



With New Eyes

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MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE UNITED STATES began when I was eight. It didn't take much, just a couple of black-and-white photos that I found at the bottom of a wardrobe. One was of my father's aunts, Bridget and Elizabeth, taken in the 1930s. They had emigrated from Ireland to Amsterdam, New York, a mill town on the sloping banks of the Mohawk River. Smiling, slightly portly women, they stood in front of a row of brick houses with big windows and steps up to the front door. They wore hats and white gloves, and linked arms in the dappled sunshine. The other was of Elizabeth's son, Willis. He was dressed in a boy scout's uniform of shorts and a shirt, yet he stood ankle deep in pristine snow that sparkled in the sunlight. Those photos told me all I needed to know—in America, the sun always shone, snow wasn't cold, everyone lived in big houses with freshly painted porches, all families were happy, and that damp-fed moss that crept over everything in Ireland was nowhere to be found. I was smitten.

When my family got a television set, America came to life in our living room. Through shows and films that were decades out of date in the US, I learned that America wasn't just clean and bright; it was free. In Ireland, a woman's primary duty as a homemaker was enshrined in the constitution. Poverty and the Catholic church kept everything closed in and battened down; life seemed suffocating, particularly for women. But on the other side of the Atlantic, my favorite actress, plucky, beautiful Jean Arthur, who grew up not too far from Amsterdam, barged her way through her celluloid world afraid of no man. There were no walls she couldn't climb—in a beautifully tailored suit with matching hat. James Stewart's Mr. Smith went to Washington to fight for the rights of poor people, and he won. Because, in America, good always triumphed over evil, and even poor people wore clothes that fit.

Later, a darker side of the United States filtered through. Ireland's only radio station played Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie—the music of social justice. Kent State, hippies, the magnificent Angela Davis filled the news, right after coverage of the daily bombings and shootings in Northern Ireland, sixty miles away. On TV, I watched grainy images of civil rights protests in the deep South, sit-ins, and bodies crushed by the force of water from fire hoses. On the Edmund Pettus Bridge, unarmed marchers dressed for church were bludgeoned by White state troopers. But President Johnson took a righteous stand. The Voting Rights Act followed. And in 1976, as I took a seat on my first ever flight to the United States, Black Americans seemed to have achieved equality, something Catholics in Northern Ireland would not get for another twenty-three years.

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And so in June of the bicentennial year, I stepped down from a Greyhound bus into what was once the vacation capital of the United States—Atlantic City, New Jersey. I had just turned twenty-one. Americans wished each other Happy Birthday in 1976. It was also the year Jimmy Carter was elected president and Atlantic City legalized gambling. It was eight years before Donald Trump opened his first casino on the boardwalk. I had an address of a boarding house on St. James's Place, and as I wandered through town without a map, I could feel a tangible sense of possibility. It was there in the crystal light, the same light that dappled the black-and-white photos of my great aunts and glowed from the Jean Arthur movies that I loved. It was in the sea air, in the bright summer clothes everyone wore, in the shops I passed where people bought so many things without, it seemed, considering the price of anything. Possibility of what? It never occurred to me to ask. It didn't matter. It was enough to know that at last there was possibility.

“Get outta my neighborhood!” a woman yelled from above.

I had stopped to rest beside a yellow brick building. On the top floor, a black face framed by Angela Davis hair leaned out the only open window. She looked straight at me.

“Go back where you belong,” she yelled again, then slammed the window shut.

My first thought was that I must have done something wrong, broken some American rule I didn’t know existed. Was she in her apartment right then calling the police? Panic bloomed in my stomach. Maybe I should never have come here? But I was lost and over-heated, and the straps of my orange backpack were cutting into my shoulders. Pain brought focus. I spotted a boxy looking restaurant beneath towering yellow arches and headed toward it. Surely someone there could give me directions.

St. James’s Place, it turned out, was only a few blocks away. A short street sandwiched between New York Avenue to the south and Tennessee to the north, it was lined with multi-story boarding houses in shades of yellow and cream. The ground floor of each house abutted the footpath; the floors above were further back so that the roof of the ground floor became a large, railed porch. Here and there on the porches, people sat in groups, smoking, talking, playing cards. They were mostly older people, boarding house managers or owners perhaps, waiting for the summer season to begin. I climbed the stairs of one of the houses and asked if they had any vacancies.

“Where’re you from?” one of the women asked. Her skin seemed excessively wrinkled, her lacquer-rigid hair too dark for her age. I would later learn that the bright, shapeless dress she wore was called a muumuu. Definitely not Jean Arthur. She was the house manager and yes, she had vacancies. I paid a week in advance and hauled my backpack up to a tiny room with a view of the side of the house next door. In the next couple of weeks, the boarding house would fill up with Irish students, many of whom I knew from college.

“Can you waitress?” the manager asked me that evening. I’d worked “below stairs” in a well-

known Dublin restaurant—Bewley’s Oriental Café. In Bewley’s you had to work your way up the hierarchy to waitressing. I washed dishes and scrubbed floors, and broke an inordinate number of plates, but I never got anywhere near server status.

“Yes,” I replied, “I can waitress.” She advised me to get up early the next day and go door to door on the boardwalk. Just walk in and ask for a job.



St. James Place and New York and Tennessee Avenues were the orange streets on the original Monopoly board, valued at \$180 each. At the eastern end of St. James Place, ramps lead up to the boardwalk—at \$400 the most expensive property in Monopoly. The boardwalk’s wooden thoroughfare runs the entire length of Atlantic City’s coastline, the boards laid out in an attractive herringbone pattern. On its eastern side, beyond a wide sandy beach, the Atlantic Ocean stretches, sometimes gray, sometimes blue to the horizon.

That was where, the next morning, I began my job search. Because I found it so difficult to just walk into a place and ask for work, I was easily distracted by everything around me. Many of the old hotels were still there. I took my time admiring the redbrick Claridge’s where Marilyn Monroe once stayed, and the Marlboro-Blenheim where Winston Churchill resided when he was in town. Domed, turreted, towered, some capped with precipitously sloping roofs, I could see how the boardwalk once lived up to its premier position on the Monopoly board.

I tried to imagine what it must have been like twenty, thirty, fifty years earlier: elegant women in floaty sun dresses and matching shoes, arm in arm with handsome young men, their hair neatly cut, buying ice creams, saltwater taffy, and tickets to the amusements on the piers that jutted out into the Atlantic. But I didn’t see anyone like that. The people strolling by were often overweight and wore shorts, t-shirts, and cheap flip-flops. Some shop fronts were still delightfully old fashioned with striped awnings and a distinct art deco vibe, but most traded beneath plastic signs in garish red and yellow. A dizzying array of souvenirs,

beachwear, postcards, and taffy spilled out onto the wooden street. Everything looked tired—in need of fresh paint, perhaps, or fewer plastic signs. But jaded as it was, I loved this worn-out piece of the country that had captured my imagination since childhood.

A couple of hours later, I stopped in front of a five-story, pale-colored building on the corner of Ocean Avenue. Above the sheet-glass windows of the ground floor, the word “Woolworth’s” in huge red letters sprawled across a white tile background. That was a name I recognized. There were two Woolworth’s in Dublin. My mother once took me and my brothers out to eat in Woolworth’s cafeteria, a rare and special treat. If Woolworth’s in Dublin had a cafeteria, surely the one in Atlantic City did too.

Familiarity gave me courage. I pushed through the glass doors into a cavern full of everything from a needle and thread to beach supplies and cosmetics. The cafeteria at the back of the shop was quite an elegant affair as cafeterias go with neat little tables surrounded by matching metal-framed chairs. I asked to speak to the manager. Minutes later a handsome Black man in a dark suit, not much taller than my five foot four, approached me. His manner was gentle but businesslike, maybe a little harried.

“Can you waitress?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said. As with the house manager the day before, it wasn’t really a lie; he asked can I waitress, not had I. And with that, I was hired, start the next day, no references, no demands to see my visa. In the neighborhood I came from in Dublin, unemployment hovered around 40 percent. I knew people who had searched for months, even years for work. In Atlantic City it took me a couple of hours to get a job. The rumors were true: in America, jobs grew on trees.

My job at Woolworth’s wasn’t really waitressing. I dished out hot food to the customers lining up for breakfast or lunch and helped keep the food counter stocked. On my second day, when I went to the kitchen for a fresh tray of scrambled eggs, I found out the eggs didn’t come from white or brown shells cracked open and whisked together. They flowed in a pale-yellow stream from a carton. I found the discovery

mildly disturbing and made a mental note not to eat eggs in Woolworth’s.

The cafeteria went through a surprisingly large amount of fresh fruit, which led to another discovery: a huge walk-in refrigerator packed with boxes of melons, apples, grapes, oranges, and strawberries. Always there were strawberries, red and plump at the peak of ripeness. The temptation was too much. Every time I went to the fridge to replenish the fruit on the counter, I ate a few. I wasn’t the only one. As the days passed, I met staff from different departments—dishwashers, cashiers, shop assistants—all in the fridge, all surreptitiously nibbling strawberries.

Over time, we began to talk, snatching conversations as furtively as we snatched fruit until the sound of an approaching manager sent us scrambling for the door. It was there, in Woolworth’s fridge, that I began to notice the many shades of human skin. Ireland in the seventies was an almost all-White country, mainly because it was so poor nobody wanted to move there. The only Black people I saw were African doctors interning in Irish hospitals, or the popular Phil Lynott, a biracial rock singer with an unruly afro and a cheeky smile. Black and brown people were one-dimensional images in books or on TV. In Woolworth’s fridge, they became real.

Jimmy, from Puerto Rico, explained his home to me: an island marooned between statehood and nationhood with none of the advantages of either. Both my parents were White, but year-round my father looked like he’d just returned from intensive sun-bathing on the Mediterranean. Jimmy’s skin was an almost identical shade of warm, golden-tan. Angela, a Native American, spoke with cushiony softness. Her light skin had a slightly gray undertone, and she talked wistfully about riding in the back of a pick-up on “the rez” in Arizona. She had run away a year ago, following a boyfriend east. But now she wanted desperately to go home and was working two jobs to save the bus fare. Rich, a New York City native with Greek parents, was almost as pasty white as me. He said he was just passing through Atlantic City, but he was mysteriously vague about where he would go when summer ended and the jobs dried up. He threw





out words in a rapid-fire, high-energy New York way that I found mesmerizing. Rochelle was dark brown, from Philadelphia, a student like me, in Atlantic City to earn money. She was laser-focused on law school and could talk of little else. For me, this kaleidoscope of human color and sound was the wide-open, everyone-belongs America I'd always imagined.

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Woolworth's was good to me. It paid the rent, but I needed to save for next year's college fees. So one day in late June when my shift ended, I headed south to New York Avenue and the boardwalk, a corner occupied by another iconic shop—McCrorry's. McCrorry's was a huge company with around 1,300 shops. Legend has it that the founder, John Graham McCrorey, dropped the "e" in his last name to save money on signage, and

indeed the shop seemed even more down-market than Woolworth's. McCrorry's sold cheap clothes, shoes, cosmetics, jewelry, a small range of food items, and the ubiquitous beach supplies. A soda fountain ran along the right side wall. A month in Atlantic City had given me the confidence to walk up to the young, fair-haired man behind the counter and ask for a job. He directed me to the store manager.

Chip was from Arizona, transferred to Atlantic City for the summer. He wasn't so much tall as big, a solid mass on the cusp of turning into fat. His thick wedding ring was already sinking into the flesh of his finger. Pointy-toed cowboy boots peeped out from under the hem of his jeans; a turquoise studded belt kept his plaid, western shirt neatly in place. He seemed old to me, which meant he was probably forty, maybe younger. He slowly looked me up and down. Neither of us

liked what we saw, but I needed a second job and he needed a waitress, so I was hired for the soda fountain, afternoon shift.

McCrorry's soda fountain was long. In peak times it needed at least two waitresses with the fountain manager, Dave, operating the grill. Dave showed me the ropes: how to replace the huge bladder of milk in the milk dispenser; how to pour pancake batter from the carton stored in the back room into a silver container so customers would think it was made from scratch; how to put a milkshake together with just the right proportion of ice cream. Milkshakes, sundaes, club sandwiches—these were all new to me, the commonplace ingredients of my rapidly expanding world, and I was there in the middle of it all in a perky little black apron working a soda fountain. Was there anything more American than a soda fountain? I was the young George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, serving shakes and sundaes in Mr. Gower's drugstore. I felt like a child catching a snowflake on the palm of her hand for the first time.

Wanda, an African American Atlantic City native, worked behind the counter with me. She nodded at me when we were introduced. I could see her take stock, but not in the way Chip had. Approval would be too strong a word for what I saw in her I've-seen-it-all-before eyes, but she didn't disapprove either. We were about the same age, she a couple of inches taller, with the kind of muscular, strong body I've always wanted. When she smiled, her dark complexion took on a pretty pink undertone. She smiled a lot and advised me to do the same—"You get more tips that way, girl." But the thing I liked most about Wanda was her don't-give-a-shit attitude. She did her job well and followed management's directions without question, but in a detached, wry way as if she were amused by the endless absurdity of both life and the people who populate it.

In the decades since, I've had close to thirty different jobs, but I have never been so in sync with a colleague as I was with Wanda. We seemed to anticipate each other's moves. If she needed creamer for someone's coffee, I handed it to her without being asked. If I forgot syrup to go with the pancakes I'd just served, she silently left a

container of it next to the customer's plate. We moved effortlessly around each other in the tight space behind the counter. We talked too. I told her about my parents and my brothers. I learned that she lived in town with her parents, that she too had brothers. She had a way of skimming over detail, but it didn't matter. I enjoyed her company so much that life outside the present moment seemed unimportant.

Because of Wanda I looked forward to my afternoons in McCrorry's. We laughed a lot, often at things only we found funny. We laughed at Chip's turquoise belt and the way he strutted around in his cowboy boots. We laughed at the way I couldn't grasp the difference between cream cheese and custard Danishes, no matter how hard I tried.

"When are you going to learn, girl?" Wanda asked, pulling two Danishes out of the pastry cabinet on the counter. "This one's cream cheese. This one's custard. Can't you see the difference?" Before that summer, I'd never seen cream cheese or a Danish pastry, but somehow, this tip-sucking learning block seemed hilarious.

Having been introduced to American ice cream, I developed a passion that would last a lifetime, matched only by Wanda's love of donuts. We worked out ways we could sneak a bit of both. When she got a customer who wanted ice cream, she let me know. I scooped the ice cream for her customer and sneaked a spoonful for myself. When I got a customer who wanted a donut, I returned the favor, keeping watch as she slid a donut onto a plate for my customer, and one into her pocket for nibbling throughout the shift. Our wages were so low, the tips not much better—one customer gave me a religious tract in lieu of a tip "because Jesus is more valuable than gold"—that pangs of conscience about sneaking the odd donut or a spoonful of ice cream were manageable.

Each department of McCrorry's had its own manager, mostly students hired for the summer. That year, the managers on my shift seemed as homogenous as Woolworth's liquid eggs—tall, slim, fair-haired, and male. Some evenings, when the tourists who packed the fountain during the afternoon disappeared into restaurants and hotels for dinner, the shop was quiet enough

to hear the girls who worked the floor and the managers laughing together. They congregated toward the back of the shop—young, vibrant, unfailingly polite, with straight teeth and clothes that fit just so. They never invited Wanda or me to join them after work.

“You want to be with the pretty White boys, don’t you?” Wanda said one evening as we leaned side by side on the empty counter. She was right. I wanted to be included. Being left out burned, like failure. “Why don’t you go talk to them?” she asked. “You’re too shy. Go back there and talk to them. Maybe you all will go out tonight.”

My mood lifted. “Come with me,” I suggested, “we’ll both go . . .” She cut me short with a laugh, then pulled a piece of donut from her apron pocket.

“You want to clean that ice cream fridge? It needs cleaning.”

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And so the summer passed: up early, snatch a quick bowl of cornflakes, head to Woolworth’s, shift over, back to the boarding house for a second bowl of cornflakes. Then I’d strap on the black apron, turn right on the boardwalk and begin my shift in McCrory’s. By August, my waitress uniform was a little loose, and my college fees were in the bank.

Most days were filled with mundane experiences that to me seemed magical—new tastes and smells, new people and places, new friends. The people who thronged the boardwalk came in all shapes, sizes, and types. Some caught my eye. The frail, elderly White couple who shuffled arm in arm along the seaward side dressed as if they were headed to a dinner dance. I fancied they began coming to Atlantic City when the town was still the kind of place where you dressed for dinner. For a couple of days, a beautiful young Black woman in a yellow sundress sauntered alone past shops and restaurants, rarely going into any of them. She turned heads, but nobody turned hers. I liked to think of her as serene and self-contained rather than lonely.

One couple, a few years older than me, stood out. They lived in the boarding house across the street. As the bank of cash registers in McCrory’s was directly across from the soda fountain, I

occasionally spotted them there buying snacks or drinks. The woman was tall and slim with long, platinum hair that gleamed in the sunshine. Her creamy complexion contrasted starkly with the tanned bodies around her, and somehow, the way she held herself, her willowy, pale elegance made the pursuit of a tan seem crude. Her partner was even taller, and as black as she was white. Toned without being overly muscled, he seemed totally at home in his body and carried himself with a dignity that reminded me of Sidney Poitier in every film he ever made. Individually, they were beautiful. Together, they were stunning, like a work of art, a perfectly executed study of light and shade. And for two such beautiful people, they seemed devoid of arrogance or vanity.

One golden afternoon toward the middle of August the counter in McCrory’s was full of customers. A woman—probably in her fifties, maybe sixty—took the last open seat at the edge of my section. I still remember her hair—gray, with a slight curl, pulled back loosely behind her ears. I remember her face—make-up free with high, sculpted cheekbones. After giving her the usual few minutes to peruse the menu, I approached, order pad and pen in hand.

“I’ll have coffee and a cheese Danish,” she said, and smiled pleasantly.

The coffee was easy. But the Danish! Why did she have to ask for cheese? Why not a fruit I could recognize? I opened the pastry case, my hand hovering between the two options—cheese, custard. I picked one, placed it on a little plate, and put it on the counter beside her coffee. She looked at it, then looked up at me.

“What do you young people think you’re trying to prove?” she hissed. Her question seemed bizarre, but it was the manner in which she spoke that rattled me. The venom in her voice was well out of proportion to the sin of serving the wrong Danish, but I couldn’t think what else I’d done wrong.

“I’ll get you another one,” I said, pulling the plate back and thinking I better ask Wanda to double check the replacement pastry. But the woman ignored my fumbling and stared straight at me.

“What do you young people think you’re

trying to prove?” she repeated and jerked her head backward toward the cash registers. I followed the line of her movement. There, at the register, the Black and White couple that lived across the street from me were in the process of paying for snacks and what looked like a beach towel.

I stared at the couple for a few seconds, then looked back at my customer. She nodded her head as if to say, “Yeah, now you get it.” And I did, in my stomach, a tight, sickening sensation like the world had just turned on its head. Then a voice in my mind, calm as a college professor explaining an equation, said, *You’ve heard of racism, well this is what it looks like.* It looked like the triumph on my customer’s face when I finally understood that in her America, interracial love was not only taboo, it was abhorrent. And triumph turned her otherwise pretty features so ugly that I could barely look at her. I wrote out her check, slipped it onto the counter, and busied myself with the grill.

For me, black and white were just words, colors, or as I learned in science class, not even colors; black was the absorption and white the reflection of all light, two facets of the same process. But there at the grill in McCrory’s, the words I’d always taken at face value sank under the weight of a history uglier than the hatred on my customer’s face. And it changed forever the way I saw the world; that couple would never again be just two people with movie-star looks who bothered nobody. They were a Black man and a White woman. Wanda would never again be a colleague with whom I shared a sense of humor and an irreverence for authority. She was a Black colleague. Black. And I was White.

A lot of things came clear as I jabbed a scraper at non-existent grease on the already clean grill: why, on my first day, the Black woman in the window was so angry that she yelled at a complete stranger to get out of her neighborhood; why Wanda’s odd remarks about pretty White boys always seemed to conceal the sharp edge of something unsaid; why she laughed when I suggested we both join the group of staff at the back of the shop; why the residents of my boarding house were all White and that Black and White couple was the only interracial couple I saw that summer. And I wondered what

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—Marcel Proust

level of innocence, or naiveté, or stupidity had shadowed my eyes for the past twenty years.

“You deal with her!” I hissed at the manager when he pointed out that my customer was waiting to pay. He opened his mouth to say something, then did as he was told.

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Travel is an external act, a sequence of actions leading to a destination that in my case had been predetermined since childhood. But travel is also a journey inward, and it’s the journey that, in big or small ways, transforms us. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust wrote: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in seeing with new eyes.” That August, I used some of my savings to buy a thirty-day Greyhound bus ticket and left Atlantic City the same way I arrived—on a red, white, and blue bus. As we sped along the New Jersey Turnpike through scenery that, many years in the future, would become the opening sequence of *The Sopranos*, I still had destinations in mind. I thought about where the bus would take me—the wheat fields of Kansas, the Rocky Mountains, maybe I’d even see the Pacific for the first time. But my journey was already complete. I knew I could never unsee what I’d seen that day in McCrory’s, and I wondered what homogeneously White Ireland was going to look like when I saw it again with new eyes. ✱