was in a full-length pink robe, a cigarette in hand.

“Harry’s at work. Lydia and Maria went bra shopping, but they didn’t think you’d want to come.”

She looked down at my chest and didn’t try to hide it. The last time I went bra shopping, the saleswoman said, “Well, I could measure you, but there’s not exactly much to measure, dear.”

“Guess you’re stuck with me. Coffee?”

“I don’t really…” but she was already pouring me a cup from the percolator on the table. She didn’t use an oven mitt.

We sat down at the table and didn’t say anything to each other. Then, Donatella leaned back in her chair and looked down her nose at me like she was wearing glasses, which she wasn’t. It was difficult to tell whether she thought she was better than me or whether she was just relaxed, although I was inclined to think the first option, since Donatella never seemed relaxed.

“*Dimmi qualcosa, cara.*”

“I don’t understand Italian, Donatella,” I said.

She looked disapprovingly at me.

“Why not?”

“Well…” I said. Then we didn’t say anything else to each other for the next five minutes. It wasn’t the comfortable kind of silence good friends have, like Lydia and I on the days she wasn’t annoyed at me. Although maybe I just thought it was comfortable silence, and actually it wasn’t. No, Donatella and I were clearly both trying to think of something to say to one another.

Finally, I said, “There’s a frozen cow heart in my freezer.”

Donatella didn’t even blink. At some point in her life, she had probably butchered a cow herself.

“Marnie, you remind me of a year of my life were I cried a lot. *Sempre piagendo.*”

“Oh,” I said.

“You should show me the heart,” Donatella said.

“Ok,” I said.

I felt a little dizzy as I opened our front door. I assumed my mother would still be on the couch, which she was, a beer in a puddle of its own condensation on the coffee table. She was burning amber incense that smelled like urine, probably to cover the smell of weed. I didn't say anything as I passed by, and she didn't say anything to me either, her eyes glazed over. It was sad that I liked my mother most when she seemed the least there.

I opened the freezer gingerly. There it was, behind a half eaten carton of Breyer's. But there wasn't just one bag now. There were at least three others since the last time I opened the freezer.

Every time he did something he regretted, did he bring something home? Kidneys and tongues and stomach and brains, until there was a whole cow. These bags of who-knows-what would sit here in the freezer until there was no more room, and my mother would never notice. She would never say a word.

When I picked up what I hoped was the heart, it was heavier than I expected, like a bag of quarters. I slipped it into my backpack and walked back out the door, purposely not looking at the couch. I knew the scene hadn't really changed.

When we stepped outside, Donatella pointed to her car, but I would have guessed it was hers anyways. It looked like a movie prop, creamy white, with round headlights that looked like they were about to fall off. The fender was completely covered in bright orange rust.

“I bought this for \$13,000 in 1954 and I want to be buried in it,” Donatella said.

I sat in the back so she could seatbelt her oxygen tank into the front seat. The inside of the car smelled like wood and leather and mothballs. The seats were littered with tabloid magazines that looked at least 20 years old, empty coffee cups, and a few rolls of toilet paper.

She started the engine, which was so loud I thought it might be broken. When she shifted into first gear, her whole body shook, as if from the recoil of a gun.

We headed towards the North suburbs, crossing over the canal so dirty they wouldn't let anyone swim in it anymore. We passed Target, its parking lot empty of cars, and the landfill they turned into a hill for sledding.

“This car doesn’t have power steering,” Donatella said as we whipped around a corner. I had a brief vision of her oxygen tank flying through the windshield. For some reason I still felt safe, the world suddenly distilled into only what I could see out of the smudged glass window.

We finally turned into a neighborhood where the houses were identical and plain. The same white fences, the same purple flowers in the front yard. The street seemed too tame for the car, and for Donatella.

“That’s her house,” she said, pointing at the one directly in front of us, “and there’s mine.”

I could tell which was Donatella’s because there was an Italian flag hanging on the deck, along with an ashtray that was completely full.

Neither one of us got out of the car. She turned to me.

“I’m pretty sure that bitch slept with George before he died.”

I didn’t say anything. It didn’t seem like she wanted me to.

“Marnie, you know who else is a bitch? Lydia, and it’s only going to get worse. She’s going to make a lot of people unhappy. Not you, though. *Tu, tu sei brava. Sei bella.*”

Something about how I was good and beautiful, as if she knew what I needed to hear. I felt a strange, cold calmness. What we were doing was not a good thing, or maybe it was.

I looked over quickly at Donatella’s wrinkled face. Maybe she had forgotten why were here.

“Your father and my daughter are messing around,” she said.

“I know,” I said, before getting out of the car. I walked towards the house, and I turned back, just once. The sunlight hit the hood of car, the oxygen tank, Donatella’s face. From this angle, she looked a little like Lydia.

She waved a hand at me, and I stepped up to the front door of her neighbor. The porch was newly swept. A pink mat read: “Welcome.”

I unzipped my backpack and took out the plastic bag. I could have just left it like that on the porch, but I could see Donatella shielding her eyes from the sun, squinting at me through the glare of the windshield. I could do better.

I tore the bag open, half-expecting the heart to start beating once it was exposed to air. But it didn't. It was only a red, melting thing in my hand.