An Anthology of Really Short Stories

EDITED BY JEROME STERN

W. W. Norton & Company
New York   London
Roberto Fernandez

Barbarita waited impatiently for her ride as beads of sweat dripped from her eyebrows into her third cup of cold syrupy espresso. She was headed for the toilet when she heard the knocking sounds of Mima’s old Impala. “About time you got here,” yelled Barbarita from the Florida room.

“It wouldn’t start this morning.”

Barbarita got in, tilted the rearview mirror, and applied enough rouge to her face for a healthier look. She wanted to make a good impression on the doctor who would approve her medical records for her green card. On the way to Jackson Memorial, Mima talked about her grandchildren.

Barbarita knocked down all the Bibles and Reader’s Digests on the table when the nurse finally called her name.

“Sorry, ma’am, but you can’t come in,” the nurse said to Mima.

“I’m her interpreter,” replied the polyglot.

“No bueno,” said the doctor grimly as he walked in with Barbarita’s X-rays. He told Mima, “Ask her if she had TB.”

Mima turned to Barbarita. “He says, if you have a television?”

“Tell him yes, but in Havana. Not in Miami. But my daughter has a television here.”

Mima told the doctor, “She says she had TV in Cuba, not in Miami, but her daughter has TV here.”

“In that case we need to test her daughter for TB too.”

Mima translated, “He says he needs to test your daughter’s television to make sure it works, otherwise you cannot get your green card.”

“Why the television?” asked a puzzled Barbarita.

“How many times did I tell you you needed to buy one? Don’t you know, Barbarita? This is America.”
Peter has just returned from Mexico, where his face turned the chalky pink color of Pepto-Bismol. Rachel is at that swooning stage of love, stupid with happiness at his return.

That evening they drink cold vodka and gossip about a child-laden couple they know, who rise at dawn for work and return home at seven to bathe the three-year-old, console the eight-year-old, and struggle through dinner in time to collapse in bed by ten.

"Even so they have a great house," she says. "And nice things. They make a lot of money."

Peter shakes his head and says offhandedly: "I'd rather inherit it."

They are both shocked by the statement. An island of silence bobs to the surface. Rachel swallows the last of her vodka, and with it the realization that she is in love with a man who has just traveled to a third-world nation to play tennis.

"By the way—" He looks up guiltily, making a game of it. "Promise me you'll never tell anyone I said that."

This makes her laugh, freshens her love. They laugh some more. Talk their slow way toward dinner. Spy on the remarkable albino Mexican boy playing in the yard next door. Make love with the windows open and then lie there listening to the mariachi music that pumps through her Houston barrio neighborhood.

Everything is soft, very soft. And luck abundant as johnsongrass. The mimosa trees' green canopy. And the mockingbirds, not yet vicious, waiting for the fierce end of summer.
Her foot begins bleeding on the beach, cut by the jagged funnel of a broken bottle. *Cerveza*, she thinks, and, also, that her blood is the only thing there belonging to her. Foreign country, driven to in a friend’s truck, the shirt she wears from a long-ago lover, crusty no-color shorts found folded in the house, and the house itself, ahead, that belongs to an uncle. Her bloodprints in the sand like valentines.

She’s been running again, this time on foot, running south, she’s come from unlikely Kansas to the Mexican Gulf, sliding down her own country, gravitating toward the equator. At the border a toothless woman sold her a shrink-wrapped Saint Dymphna, patroness of nervous disorders. She laughed, but uneasily. Did a sane person laugh, all alone? The Mexican had three teeth, no more. Where do all the world’s teeth go, she wonders now, hobbling dizzily through the debris, clamshells and plastic bags, praying to her new saint that the roving pack of dogs will not attack her, nor the fishermen, who watch dispassionately from boats, weaving nets of bright green acrylic.

In the house—no tapwater, no windowglass, no easy-chair—she leans against the stove and ties a sock around the wound. On the burner rests a notebook, the entries of former guests, their gratitude for a place to overindulge: sun, drink, sex. She feels excluded by their exclamation marks; she tries to imagine what she might write, tomorrow, what someone like her might have to say after the night ahead.

Outside, the setting sun begins its furor. A trail of red hearts points the way to her. Wild dogs howl.
Waiting
Peggy McNally

Five days a week the lowest-paid substitute teacher in the district drives her father’s used Mercury to Hough and 79th, where she eases it, mud flaps and all, down the ramp into the garage of Patrick Henry Junior High, a school where she’ll teach back-to-back classes without so much as a coffee break and all of this depressing her until she remembers her date last night, and hopes it might lead to bigger things, maybe love, so she quickens her pace towards the main office to pick up her class lists with the names of students she’ll never know as well as she has come to know the specials in the cafeteria, where she hopes the coffee will be perking and someone will have brought in those doughnuts she’s come to love so much, loves more than the idea of teaching seventh-graders the meaning of a poem, because after all she’s a sub who’ll finish her day, head south to her father’s house, and at dinner, he’ll ask her how her job is going, and she’ll say okay, and he’ll remind her that it might lead to a full-time position with benefits but she knows what teaching in that school is like, and her date from last night calls to ask if she’s busy and she says yes because she’s promised her father she’d wash his car and promises to her father are sacred since her mother died, besides it’s the least she can do now that he lets her drive his car five days a week towards the big lake, to the NE corner of Hough and 79th and you know the rest.