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ARINA

RICHARD GOODMAN

I had to find a new place to live. My girlfriend and I had broken up, and I had to leave the New York apartment we shared. So, I poured through the “Apts. for Rent” section of the *Village Voice* and saw a notice for a sublet on Crosby Street in Soho. Crosby Street in 1980—when all this happened—was a moody, coolly stunning street that ran from Canal Street to Houston Street on Soho’s edge in New York City. The ad was for a summer sublet for a loft. A loft! In Soho! I’d never experienced living in either, but I’d felt the allure ever since I’d moved to New York. Soho, the land of painters.

I went downtown, met the owners—a painter, of course, and his wife—convinced them I was reliable and solvent, and got the place. Just like that. It was a small loft on the fourth floor of a commercial building with two windows that faced the street. It probably wasn’t big enough to legitimately be called a loft—it seemed to be a subdivision of a bigger space—but it had everything I needed while I looked for a permanent place to live. It was furnished, mostly with chairs the owners had found on the street or built, had a small kitchen, a desk, and a bed. I packed two suitcases from the old apartment and moved in for the summer. I would be living in Soho.

It turned out that Soho was the shoulder I could put my head on, the ear that would listen to me. My breakup was with the first woman I had ever lived with. She was smart, kind, funny. She and I lived cheaply and well in a small apartment in the East Village. She believed in me. I in her. We were young and in love. I loved our life, and it confused and saddened me that I would jettison our intimacy and joy. I did, though. She didn’t want to break up. It was all my doing. These were the feelings—sadness and confusion—that I carried with me when I moved away and into that loft on Crosby Street. It all came out in a kind of numbness I felt, as if my nerves had been given emotional pain killers. I walked around in a daze. I was melancholy and lost. I blamed myself, but I couldn’t pinpoint

what part of me had failed and why. Soho was where I began to heal and to try to sort things out.

Back then, Soho was a gritty, mostly undiscovered place. You didn’t go there unless you knew someone who lived there, because it was made up of small factories, not residences. But it had a rough beauty, beginning with its cast-iron buildings. While Soho was occupied during the week with trucks and commerce, and it could be noisy, in the evenings and on weekends, it was nearly empty and quiet. I know—not anymore. But back then, in the late ’70s and early ’80s, yes, it was. So, I could be quite alone with my loneliness, free to roam from street to street in near or even complete solitude, feeling my melancholy nurtured by silence and space. Hearing my own footsteps clack and clomp in loud singularity during an evening stroll was often antidote enough for some feeling of wrack that suddenly overtook me. And it helped, at times, to feel my hurt was the only hurt around, and Soho let me feel that easily.

In particular, this was true of my street, Crosby Street, with its empty longitudinal expanse and its rough cobblestones. At times, there was literally no one walking or driving down this street for close to an hour. I would stand outside my building and communicate with this emptiness. I could sigh deeply, as the heartsick do, and Crosby Street, with great beneficence, ingested my woe, accepted it, seemed to request more. It was constant in its willingness, a big, loyal, mute friend that was always there when I came home alone. I felt especially tender toward the cobblestones. They seemed to me, even in their density, a sort of delicate and vulnerable touch within the context of all this cast-iron strength. There were not a few days when I spoke mentally to these cobblestones which had so obviously been planted by human hands, and I felt very protective toward them.

I would emerge from the subway in the early evening, back from my stint at the advertising agency in Midtown where I worked, to my new neighborhood. I was a citizen

now—temporarily, at least—of Soho, land of painters. I would walk across Prince Street, those formidable cast-iron buildings looming over me in the declining summer light. I was headed for Dean & DeLuca, a gourmet store, where I would buy some food for dinner. I never ate much those days after the breakup, but what I did eat was good. I wanted to do that for myself.

I would buy some of Dean & DeLuca's delicacies—usually a baguette and an exotic cheese with Italian salami. I'd take this with me home to my loft—my loft—on Crosby Street. Because it was summer, the air was usually soft in the evening, and the light had authority until past eight o'clock. It was good to be out among all that architecture, the rare cast-

iron buildings with their hues of ochre, cream, and sienna. When I arrived home, I'd spread my picnic on the table, and I would nourish my soul with lovely things to eat.

I was a citizen now—temporarily at least—of Soho, land of painters.

This was part of what began to heal my heart as I tried to sort matters out and wondered why I had let things go wrong and if I would ever love again. The loft was my haven, a place that at first was unfamiliar to me but that, gradually, felt a good fit, like a prized old coat. I spent many hours there, uplifted, in that room.

I was thirty-five, and I had aspirations to be a writer. I was an advertising copywriter, though, about as far from being a writer as you can get, despite the “writer” the two words share. It's simple: one you do for money, the other you do for love—at least that's how I saw it. I'd tried to write for love now and then, but I'd never gotten far. I'd written stories in college that had won an award, but when I went into the real world, I just stopped. The pen I picked up wrote slogans, not stories. I was paid well for those slogans and commercials, and New York City always offered plenty of tempting ways to spend that money. It always has.

But I was a hooker. I can best explain this by saying that if I were writing an ad for, say, Colgate toothpaste, I would do my utmost to convince you this was the world's best toothpaste. If, suddenly, my ad agency lost that account and by some miracle got the Crest toothpaste account the next day, I would then do my utmost to convince you that Crest was the world's greatest toothpaste. The simple fact that both toothpastes can't be the greatest—not to mention that neither of them might be—wouldn't hinder me at all. Allegiances change literally on, and for, a dime. I used to joke in

moments of light-hearted self-loathing that every morning before I went to the advertising agency my biggest decision was what pair of fishnet stockings I would wear.

I still harbored the idea that I was a writer, though, that my calling in life was to write. When you get to your mid-thirties, however, and you haven't written more than a few stories since college, you can't help but wonder: am I deluding myself? Am I just posing? Am I a fake?

What can I say? Words and books excited me in a way nothing else did. I could feel my body temperature rise, my brain light up, when I thought or spoke about books and writing. I was well aware that the streets of New York were littered with abandoned artistic desires and aspirations. Even though I was unhappy as an ad man, I didn't have the resolve to quit. Still, I wasn't ready to throw in the towel. I had a friend who introduced me to a writers' group. I joined. By doing that, I was forced to write something to present to the group when it came my turn. It was something. It allowed me to keep up hope that I was a writer for love with some sense of authority.

The woman I left had believed in my dreams. She believed I could, and would, write. Few people had, so it further pained me that I had abandoned that support, had thrown it away, like some kind of trash by the curb. I still think about that. What, I wondered, as I walked Soho's streets, was wrong with me?

I didn't know anyone in my building on Crosby Street. I would share the elevator with people now and then, but I stayed pretty much to myself. I never said hello to anyone. If they did to me, I gave the merest reply. I didn't want to engage. They all looked like painters, and I guess I was intimidated. They wore cheap clothes that somehow were stylish. Some had paint-splattered pants or bib jeans. A few had children. I always felt preppy, like I'd stepped out of a Brooks Brothers catalog. I guess I had.

Then one day I met her in that same huge elevator—at least twice as big for just people living in this small building and clearly used for commercial purposes. Arina. I got on at my floor, to go down, and she was there. She looked at me and spoke:

“Are you taking loft of Michael this summer?”

“Uh, yes,” I said. “I am. Sublet.”

“I hope they don't charge you too much.”

She wore her hair short, a wide blade of which cut across her forehead on a sharp angle. Her smile was open and ready, like a child's. And that voice. She had a black-bread-thick accent—Russian, I

thought it must be, and it turned out I was right. She dropped everything that was superfluous about English—articles, for instance.

“No, well, I don’t think they did.”

I introduced myself.

“I am Arina,” she said. “I know Michael long time.”

The elevator reached the first floor. There was no lobby, just a small area with wall mailboxes.

“You come for party or to eat something,” Arina said. “I will tell you when.”

“Sure, yes. That would be great. Uh, what floor do you live on?”

“Six.”

“How will I get in touch with you?”

“I will knock on door,” she said, as if that were absurdly obvious. Then she laughed, and it seemed I heard that crackling in the chest that comes from heavy smoking. I stole a quick glance at her right hand and saw her fingertips were stained yellow, like varnish. We walked outside into the sunlight.

“I must to buy paint,” she said.

“You’re a painter?”

“Da,” she said. “Painter.”

She smiled and turned and walked south on Crosby toward Canal Street, I was certain on her way to the storied Pearl Paint Store. Most painters in New York went to Pearl Paint to buy their supplies, sooner or later. They were pilgrims going to a shrine. I even knew about Pearl Paint. I would go there myself, from time to time, even though I wasn’t a painter. It was so much fun to be there. It was four or five floors of everything to do with painting—brushes of all sizes, tubes of paints with colors I’d never heard of, easels, frames. The wide wooden stairs creaked appealingly as you explored each floor. I wanted to buy everything, even though I could barely draw a stick figure. Such an array!

I waved goodbye to Arina as she walked away.

I had all but forgotten about her invitation when one day, a week or so later, she knocked on my door. It was around ten o’clock at night. I found out she was a night owl, and, for her, the night, at ten o’clock, was hardly beginning. I opened the door.

“Richard. I’m having party Saturday. You must come.”

“Well, okay. Sure. What time?”

“I don’t know. Maybe five.”

“In the afternoon?”

“We start early. We go until there is no one left.”

“Great. Thanks.”

She looked past me into the loft. “You don’t move nothing?”

“No, no, it’s their place.”

“So? Move things for you. It’s your place for next three four months.”

I smiled. “I’ll think about it.”

“Are you with woman?” she asked.

“No, not now.”

“I see if I can find you woman,” she said. Then she turned and left.

I went to work the next day buoyant. I was going to a party Saturday night. A party in a painter’s loft! I felt like I’d been given official Soho citizenship. Soho was, after all, settled by painters when it was an untamed frontier. The painters were the intrepid ones. The pioneers. They fought the early battles with the city and landlords for the Certificate of Occupancy—that coveted document that declared you could live in a commercial building—and those battles were often long, costly, and ugly. It was no joke to be in that first wave. Many were bloodied.

That invitation carried me through the next days as I wrote ads for an insurance company, an airline, and god knows what else. Just let me get to the weekend, I told myself.

I rang Arina’s bell at 6:30 that Saturday. I was nervous and excited. She opened it and smiled.

“Richard!”

“Hello.”

“Come in, Richard.”

I walked inside. The room was large, spilling with light. This was a genuine loft, unlike mine. Half of it was filled with furniture, and the other half was empty except for a tall standing easel upon which was mounted an unfinished painting. This half-emptiness of the loft made the furnished area seem like the set of a play. It was as if at any moment stagehands might come in and move the tables and chairs around. A group of people was already there talking loudly away. I could hear Russian and English blended, filling the air. There was a piano in one corner, and a young man with dark blond hair and horn-rimmed glasses was playing furiously—some classical music I didn’t recognize. The man, who seemed to be about twenty-five, looked vaguely familiar, but I was sure I’d never seen him before, and that seemed strange.

The vastness of the place! I never saw this kind of stratosphere in Greenwich Village apartments, for example. There was so much space and light I felt like I was outdoors, like the place could have its own sunrise. There were no walls where walls would normally be, where the eye would be stopped. It was deliriously disorienting. There was a long, heavy table next to the far wall, and on it was a bounty of food—weighty hors d’oeuvres with plates of cheeses and bread. There were also six or seven opened bottles of vodka and as many bottles

of wine. People poured drinks and piled food on paper plates. It was hard to take everything in. This was not an advertising crowd.

“Richard, I want you to meet Zbarsky,” Arina said. She grabbed my arm and hauled me over to a tall thin man with reddish hair and a sharp-angled face. He had a cigarette in one hand and was gesturing with it flamboyantly, painting the air with smoke as he talked.

“Zbarsky!” Arina said. “Meet Richard. From downstairs Michael’s loft.”

The man stopped talking and looked down at me. Then in a sonorous musical voice he said, “Michael loft? I thought he subtlet to woman.”

“No, Zbarsky,” Arina said.

He smiled and stuck out his hand.

“I am Felix Zbarsky,” he said.

I told him my name.

“Are you painter?” he asked.

“No, writer.” Pause. “Well, I want to be.”

“Writer? Good! We have already too many painters!”

Later, I learned that Felix Zbarsky was a highly regarded painter. But at that moment, he was simply a smiling, booming-voiced Russian to me.

I walked among the crowd of people and heard the Russian language everywhere, in loud melodic exchange. Such a tongue. It emanates from deep in the chest, dark and rich. The voices thundered; they could carry across steppes. Everyone looked interesting. I might have been a stranger in a strange land, but I loved it. There were children, too, running about. They were delightful and slightly intimidating, these boys and girls raised in Soho. At least back then, when I lived there. For them—especially as they grew old enough to understand a bit of the world—art, and the struggle to make art, was normal. Their parents made art, and their parents’ friends did, too. The kids came home from school to canvasses and paint and the exuberant, slightly desperate life of creation everywhere. The children looked feral with long hair a little disheveled. Their eyes were alive with a penetrating confidence. They knew Manhattan, or this part of Manhattan, these urban native boys and girls, and they were completely at ease with the city. I saw there were other ways of being a family.

Arina had two large dogs, boxers, with tawny coats and drooling dark maws who traveled about the room together nudging your legs and sniffing. They came up to me.

“This is Pushkin,” Arina said, stroking one. “And this—Gogol,” she said, pointing to the other. “They are sisters,” she said, laughing. It was tricky for them to be dogs on the sleek old wood floors. If they

chased each other, their legs would splay out, like first-time skaters.

“Who is that man playing the piano?” I asked her. He looked unhappy as he pounded away expertly.

“He is Dmitri Shostakovich.”

“What? Dmitri Shostakovich? I thought he was dead.” I didn’t even think of how ridiculously young the man was, how impossible that he be Shostakovich.

“That is grandson.”

“Really? Dmitri Shostakovich’s grandson? The great composer?”

“Sure. Why not?”

I looked more closely at him. Yes, there was that classic visage—those thin lips, brown glasses, nearly squarish head, tall forehead, all softened by another generation, but there nonetheless. The music he unhappily played, I learned, was his own.

And that phrase seemed to me to be the essence of my existence that summer in Soho: *Why not?* Walk into a loft and why wouldn’t you find Dmitri Shostakovich’s grandson, or anyone else for that matter? And you would. I looked around the room at all the people. I wanted to be Russian right then and there. I took a small glass and poured some vodka into it. This seemed a good way to start. The liquid looked like water but was far more dangerous. I started to drink, but Zbarsky stopped me by putting a hand on my arm.

“You must toast something!” he commanded.

“Toast?”

“Da.”

I thought for a moment and looked around the room. Something came to me, inspired by the throng of painters and the poetic melodies of Russian words.

“Quiet!” he bellowed with a wave of his flag-like arm. “Richard gives toast!” His voice stopped all talking. No one knew me, but the room waited.

“To art!” I shouted. I raised my glass.

Zbarsky smiled. He turned to face the people in the room. He raised his own glass.

“To art!” His voiced covered the room.

The crowd answered, raising glasses, “To art!” And then he drained his drink in one great, authoritative gulp.

I walked around the rest of that evening in a trance. I bathed in the music of the Russian language and Russian-inflected English. Everything was grand and flamboyant and there was much laughter and good-natured shouting. I went home to my loft late that night reeling with contentment. I pretended I was Russian as I climbed into bed. I was a writer! *Richard Goodmanovitch*. Da! “Why not?” as Arina would say with a shrug.

I carried this exuberance inside me when I went to work in midtown Manhattan on the following Monday. But nothing will kill that kind of excitement quicker and surer than a New York City office building. Mine was on Third Avenue near 50th Street, a tower of tall steel and black glass. These are buildings where people like me, some of whom wanted to be artists, would quote poets in their head, like a layman's rosary, as the elevator took them up to their day. This elevator wasn't filled with impoverished Hemingways, though. It was filled with earnest, focused men and women who stood silently together, like rows of cigarettes in a pack. By the time I reached my floor, I was a Brooks Brothers man again. All I could think about during the day was my loft waiting for me and the exotic country I lived in, Soho. But I had to put in my time first. I had to write my ads. I had to sell a bit of my soul.

Arina and I became friends. She introduced me to her friends, other painters, some Russian, some European, some American. She would take me with her to visit them in their lofts. Before I came to Soho, I hadn't met many painters. But through her, I got to know painters, and that was one of the great joys of living in Soho that summer. When I walked into a painter's studio with Arina, I loved seeing the disarray. I loved the tubes of paint that had been strangled empty, lying side by side, tin corpses. I loved the dried globs of paint on palettes or on old tables, the remnants of experiments of mixing colors, trying to match what he or she saw. I liked the appealing chaos of a painter's studio, with all those old coffee cans filled with upturned brushes, small and large, the unframed canvasses they stretched themselves, the in-progress paintings. I never saw an un-messy painter's studio—thankfully. It gave me a jolt of freedom when I saw this wild work. Painting was physical. Everything was action. I always felt more buoyant in a painter's loft—even if I wasn't floored by the work.

My busted romance had thrown me all off. Soho helped right me. I breathed its air, restoratively. I think it might have been that I was exposed so widely to the daringness of the place, to the chances so many of those people who lived there took. They could be thrown out of those lofts at any moment—and some were—lock, stock, and barrel, along with their children and the lives they had built. I was surrounded by the absence of cautiousness in Soho. I saw another way. I saw bravery. I saw resolve.

Gradually, as the summer wore on, my heart began to heal. Despite Arina's offer, I had no desire to be "with woman." I was content being alone.

Besides, I wouldn't have been very good company on a date. No woman wants to go on a date with someone bemoaning a failed romance. So, I just soaked Soho in, walked its streets, inhaled its air, drank in its motley, confident people.

Soho's sparseness also had the simple but startling effect of granting a lot more attention to individuals. This was an incomparable gift. It was not unusual, for example, to see a single person walking on the opposite side of the street, making it just you and him or her, strolling for minutes along together on opposite sides, the only humans around in all this real estate. I never saw people more clearly, more distinctly than in Soho. That meant much to me. It was a form of human contact that was almost intimate—it was certainly private in one respect—and if I didn't actually meet the person walking toward me and then by me, I did feel there was an exchange nevertheless. I can still remember faces and nods and hellos and unabashed eye contact. This contact was my first tentative reaching out for closeness again.

It happened that one of the people in my new writers' group lived in Soho, too, on Broadway, in a loft. He was a Californian, a surfer, who wrote about his bad boy days taking drugs and committing petty crimes. His place was at the top of a series of endless stairs—was it six flights up, or eight? Like a lot of these commercial buildings in which people were living illegally, the elevator was shut down after working hours during the week and on the weekends. Our writers' group met at seven in the evening, so you had to climb those stairs. The loft, with its person-high windows, had a spectacular view of Soho's Broadway. His girlfriend, tall, lithe, long-haired, had enough energy to power all of Soho. She wasn't in the writers' group. She was a photographer. All the men in the group would take surreptitious glances at her as she darted about doing a thousand things. I was jealous of this Californian, of his casual suaveness, of his druggy youth, of his beachy good looks.

Those evenings in his loft weren't fueled by coveting, though. They were fueled by an earnest effort to write. I cheated sometimes, though. I brought work that I had written earlier, sometimes as early as college. I pawned it off as work I was doing now. I felt guilty, but I needed to fulfill my duty to have something to read to the group. I would feel even more guilty if I came up with nothing. I wanted to stay part of the group. I needed it. It was a refuge. I felt strong there.

At the same time, I came more fully into Arina's life. Sometimes she would invite me to her loft on

the weekends during the day. She would serve tea and rye bread with butter. Then we would talk, just the two of us. She would point out a painting she was working on.

“This painting I hate,” she said once, referring to a painting resting on an easel nearby. She painted people, not abstractions.

“Why?”

“It is horrible.”

“But why?”

“Everything is bad. Piece of shit.” She flicked her fingers toward it disdainfully.

I couldn’t see it. I didn’t like every painting she did, but I couldn’t see why one was bad and the other wasn’t. But then, I wasn’t a painter.

“I paint over it.”

I had told her about my aspirations, about wanting to be a writer. Instead, I lamented, I was working as an adman. I can hear my voice now, a child-like whining.

One day, she just bluntly asked me, “Richard, why you writing ads? Why you not writing stories?”

“I don’t know...I....”

“Quit job. Get loft in Soho. Write stories.”

“Yes, yes.” A small wave of fear ran through me.

“So. Do.”

“I will. I will.”

“Da. Now.”

When you think about it, it was simple, wasn’t it? *Quit job. Get loft in Soho. Write stories.* That was all there was to it. But how, I wondered, did Arina live? How did she pay the bills?

“I sell painting,” she said when I asked. “I need sell more,” she said almost indifferently. “I need gallery.” I looked at her. She was so confident. The future didn’t faze her.

The fact is, I wasn’t married, didn’t have kids, wasn’t in any kind of debt. It all came together as I thought about it. I would quit my job, get a loft in Soho and write stories. I would live Arina’s life. If not now, when? I was liberated suddenly. I was—myself. Chance had taken me to this loft in Soho, to this building, and it was leading me out of my malaise and stasis to what I really wanted to be. Was meant to be. Still, I went to my advertising job every day. It’s hard to convey the disdain real writers I met—for that’s how I saw them—had for advertising copywriters. I noticed that copywriters were always trying to latch onto famous writers who had been in advertising—usually briefly—as a way of linking their life with theirs. I did, too. But if you had the resolve and the courage, if you struggled to write your poems or your stories in whatever circumstances you found yourself, none of that mattered.

Advertising would never be relevant. It would never hold any allure.

I did try, as Arina directed me, to write. I’d sit down, mostly on the weekends, and try to write—something, anything. Now that I was in the writers’ group, I had to. I never did that much. I did the minimum. I always had a reason. Reasons were always ready, and waiting, and plausible.

June turned into July. I would have to leave the loft in mid-September when Michael, the loft’s owner, and his family returned from Wyoming where his wife’s family had a cabin. Fairly soon, I had to figure out where I was going to live after they came home and repossessed their loft. Where? Soho, of course! I began looking at the ads in the *Village Voice*—this was years before the Internet—circling this and that. There were many subtleties, but not so many out-and-out rentals. It was still illegal to live in many of these buildings, so it was hard to find wide-open rentals. I kept my eyes and ears open, too, in case Arina or someone else I met there knew of something. That’s how you usually found out about these things.

One day I went up to Arina’s loft to say hello and talk. This was in late July. She didn’t look happy. She didn’t have that usual broad smile.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Fuck art. I hate art.”

“Why? What happened?”

“I find gallery on Avenue B. They like my work. They want to give me show.”

“That’s great, Arina!”

“Fucking assholes take my paintings and don’t give me show. They tell me they change their mind.”

“That’s shitty. I’m sorry.”

“I quit painting.”

“No, no, don’t do that.”

“I must take walk. I need get out. I will see you later, Richard.”

This wasn’t something in a book. It was real, the hope and then the discouragement. The abandonment and the aloneness. The justifications you had to produce every day when things weren’t going anywhere and bills had to be paid. I wished with all my might I could help her. I went back to my loft. It was disorienting to see her so upset, so down. It made me anxious. She was always a pillar of artistic strength, and her desire to quit shook me. The thing is, I didn’t really know what she was made of. I really didn’t know her character.

The next time I saw her, a week or so later, she was the same as always. Upbeat, funny, smiling. When I asked her about the gallery that had gone back on its word, she didn’t know what I meant at

first. Then she simply said, “Fuck Avenue B place. I find another.”

“Can you?”

“They’re all bastards. It’s about money. They all steal you.” She shrugged. “What else can I do? I paint. I always paint.”

July turned into August. I still hadn’t found a loft to rent. Midway through August, I realized I had exactly one month left before I had to leave. I started to panic. And then something began to come over me. I didn’t understand it at first. I guess if I were to try to describe it now, looking back so many years later, I’d say it was probably like what it’s like to freeze to death—or at least how I imagined it. It’s usually described in books as a numbness that begins to creep up your body imperceptibly. It starts with your feet and hands, then travels slowly, but surely, in inches, up your limbs. You don’t even realize you’re freezing, the loss of feeling is so subtle.

This is what happened to my plans. They began to lose their vitality. They started to get numbed. I can see now, looking back, that my resolve to live in Soho lost its intensity, search by search, hour by hour. I was looking less—and with less exuberance—for a loft. And at one point, without noticing—certainly without acknowledging it—I started to look for an apartment in Greenwich Village. The ads I circled were mostly north of Houston Street, not south, in Soho’s domain. This, I knew later, is what the poet C. P. Cavafy described as the moment when a person has to declare “the great Yes or the great No.” Later, I realized there can be more than one of these great yes or no moments. But this was mine, in Soho, in the late summer of 1980.

Reality took over—or what I perceived as reality—and it supplied whatever logic I needed to support my decision. “Hey, I have to find *something*—and soon,” I thought to myself. “If I don’t, I won’t have a place to live at all—Soho or no Soho. And then what’ll I do?”

So it was that I found myself being shown an apartment on West Twelfth Street near Abingdon Square in Greenwich Village one early September day after work. It was a one-bedroom apartment, not large, somewhat dark, without much of a view, but in a lovely part of the West Village. It was a pre-War building, which meant that it was well constructed, solid, inside and out. It had doormen. It was near public transportation. I had always loved that part of Greenwich Village. I didn’t think long about it. I signed the lease. You could write in Greenwich

Village, I declared to myself, and many had! I could name them, these writers. It was a civilized place, a literary place.

Truth be told, I more or less slinked out of my loft on Crosby Street. I packed up early one Saturday morning and took a cab over to my new apartment. I said goodbye to Soho in my mind. I told it I would always remember how well it had treated me. How it had helped me get over my broken romance. How it had showed me a possible path to escape my advertising life. Briefly, I wondered one last time why I hadn’t tried harder to find a loft, so I could remain under its inspiring influence. The way might not be easy or pretty, but it was there. But I hadn’t tried harder.

I was too embarrassed to tell Arina I wouldn’t be living in Soho, that I hadn’t quit my advertising job, that I hadn’t found a loft, that I hadn’t started writing stories seriously. I did leave her a note, though. I put it in front of her door. I don’t recall the exact wording, but I know I thanked her for her generosity and for letting me into her life. I had learned so much from her. She had been so kind to me. But leave Soho I did.

I began my new life in the West Village in the fall, when New York comes into its own. I loved New York in autumn, when the air turns cool and crisp, summer’s heat and humidity is banished, and you walk with a spring in your step. The leaves turned in Central Park, creating a flamboyant palette. The women dressed in wools and tweeds with scarves wrapped around their necks in creative twists and turns. I could walk forever in that sharp air. I did, too, getting to know my new neighborhood. The West Village wasn’t Soho, but it was something just as stirring. I went from one country to another, one domain to another. I fell deeply, hopelessly in love with the West Village. I claimed it as my own.

I continued in advertising. I continued with my writers’ group, too. Every time I went to that loft on Broadway, I would think of those three summer months I lived in Soho. I thought of my old loft on Crosby Street. I thought of the sense of renewal I had there. Of possibility. But after we read and listened to the stories, after the talk and glasses of wine, I went home to Greenwich Village, to my pre-War building. I didn’t belong in Soho anymore. I had given up my citizenship. I had returned all my official documents, as it

The leaves turned in Central Park, creating a flamboyant palette.

were. I was now like everyone else who didn't live there, a visitor.

That's the thing about memory. It becomes more pliable as time goes on. More elastic.

Was it a year later? I don't recall exactly. I was walking to my seven o'clock meeting of the writers' group. This week it was in that sixth- or eighth-floor loft on Broadway, in Soho. It was spring, May, I think. I was expectant, as I always was when I went to the writers' group. It meant so much to me. These two or so hours in the evening amongst writers allowed me to think of my advertising life as temporary, even though it now stretched more than seven or eight years. Even though there was the next day, when I would trudge off to that Midtown glass tower and write for money. I still had those two precious hours.

I crossed Houston Street, the northern frontier of Soho. I walked down West Broadway, Soho's main thoroughfare. I turned left on Prince Street and headed toward Broadway. The evening was cool, pleasant. I soaked in the familiar cityscape, my eyes going upward when I passed buildings I knew and had great affection for. There was no place like it, I thought, this realm.

**That's the thing
about memory.
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More elastic.**

Then I saw her. Arina. She was walking toward me. So unmistakable. That short hair, a swath of which cut across her forehead. I saw the face I had come to know so well and which made me smile every time

I saw it. I hadn't seen her since I left Soho. I was too embarrassed to contact her after the way I'd left without saying goodbye. I'd thought of her, of course. I'd thought of all the times I'd been to her loft and laughed and drank more vodka than I should have and been uplifted by her talk and by the painters I met and by their exuberance and courage. That stayed with me.

She came closer, and I called out, "Arina!"

She looked around for the source of her name, and then she saw me. She smiled. My world opened. My heart was glad.

"Richard!" she said and began to laugh. We came together. I was in her presence again.

"Arina, it's so nice to see you! How are you?"

"Richard, why you no call me? Why you not come by loft?"

"I know. I know. I should have. I'm sorry."

"My friends ask, 'Where is Richard? Is he dead?'"

"No," I laughed, "I'm not dead. You can see."

"Da. I see."

"How goes the painting?" Suddenly, the great inspiration that Soho had been that summer welled up inside me.

"Painting is okay. I have gallery."

"You do? That's fantastic."

"It's okay. They steal from me. But what can you do?"

"How is Zbarsky?"

She shrugged. "Zbarsky is Zbarsky."

"What about Pushkin and Gogol?" For some reason, I wanted to know about her dogs.

"Okay. Pushkin is getting old. I take her to vet a lot."

I noticed her fingertips were still stained yellow.

"Richard, you writing stories?" she asked.

A wave of awkwardness swept through me. I could feel myself beginning to think of a lie.

"Yes. Yes. I'm writing."

"You still have job in advertising?"

"Yes. But I'm going to quit." There was no skeleton in the answer, no muscle and bones.

"Why you no get loft in Soho? Quit job. Write stories."

"I know. I know. I'm trying to write now. I am."

"Richard. Come here. Come to Soho."

"We'll see. I'll think about it."

"There is nothing to see. Come to Soho."

I started to feel uncomfortable and a little annoyed.

"Yes, I know. I hear you."

She smiled and edged her face toward one of my ears.

"Maybe you need doctor to check your ears."

I laughed. She smiled a big Arina smile.

"You come by loft for tea," she said. "I show you my new paintings."

"I'd love that! Just tell me when."

"Come when you want. I'm there always."

"I will. I miss you. I miss Soho."

"What you doing here?"

"I'm going to my writers' group. We meet in a loft on Broadway."

"Da. Go write."

"I will."

"I must go meet someone," she said.

"Sure. Go ahead. It was so great to see you, Arina."

She smiled. "Come by loft. Soon."

"Yes. I will."

"Goodbye, Richard."

She walked away and crossed West Broadway and continued walking west on Prince Street. I watched her as she became smaller and then, after a while, I could see her no longer. Then I turned and walked the other way. ●