

Seth Sawyers

Fried Eggs

My lovers suffocate me,
Crowding my lips, thick in the pores of my skin

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Long before she turned out to be a plate of fried eggs, Sarah was a bagel. A toasted everything bagel with cream cheese and tomato. That's still my standard order. I've gotten it in Baltimore, DC, and now Norfolk. And it's not only the bagel itself, still warm from the toaster and wrapped in waxed paper, but the process too. The walk to the counter, the glance at the bins, the order that's simple and confident. Through the whole process, she's beside me, within, rolling her eyes at my jokes, holding my hand.

She was big on food. She loved the Philadelphia roll at the sushi place on Charles Street, was disconsolate for two full hours the time they were out of fresh salmon. I went out of my way to bring her the things she liked and smiled when I thought that her being an actor heightened her senses, made her more aware of what she ate and things like the way I stood when I was drunk (pelvis out and teetering backward). I remember once, after a silly fight about something I don't remember, she made me a dinner of pasta with fresh mozzarella. The noodles were overdone, the wine was cheap, and the tomatoes cut so strangely that they fell apart on the plate before I could get them to my mouth. But I smiled and said it was good and she was none the wiser. She ate everything on her plate, joyous and drunk on the burgundy I poured from an enormous handled jug.

It seems now that I was happy all the time then. We made dates for vegetarian subs without yellow peppers and ate on the bench outside the theater building at school where Sarah spent all her time. We skipped

classes so we could lay naked in my bed, our legs entangled and our arms wrapped around each other's backs, lightly stroking, up and down.

One time I stopped by her place while her roommates were watching ER. I walked into the apartment and three girls pointed toward the hallway. "She's in her room," one said. None of them looked up from the television.

Sarah didn't hear the door open, so I eased my way in and saw a pack of Newports on her desk. She didn't smoke menthols. Didn't smoke anything before she started bumming my Camels. I crept along, listening to Sarah talk to herself. She laughed at one of her jokes that only she knew about. Then she turned and saw me. I folded her small, hard frame in my arms as she hit me on the chest, half-kidding.

Then she did her impression for me. It was for a project in theater class. The guy she chose smoked Newports, and I found out that he had a bad lisp. Or maybe Sarah wanted the guy to have a lisp. I never asked, just sat on her bed with my back against the wall and watched, laughing when she laughed, the tendons in her neck flaring when she squealed and got one just right.

She had a squeaky bed that year, so we made love on the floor of her room that night while her roommates watched TV a few steps down the hall. We moved with great intent but slowly, very slowly. We touched each other's fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, backs, and hips. My belt buckle didn't make any noise when she let it fall to the floor. We breathed quietly, and when I locked my eyes on hers it was the quietest thing I'd ever done. We dropped some pillows on the floor, and I reached up to the bed for a quilt her grandmother had made. I draped it across my back. After a while I pulled it over our heads.

"This is just for us," I whispered.

"I know," she said.

I could just make out her eyes in the dim light, steely blue but sparkling, looking back at me into something I knew only she could see. I noticed, without looking, her lips curled into a smile.

"No one's allowed in here with us," I said.

"I know."

"This is nice," I whispered.

"I know," she said.

Where before jangly nerves ate away at my stomach, everything turned

warm and soft and I knew that I was home. I knew that I had nothing to worry or think about except what was underneath that quilt. My life was there on the floor of this girl's bedroom in the space between where she and I met, and nowhere else. Then I kissed her, and it was dark and warm inside the quilt. That was when I almost said I loved her and when, later, I really did say it, she told me she had guessed as much.

On the weekends, after I graduated, we got coffee and toasted everything bagels with cream cheese and tomato from Sam's in Catonsville. We'd take them back to the town house I shared with three other guys and eat in the living room. When the cream cheese squeezed out between the two halves of her sandwich, Sarah licked it like she would a melting ice cream cone. Then she'd burp and laugh, every time, as if she had never done it before. Afterward she bared her teeth and I checked for poppy seeds.

After a night of double tequila shots at the bar one time, we came back to my house and watched TV with my roommate. When it was time for bed, I gave Sarah a piggyback ride up the steep stairs to my room. She had trouble even hanging on.

"Goodnight, kid," I shouted to Dave, seated on the couch.

Sarah didn't miss a beat. "Goodnight, kid," she said, loud, giggly, and drunken. She laughed without a break until she fell asleep ten minutes later. I fed her Tylenol in the morning and told my boss I had a flat tire when I walked into work an hour late.

Another time that summer, she came in the front door minutes after I laid on the couch for a nap. She was ready to go, ready for a talk, or if I was up to it, a wrestling match. I could see it in her face. While I laid on my stomach, she climbed on my back and let her full weight rest on me. She wiggled around, grinding her hip bones into my butt. I groaned something about sleeping and she sat up so that she straddled me. I kept an eye open and watched her lean back. I felt her hands on my ankle and then she wrenched the sandal from my left foot. The laughter started right away.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," she said.

I faked lazy for a few seconds as she waved the sandal inches from my face. I smelled sweat and damp leather.

"Are you gonna put it back?"

"No." Steady giggling.

I kept my eyes closed and waited to see if she'd take the bait.

"Oh, come on. You're no fun," she said.

She got up and I heard her feet on the hardwood floor, so I pushed myself up from the couch and leapt at her in one motion, arms out. She started so fast that her bare feet slipped. She screamed something and ran through the dining room, through the kitchen, down the stairs, and out the basement door. She laughed her way three or four times around the house before I could tackle her to the grass and tickle her in the spot that let me get the sandal back.

She always said I was mad that time but it never seems that way. We remembered it differently, even back then when we were still together. Maybe she remembered some expression of mine that betrayed a frustration I didn't yet know I had. Maybe she knew somehow that it could never last, that we were in our early twenties and had no idea how perfect things can be so easily tossed aside like newspaper.

But I know what I remember. It was the look on *her* face, the sheer joy I saw when she glanced back and saw me chasing her around the town house on the outskirts of Baltimore, her look that was absolutely content with warm sun on her forehead and the breeze that lifted her shirt up an inch or two from her waist.

I still own the pair of sandals that lets me remember something sweet. Their soles are shot now, worn out, and the leather, like that of an old baseball glove, is stiff from sweat and rubs away at my feet, leaving little raw spots that turn smooth and pink by the end of the summer. Sometimes your stuff is so ripe that a kind of potential energy radiates out from its insides, into your hand and up your arm, and before you know it you're daydreaming. And when I pick up the sandals, I can't imagine buying a different pair, even if they make my feet hurt. I don't care if the history they tell is skewed either. If it's skewed it's because I want it that way. The sandals carry with them the kind of memories that nostalgia bends and shapes for me, and I don't mind.

And sometimes you pick up your histories at their most painful moments. You debate whether they should be left alone, to be buried in the back of the drawer, where you keep all the mementos too valuable to throw away and way too pungent to leave lying around. But then something inside wins out and you relent.

Like eggs, for example. They're common, a staple. If you can't get away