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The Death of Nu-Nu

By Mitch Berman

1

No one at the Café Lucca knew the man's name, so you will not learn it from me. No, none of us, neither the regulars nor the waiters, knew his name, though all of us knew him; or at least we knew who he was.

He would enter the café, glancing not so much at as over the regulars, who looked, or glanced, or did not look back at him according to our own habits. He appeared to have little desire to see us, and none to be seen by us.

He was about sixty, more tall than not, more bald than not, more handsome than not. He was thin and his face was thin, with tanned skin stretched to an unglossy tightness around prominent high cheekbones and slightly sunken cheeks and temples. I believe that his eyes, through gold-rimmed bifocals, were blue. He had superb and unvarying posture. All his movements were executed with a firm premeditation that suggested good health, but nothing left of youth.

He dressed in a way that would pass him through New York City anonymously, recognized instantly and only as being of that social class which must subscribe to, but not necessarily enjoy, the ballet and the opera. There was never any scuffing, nor too much shine, on his black penny-loafers; there was never any lint or loose thread on his navy blazer or creased charcoal trousers. I disliked him slightly because it was impossible to have strong feelings about him.

He would establish himself at Table 8 — and if it were not available, he would shift uneasily and soon depart, leaving a tip that was even smaller than usual — fix his eyes to the headlines of his clean unfolded copy of *The New York Times,* accept his cappuccino and baba au rhum with such modest word or gesture as the waiter required, then turn to the crossword puzzle and rapidly complete it, in ink. Only then would he read anything else in the paper, and he seemed to read everything else, from the first page of the news to the last of the classified. He never stayed less than an hour or more than two. When, after years of faithful attendance, he took an extended absence from the Café Lucca, I did not notice he was gone. And now I will withdraw from the story, though I am still telling it. I remain at the Lucca, if you wish to picture me there, at Table 1, in the corner by the radiator. My drink is double espresso, hot in winter, iced in summer. I am usually writing.

2

The man was in Florida for the eighteen months when he did not come to the Café Lucca. The day after he arrived for what was to be only a week with his sister's family in Boca Raton, he fell ill at her dinner table and was taken to Roosevelt Memorial Hospital. He had an aneurysm — a kind of overfilled water balloon — directly over the motor strip in his brain, and the doctors warned that the necessary

surgery would risk paralysis. He was knocked out, drilled and sawed like a wood-shop project, chopped up, screwed down, sewn up, pronounced as good as new. His motor strip was intact, and after a week of observation at Roosevelt Memorial, he was farmed out to a private room in the Coconut Grove Nursing Home.

The Coconut Grove was on one of the busier streets in Boca, and although there were no coconuts, he could see, if he opened his fourth-floor window and bulged his face hard left into the screen, a wedge of Ocean Avenue on which there was a traffic light that was rarely triggered by crossing cars, a bus-stop bench and a Benetton store. Wakeup was at 7, lights-out at 10. Meals were served at 8, 12 and 6; at least once a day a Jell-O Surprise would be placed before him, with a maraschino cherry staring up out of it.

He missed the coffee first, or rather the smell of the coffee, or rather all the smells of the Café Lucca back in New York. As he got stronger, gave up the wheelchair, took solid food, these smells carried back to him, the way desert dust drifts on a high wind to a distant city: the smell of the freshly ground coffee beans, or not quite, but that smell mixed with the general and pervasive smells of cooking, basil or garlic or wine and always onions, with the specific, nearby, intimate smells of his rum-soaked pastry, the steam from his cappuccino, the vinegary scent that arose when he unfolded the *Times*, or not quite, but all these smells mixed with fresh air, for the Lucca's front door and the transom window above it would remain open at this time of year. He had never thought of the air in Manhattan as fresh, but it was, at least in early autumn, when the winds dried out and crackled the leaves, when the leaves crackled dry and fell loose on the ground, when his feet crackled the leaves on the sidewalks. He could still see his penny-loafers among those leaves, firm, sweeping, capable; now his feet were tentative, shuffling, pale, paled by fluorescent light in brown corduroy slippers against green marble-patterned linoleum. When he had first entered the Coconut Grove he had been

overpowered by the cherry antiseptic used to swab the floors, but as he got accustomed to it, he came to smell it only as the absence of clean air: he would open his window, lean the side of his face against the screen, and inhale the Boca air, watching people go in and out of Benetton, watching the summer sale come and go, watching the stock trucks unload the fall line and the window dressers push it up front in the picture windows, watching the winter wools and flannels arrive; watching people who walked by and particularly those who settled on the bus bench, including a stout elderly woman who came Thursdays at 3:40 with a straw handbag full of soap opera magazines and two large Winn-Dixie shopping bags, one containing jars of Cremora and the other containing six-packs of Old Milwaukee beer, and as he compounded these ingredients, imagining her life, the bus would pause there and consume the woman in one bite, leaving behind a belch of sticky-sweetish diesel fumes, the same fumes that had enveloped the Café Lucca when the red double-decker tourist buses had pulled away from the curb of Bleecker Street, and he wondered whether people at the Lucca had conjectured about him as he had about the Cremora Lady: he inhaled the air from his window, and even the outside air, with its close and fresh-rotten hint of the Atlantic, even the outside air, half-smelled, mixed in with the odor of the Coconut Grove, smelled of something, smelled slightly, if he were quiet and were listening, of the café, of escape, of home. He could not stay there indefinitely, half of him in the nursing home, half in the town, all of him back in the café; the seaside humidity had rust-roughened the screen, after a while the screen roughened his cheek, and once a mosquito bit him through it.

When he closed the window and turned out the light, he closed the window on the Coconut Grove, on Boca Raton, on Florida, and went back to fall, back to winter, back to a place where there were falls and winters, back to Manhattan, back, finally, always, to the café. He explored the café as he never had — never had to do — before,

in the way a stroke victim does not so much relearn the functions of his body as consciously learn them for the first time.

He knew, had always known, had never known he knew, everything about the Café Lucca: the name not only of the owner, a squat young Tunisian man with curly black hair and black-lashed black eyes like apostrophes, but of his wife and two small daughters; the names of all the waiters, though he rarely used them; and the names, occupations, tables and usual orders of the other regulars, though he never spoke to them. He discovered he knew these things because each of his fantasies encapsulated a complete and sequential visit to the café, and in them the cappuccino and baba au rhum did not materialize on his table of their own accord, but were, as in life, placed there by a waiter whom, as in life, he had to thank, to pay, to tip. Just as what he'd always taken to be the smell of the Lucca was constituted of many smells, so too the sound of the Lucca was composed of many sounds that he could now separate as one can unravel the colored threads from the edge of a woven scarf: the thin clatter of radio disco from behind the counter, the thick clinking of Buffalo China on Buffalo China, the burble of conversation, the frequent ring of the house phone — electronic — and the occasional ring of the pay phone — acoustic — and the constant arguments between the coffee lady, who yelled at everyone in a Maltese accent, and the waiters, who defended themselves in Russian, Spanish and Arabic accents, or when they were really angry, in Russian, Spanish or Arabic.

He knew, most of all, about the cat. Nu-Nu was a young male, not quite fully grown, a cross between an orange tabby and a Siamese. From the tabby he had the orange and white markings; from the Siamese a long, pointed face and an aloof demeanor. When the radiator was on, he slept either stretched out atop it on a carpet-covered pallet or curled up like a frozen shrimp on a chair beside it; when it was off, he stayed out of sight, baking himself into a woozy trance among the compressor coils

beneath the ice-cream freezer. Being a young cat he was, when not sleeping, uncontrollable, sharpening his claws on the vinyl booth upholstery, tackling the ankles of the coffee lady, who fed him by hand and called him *sabieh tighei* — "sweetheart" in Maltese — heaving onto his back to bite and kick the black rubber runner that tongued through the café on rainy days, pausing to flash his crazed challenging white-rolling eyes at onlookers before kicking and biting some more, walking a tightrope along the sill of the wainscoting beneath the tall-paned display windows in urgent, violent, propulsive pursuit of lazy summer flies, sashaying a zigzag through the forest of chair-legs to sniff and rub his cheeks against the handbags and jackets that hung down to his level, and slinking low and weasel-like out the door to stalk pigeons from the shadows under the cars standing on busy Bleecker Street. Though the man had never touched the cat, he knew by sight all the textures of his fur, from the vein-shot translucent velvet of the ears to the fine striations of orange and white on his head to the coarse hairlike locks that stood straight up from his crooked shank when he curled up. He resolved to pet the cat in all of those places, and find out if they felt as they looked. The cat was an undemanding, undiluted pleasure of the café, and the pier to which the man moored his ambitions to return.

He always approached the Café Lucca from the northern tip of Father Demo Square, the brick-paved triangular plaza, edged with park benches, which lay across Bleecker Street: in spring or in fall, the door flung open, the cat prowling freely indoors and outdoors, a sidewalk passerby propping a foot on the low iron railing to chat with a customer sitting outside; in summer, the door closed, the air-conditioning on, the cat salted away, the drinks iced; in winter, sealed up again, a glass bubble of light and activity across the becalmed streets, the windows dull-bright, clouded with condensation, while behind them, in that damp and reassuringly too-hot heat, in that Lucca smell, in that sound, the customers were loud and collegial, their heavy clothes

lumped up on the backs of chairs, one of the tourists hailing the waitress and one of the regulars weaving between the tables, dropping a word to those he knew, and the occasional lightning of a camera's flash shocked all of it into black-and-white, a freeze-frame from which it was slow to defrost, to regain color and resume motion, while Nu-Nu slept on his pallet in the Sphinx position, compact as a loaf of bread, only a whisker twitching: it was an oasis at all hours and in all seasons, and the cat was the heart of it. Unlike this slow humid death-by-the-clock cherry-flavored prison, the Lucca was vibrating with life.

The cherry smell had insinuated itself, once again, into his consciousness because he had been returning frequently to the nursing home from new tests at the hospital. Whenever the sliding glass double-doors of the Coconut Grove opened to him — the lobby had once been a bank, and the more cynical residents said the antiseptic covered up the smell of money — a blast of cherry air-conditioned freon slowed him down, made him groggy. The very air in the Coconut Grove was doped.

Finally, as if it had taken all this time to nerve themselves up, the doctors broke the news to him. He had a tiny astrocytoma — a malignant brain tumor — that had been obscured by the aneurysm. It was in a better spot than the aneurysm, and they anticipated an uneventful surgery.

As they had the first time, the doctors guessed wrong. Surgery left the man quivering and spasming on the operating table, and then in intensive care, where, after eight days, he stopped moving entirely, stopped breathing on his own, and entered a coma from which the doctors gave him, in the manner of TV weathermen predicting rain, a 10% chance of survival.

He heard them from the depths of his coma, as a man buried beneath a heavy snowdrift might hear — or thinks he hears — the voices of his would-be rescuers far above him: slowed, distant, distorted, unreal. *Down here, still here …* His brain

struggled to form the idea behind the words, could not put together the actual words, had no chance of making his lips form the words or of pushing any breath through them. Like a man locked into a suit of armor, his body was his entire world. Home and the café were incalculably distant. He could hear only the doctors' consultations, in tones sapped of any urgency, and he imagined the rest, in flashes, in pieces, weaving them together into a long poisoned dream:

They keep finding the cancer has spread. So they're amputating pieces of me: first they hack off my toes, then my feet, then one leg up to mid-shin, more and more and more, cutting off and cutting up my body. For some reason that I do not question, they're not using a surgical saw, but a highly polished aluminum nut scoop.

They haven't given me an anesthetic, just an Andes Mint. Though I'm supposed to be numb, I can feel it, can feel impact, not pain: I can feel collision. They're chunking into me, chipping away at me as if I am rock and the cancer is ore. My body shakes and the bedsprings squeak with the impact. Dismantling me for the parts. Jarring me.

Jarring me. Brain here, in the wide-mouth; heart in the Mason; eyes in the baby-food jars. Not pickles, mayo, creamed corn: brain, heart, eyes. I keep telling you. Ignore the labels; shop well; here was once a man; here was once an organ donor. Organ donor. I checked the box on the card. There in my wallet. Organ donor.

I'm the meal at a buffet. The diners, each of whom needs an organ transplant, roll up to me in wheelchairs, looking me over, nostrils flared. Hungry. They are hungry. Each has a highly polished aluminum nut scoop.

The last thought he had before awakening was that his phone bill must be seriously overdue.

"Mih…mih," he told the nurse, or at first only his lips told her, without any voice behind them. He had been dreaming a long time, had worked up a great hunger, and now he couldn't say what he wanted. He wanted an Andes Mint.

It was two weeks before he got his voice back, five before he could eat solid food, seven before he was sent back to Coconut Grove, much longer than that before he finally got it through his head that his dreams of dismemberment and mutilation had not been real, that no one had taken any of him away, removed anything, cut any of him off.

It seemed they had. It seemed they must have. He would stand before his bathroom mirror — the medicine cabinets, with three small palm trees etched into the back of the glass, had been salvaged from a Miami hotel — wondering at how different he was, how much less of him there was.

People ordinarily have the chance — are forced — to get used to their deterioration over time, even when it is accelerated by illness. But these changes had taken place in him overnight: over one long night. Though he was discernibly the same individual, all his substance was gone. Most of the little hair he had still had left had disappeared, and what was left had turned pure white. Reddish-brown spots cropped out on his head and neck. His arms and upper legs were gray and stringy. The cheeks that had once been chiseled were now chiseled away, fallen, sunken, and the skin dangled, flaccid, from his cheekbones. His whole lower face had atrophied, while his forehead, eyes and glasses remained as always, looking as though they'd grown. His face, on which he had liked to model incisive, debonair expressions in the Café's Lucca bathroom mirror, was shaped like a light bulb.

His fantasies of returning to the Lucca had come back to him, cat first. They had seemed to have left him, cat last, out of a sense of courtesy, as if not to dangle before his helpless body things it could not have, pleasures that were out of the question for a man in a coma but that were again becoming possible for a man who was improving every day, increasingly possible, likely, inevitable, until the day when the doctors

pronounced that his cancer was in remission, that it might or might not come back, and that he might as well go home.

3

The man wore a navy peacoat, though it was a warm Saturday afternoon in late spring; he got cold easily now. The Café Lucca was busy, and the owner, short-handed, was waiting all the tables himself. Immediately after the man's arrival a tour bus pulled up outside, blocking out the sun, and disgorged forty Italians who rushed in, filled every available pore of space in the café like water saturating a sponge, upended expressi under which they had placed their faces, and rushed out. The man decided to believe he'd been lost in the flurry, and now that he'd been served no one had reason to stop and notice him. The owner, who had put on some weight, went back and forth, busing the tables, joined by the coffee lady. Five of the regulars were scattered around at their old customary tables, waxworks in their constancy, like some tableau rehydrated from the dried stuff of memory: the recently retired telephone repairman, fat and bearded like a Santa Claus not yet gone gray, with his collection of daily crosswords, his carafe of white wine and the glass he always kept half full; the writer with his ratty manuscript ripped from spiral-bound notebooks, knee jumping to his blaring Walkman; the elderly founder of the café with his enormous belly and suspenders hoisting his pants over it, speaking nasal, staccato, birdlike Italian to his wife, who answered him in English; the muscular ex-cop with his tight black T-shirt, dyed black hair and gradient sunglasses, who read nothing but sat preposterously erect, arms folded across his chest, visually patrolling Father Demo Square. He wondered if any of them had seen him come in. He looked down, plucking a thread off his pants and pulling his coat-sleeves out over his fraying shirt cuffs. The sky over Father Demo was bright blue, and the air

so clear that the leaves of the young trees stood out clearly individuated. Puffed-up male pigeons chased females between the legs of the park benches. A couple he knew walked slowly by on the sidewalk — floated by, their legs cut off beneath the wainscoting — arm in arm, almost close enough to touch. His impulse, which surprised him, was to wave to them, but he did not do it. The possibility that they would not return his greeting left him paralyzed.

Had he changed so much? And yet he felt the same inside. The same as the regular who'd returned to the café four times a week from an apartment on East 81st Street, the same as the dreamer who'd returned to the café every day from a hospital bed thirteen hundred miles away, returning as a pigeon returns, mangy and addled, to the place where its keeper lived and died: he felt not only the same urge to return to the café but felt *the same*, the same as the one who had, the night before he'd been taken to the hospital, sat beside his sister on her overstuffed floral love seat under the fluted green glass shade of their Aunt Lil's bridge lamp, leafing through family albums that glowed faint chalky green, through the crumbling, flaking, peeling, paling, dissolving turn-of-the-century albumen prints of the posed and seated ancestors, through the decades and through the generations to the 20's, the 30's, when there had appeared in the small square Brownie prints an infant which had looked nothing like he looked today — nothing like him except for the concave temples, the blue of the eyes, the inward turn at the corners of the mouth — a baby, a child, a boy only three feet tall, four feet, five: he felt himself today, as he sat in the Lucca, to be the same person who had, eighteen months before, sat beside his sister, paging through the 40's and 50's, paging through the greenglass black-and-whites on into faded into fading color, on into the 60's into the 70's, telling his sister stories that, no matter how small the child in the pictures, always began with "I," calling that boy, that child, that baby "me," as if there were nothing — no years, no changes, no lost teeth or lost time — between himself and that

unrecognizable infant; he felt himself today, now, in the café, to be the same person who had cried for milk, taken naps, resisted naps, listened to the talking box, watched the blue light, watched the colored light, walked on leaves, crossed words, taken naps again, sat under green glass, smelled cherries, smelled ocean, had an aneurysm, had an astrocytoma, had an amputation, had an Andes Mint. He reflected, finally, on all the old people he had seen come into the Lucca, who shuffled instead of walked, wheezed instead of laughed, who had lost their color, who had lost their moisture, who had withered as a leaf withers from spring to fall and then had withered more, from green to brown to brown-gray, from flexible and stained-glass luminescent to rigid-dry and brittle and opaque, who had withered as a spring leaf turns to a fall leaf turns to a winter leaf turns to flakes, to dust, crushed by the heel of a man who walks on unnoticing, who walks on unknowing into seasons beyond knowing, whose shoe rots off his foot, whose skin rots off his bones, who walks on, stalks on, staggers on, past vigor and volition, who falls on, bowed and curled by gravity, who falls on, falls down, falls; he thought of the old people, and how he had become one of them. And how the younger observer, looking at the washed-out colors, the reined-in steps, the stopped-up gestures, the tics and tremors, listening to the parch and phlegm, to the phrases that must be repeated to them and the phrases that they must repeat, assumes from what he sees and hears that the disappointments of the old must also, internally, take on this thinned, diminished quality, and how the younger observer cannot know that he is very wrong.

The man turned his attention back to the *Times*, but not for long. He had tried his hand at the crossword puzzle, but it had struck him as pointless, so he hadn't finished. The place was quaint, bustling, youthful, and though he knew everything and everyone in it, as unrecognizable to him as he seemed to everyone in the café. Though in his mind he had never left the Lucca, it had changed: and as he had

apparently lost his vividness, his identity, his reality to the people in the café, so had the café lost its reality to him. It was faded and removed from him; it was part of his past. Or not yet part of his past: waves of anticipation continued to swell up and carry him, as if his return to the café hadn't happened yet and could still be looked forward to; and each wave broke into the acknowledgement, the realization, the resignation that his return was now taking place, had already taken place, was all but over; until finally the two joined together, the anticipated return and the knowledge that it had already happened and that there was nothing left to anticipate, into a blunt-faced, hollow, bottom-dropped-out sensation of having wanted something so much and enjoyed it so little that it was as if it had never happened at all. He was like a child who prays all year for a certain Christmas present, who counts down the days, who counts off the minutes, who hangs all the decorations, who sings all the carols, and then, at the appointed hour, does not get his present.

Nu-Nu was nowhere to be seen. The man had been here for an hour, had looked around several times, at first surreptitiously, because he did not wish to seem as if he were soliciting attention, and then openly, because it did not make any difference. The cat had not appeared. Undoubtedly he'd long since been run over during one of his pigeon-hunting forays out on Bleecker Street, and no one else even remembered him.

He thought of asking the owner what had happened to the cat, but he doubted the owner would hear him even if he called him by his name; whether any of them could hear him, or see him, or whether he had become completely transparent, invisible and imperceptible in word or action, to everyone in the café.

It was time to leave. He did not bother getting the check, but put a ten-dollar bill on the table, weighted it down with the sugar dispenser, and departed without saying a word; if anyone had been watching him, the watcher would have seen that the

firmness and decision which had always undergirded the man's movements were gone, that he had hitched and hesitated as he had stood, looking around, and pushed the chair back, and that, despite the slowness with which he moved, he had got the scuffed toe of his shoe caught on the door jamb and stumbled slightly on his way out.

The owner emerged from the kitchen, saw that the customer at Table 8 had vanished, lurched as if to chase after him, then looked down and saw the money, newspaper and half-eaten baba au rhum. As he stood there, gazing out on Bleecker Street, Nu-Nu appeared from underneath the ice-cream freezer where he had been sleeping. Full grown now, neutered, sedate and already beginning to get a little fat, he rubbed his face on the owner's ankles, did not seem to notice that the owner did not seem to notice, found his favorite chair with its circular black vinyl cushion hot from the sun, lay down on it curled up tightly like a frozen shrimp, and went back to sleep.