

THE CANDLESTICK

By Carla Miriam Levy

She was diminished when I finally met her. Her skin had gone gray and leathery, her face canyoned by decades of smoking and scowling. I had seen pictures of her from the early 1950s, squinting mischief-eyed into the camera, when her hair fell blunt and shiny over a heavy intelligent brow and her long cheeks sloped smoothly toward a strong jaw. Even in the still photographs her mouth seemed to twitch, as though biting back an acerbic remark.

By the time she moved into my building, though, the acid was all that was left. Her eyes had shrunk to hard pebbles that took in the world with suspicion. And she was terribly thin, wasted by the cancer and the liver disease. “I hardly eat any more,” she told me once, when I stopped by her apartment to bring her a baguette and some cheese from Zabar’s. “Jesus, it’s Vacherin. I used to eat this in Freiburg,” she added, using the German name for one of the Swiss towns she’d lived in, not the more common French name. “Did you bring my cigarettes?”

I hadn’t recognized her the first time I saw her in the building, when I held the elevator door for her as she creaked across the lobby. The shopping bags that dangled from each hand seemed to stretch her arms and buckle her broad shoulders into a painful-looking arch. “Let me carry those for you,” I said, as she stepped into the elevator.

She looked at me levelly, appraising me with wide set, narrowed eyes that roused an old longing I couldn’t quite place. I thought she might be someone I had met in the building when I was a child, when my grandmother lived in the apartment that I lived in now. But that couldn’t account for the slippery intensity of the memory prodded by her gaze.

“If you like,” she said. She let the bags slump to the floor, and I heard the unmistakable muffled clink of shuddering liquor bottles. She turned away from me and barked out a brief, rattling cough.

The elevator lurched to a stop, and I took up the shopping bags. I followed her to the door of her apartment. She turned to take the bags from me, and suddenly I knew where I had seen her. When I was 12, I had come across an old edition of her first book in my grandmother’s apartment. I had gazed at her picture on the dust jacket, studying her face and her old-fashioned hairstyle, a bob curled under at the ends. Her dark eyes stirred something in me that at the time I did not understand. I had wanted to be her, to step into the picture and become that woman with her chin resting confidently on folded arms. But I had wanted something else, too, something that kept drawing my eyes back to her broad lips.

I handed her the shopping bags and stood dumbly in her doorway for a moment, jumbled up in a child’s confusion. She watched me with an air of dwindling patience. “I’m Emily Carter,” I finally managed. “I love your books.” She attempted an acknowledging smile, and I went on, dry-mouthed. “People usually just call me Carter. I live upstairs, and down the hall.” I waved a pointless hand in the rough direction of my apartment. “Well. Listen, let me know if you ever need anything.”

I began bringing things for her—a babka, a bottle of sherry, a liver pâté—just to have a reason to talk to her. Sometimes, in the morning, I helped her into the taxi that took her across town to her treatments at Memorial Sloan Kettering.

“Do you want me to come with you?” I asked on impulse one Saturday.

“No,” she said. “What would I want that for? I’m a big girl. I can go to the doctor all by

myself. Leave me alone.”

The following Saturday, I asked again. This time, she just said, “No. Go away.” I went around to the other side of the taxi and got in beside her. For the whole drive across the park, she sat slumped in her seat with folded arms, staring out the window. But she did not complain.

It was hard to believe she had once stood almost six feet tall.

My grandmother had found me, that day when I was 12, gazing at the book. “You don’t want to read that, Emily,” she said. “It’s no book for a little girl, all full of murders and whatnot.” But I stayed up far too late three nights in a row and read it. It was about a man who became fixated on another man, determined to win his friendship, and when he failed at that he killed the man and stepped into his identity. It wasn’t the violence that thrilled me. It was the terrifying idea of desiring something with enough force to annihilate it.

For Chanukah that year I asked my parents for more of her books. “Where on earth did you hear of her?” my father asked, frowning. “I don’t know if you should be reading that kind of stuff at your age.” But my parents gave me the books. Each one dug into different soil but they all came up with the same worm, the worm of obsession that eats a person from the inside out. She was a master of sticky ideas that cling to you against your will and better judgment, toxic ideas that damage the mind in which they dwell. I read her books again and again, gripped in equal parts by fascination and revulsion.

The book she wrote about a girl who falls in love with an older woman, *The Candlestick*, I did not read until I was a little older. And then I did not know it was hers, for it had been published under a nom de plume.

I asked her about it once, as we sat at the table crammed in a corner of her kitchen, smoking the muddy French cigarettes she had asked me to get for her from Village Cigars. “Why didn’t you publish it under your real name?”

“Don’t be daft,” she said. “I was a rising star, you know. That Jew publisher stood to make a lot of money off of me and didn’t want my name connected with a book about lesbian perverts.”

I let the word *Jew* slither past, not for the first time.

“It’s not a perverted book,” I said, stupidly.

“Things in the fifties weren’t like they are now,” she said, eyeing me as though trying to appraise how thick I really could be. “We had a lot to worry about. We weren’t like you kids who just waltz down Bleecker Street holding hands and kissing in the subway.”

I told her about the time, my senior year in high school, when some guy had seen me kissing my girlfriend in Central Park and had chased us all the way out to Fifth Avenue hurling rocks and curses.

“You were idiots,” she said, a judge passing final sentence. “If I had tried a stunt like that, I’d have gotten myself killed.”

After that, she said she wanted to write a new book, another story about lesbians. “It’s your fault,” she said. “After all these years, you got me thinking about it.” I was giddily, ridiculously flattered. I helped her haul her ancient Hermes typewriter from the trunk it had been packed in for her move back from Switzerland, stashed away in a tiny storage locker in the roach-infested basement of our building. I set it up for her on the kitchen table and brought her creamy paper from a stationery store on Broadway. She did not write much, though. Week after week when I came to see her I saw the same page caught in the rubbery grip of the Hermes’s roller. I imagined the page twisted out of the Hermes one day, bent double as she was, and forever unfinished.

“Why do you call yourself Carter?” she asked me once. I had stopped by early on a Saturday afternoon, and made her some tea. I drank the tea. She drank vodka.

“It’s my name,” I said.

“Your *first* name is Emily.” She said it like an accusation.

“I like Carter better than Emily,” I said. “It suits me better.”

“That’s the difference between your generation and mine. We didn’t pretend we were men.” She looked me up and down with her watery eyes. I felt naked in my torn jeans, my plaid flannel jacket, my thick-soled army boots. But the hard line of her mouth softened a little. “Is that what you’re going to wear on your date tonight?”

It was a first date, and I planned to take the woman to a French restaurant in Soho. “No,” I said. “I have black jeans that aren’t ripped, and a blazer. And a necktie.”

She nodded, looking through me into the past. “I used to press a crease into my trousers, do you know that? I always liked to look sharp.” Her gaze snapped back to me, once again hard as glass. “In those days the uptown restaurants wouldn’t let me in. They would not even seat a woman in trousers.”

“I can’t imagine what you had to put up with then, just to live your lives.” It sounded like pablum, like cotton wool. I did not have the words.

“That’s why I moved to Europe,” she said. “Nobody gave me that kind of bullshit in Europe. Nobody cared what I wore or who I slept with. They cared about what I wrote, that’s all.”

She had moved back from Switzerland, after something like 30 years, to get more aggressive treatment for the cancer.

“They’re bleeding me dry,” she said, “those bastard Jew doctors. They’ll keep me alive just long enough to take everything I have, and then they’ll let me die. I know it.”

It occurred to me that she didn’t know I was Jewish. My name had fooled her.

“What do you have against Jews?” The question felt like edging toward a crumbling cliff.

“I don’t have anything against them,” she said. “I just know what they’re after.”

I was too queasy to look over the edge, so I backed away. “I’ll stop at Village Cigars tonight and get you some more Galoises, all right?” God, I was a coward.

A few days later, she said, “You’re a good kid, Carter. You’re not like all those fans who just want to get something from me.”

“I am your fan,” I said. “I have been since I was a kid.”

She pointed her cigarette at me. “You’re different. Did I tell you about the girl in France who asked me to sign some books for her friends? Later I learned that she had turned around and sold them. *Sold them*. ‘Pour mes amis,’ she told me.” She mocked the French words in a mincing, nasal voice. “Dirty little liar.”

Her features pinched together in the center of her face and she began coughing. Her body twisted into itself, her shoulders convulsing. I rose to get her a glass of water and waited with my head down. I had seen it enough times by now to know there was nothing to do but wait it out. After a long minute the attack subsided, though her choking and gasping abraded me raw.

“I’m fine,” she said, hoarse as a desert wanderer. She waved me and the water off. “Sit down. You didn’t tell me about your date. How was it?”

“It was good,” I said, still hovering with the glass of water.

“Sit down, damn it.” I did. She leaned toward me. The coughing fit had squeezed tears from her eyes, and they gleamed. “Did you go to bed with her?”

My ears burst into flame. “No.” I sounded defensive and childish. I added, “I kissed her

goodnight.”

“So what happened, the kiss wasn’t any good?”

“It was very good. It was great. I like her a lot.”

She frowned. “Why didn’t you go to bed with her then?”

What a line of questioning! “She had a rotation early the next morning,” I said. The woman was a medical student. “We talked about it, and decided not to rush into things. We’re going to wait and get to know each other a little better first.”

“I would never have waited. I *never* waited.” She shook her head. “Don’t waste time, Carter. You could get run over by a bus tomorrow. And then you’d never know how good it might have been with her.”

When I was in college, I read every lesbian novel I could get my hands on. *The Candlestick* was my favorite. It was complex and beautiful and weird. It pushed all my buttons, and then reached in deeper and pushed buttons I didn’t even know I had. For a while, I lost myself in it, in the girl’s bright fearless passion and the weary, vulnerable melancholy of the woman she loved. I couldn’t stop thinking about what it would have been like for them, trying to make a go of it in the time of McCarthy. I wrote stories about them. I walked with them in my sleep.

A few years later, I was dating a woman who was writing a dissertation on midcentury lesbian fiction. “It’s about the relations between highbrow and lowbrow,” she said. “The places where pulp gets into bed with art.” She told me that the author of *The Candlestick* was the same woman who wrote all those brilliant, creepy crime novels that had pierced my teenage brain. This fact reordered my entire world. The universe swung around me and snapped into place on a crisp new axis.

Over cigarettes and vodka at the little kitchen table, with the Hermes standing idle and solemn between us, I tried to explain it to her. “It was a kind of epiphany. I could finally make sense of my adolescent mind. The missing piece of the puzzle was you.”

“You’re a little bit crazy,” she said. But her papery eyelids drooped with satisfaction. She held out her vodka glass. “Top me off, would you?”

I was not there when she died. I was away for a long weekend, with the medical student. We argued through the entire trip, and by the time I got back, we weren’t together anymore.

The doorman stopped me on my way into the building. “The old lady passed away on Saturday,” he said. “I thought you would want to know.”

It was a cold-cock to the back of my skull. I had to sit down in the lobby until I remembered how to breathe.

She did not have many friends left in New York. There was one, a writer named Susan Carr who had been her lover in the early sixties, and now lived out in Shelter Island. She organized a memorial service in the Village and asked me to speak at it. “I hardly knew her,” I said into the phone. “Who the hell am I?”

“She talked about you every time I saw her these last six months.”

Still, I demurred. She did not press me to do it.

There were more reporters at the memorial service than mourners. “A giant of American crime writing,” I heard one of them say. “God, I used to love her books.”

“She was a hell of a misanthrope, though,” another one said. “I interviewed her when she came back from Europe, and it was all ‘the Blacks this, the Jews that.’ Really paranoid stuff, too.”

“Well, I guess you don’t write demented books like that without being a little unhinged

yourself.”

“She drank like a fish, you know. That couldn’t have helped.”

“Oh, they all did, in those days.”

The banter grew oppressive. I sloughed it off and slipped outside.

Out on the church steps, I made the years roll back until I saw her striding up the street in the twilight, a tall dark-haired figure in a trench coat. She swept past smiling girls in jewel-colored cocktail dresses, past the crew-cut boys who whistled at them from the windows of tail-finned cars. She paused at the bottom of the steps in front of me, digging into her pocket for a packet of cigarettes. She cupped her hands to light one, and glanced up to where I stood. Her eyes caught mine, and as the streetlights glinted in them I saw the smiling glimmer of recognition. Then she squinted, blew out smoke, and resumed her purposeful stride.

Carla Miriam Levy has been a scientist, a lawyer, a film critic, and a technical writer. Whatever her job title, though, she has always been a daydreamer. One day, she began to write her daydreams down. Attached, please find one.