

Three Stories

KENNETH GANGEMI

Making It to Thirty

Nick was careful as he crossed Fifth Avenue. He looked in both directions for speeding trucks, Third-World taxicabs and wrong-way bicycle messengers. He wanted to live until his birthday. But he also liked being twenty-nine, the same age as Dustin Hoffman when he starred in *The Graduate*. Maybe Nick would freeze his age and always be twenty-nine.

Nick thought about people who had never reached thirty. The English poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe died at twenty-nine, as did Ann Boleyn when she was beheaded. Stephen Crane died of tuberculosis at twenty-eight, and Wilfred Owen, killed in World War I at twenty-five. Rupert Brooke died at twenty-seven, Aubrey Beardsley at twenty-six. Both Pergolesi and Jean Harlow, the sex symbol of the 1930s, also died at twenty-six. James Dean was killed at twenty-four while driving in his sports car. Jim Morrison was in Paris, bloated with drugs and alcohol, when he died at twenty-seven. Jules Laforgue, the seminal French poet, was the same age when he died of tuberculosis.

The supermodel Gia Carangi made \$10,000 a day posing for magazine covers, then slipped into heroin addiction and died from AIDS at twenty-six. Edie Sedgwick was twenty-eight when she died of an overdose. She was a classic case of a beautiful young woman who destroyed herself.

Born into a patrician New England family, she starred in underground films then hung out with motorcycle gangs in California.

Sylvia Plath made it to thirty, barely. Jimi Hendrix died at twenty-seven after taking sleeping pills and then strangling in his own vomit. He was a favorite of the Plaster Casters. Nick had read about them, a couple of teenage groupies from Chicago who made plaster casts of rock stars' penises. Janis Joplin died three weeks after Jimi Hendrix, also at twenty-seven, of an overdose of heroin. Nick had heard her described as "a mixture of Leadbelly, a steam engine, Calamity Jane, Bessie Smith, an oil derrick, and rot-gut bourbon."

Two of Mark Twain's three daughters died in their twenties. Buddy Holly died at twenty-three in a plane crash. The jazz musician Bix Beiderbecke died at twenty-eight of alcoholism. His life inspired the book and film *Young Man With a Horn*. Hank Williams was twenty-nine when he died in the back seat of a car from combining drugs and alcohol. Nick admired three famous men with the last name of Williams. Ted was a great baseball player, Hank a star in country music, Tennessee one of the finest playwrights of the 20th century. If only they had been brothers!

Percy Bysshe Shelley was a month away from turning thirty when he drowned while sailing off the coast of Tuscany. His body was cremated on the beach. John Keats was twenty-five when he died of tuberculosis. Nick had read in a biography that his "Ode to a Nightingale," which was composed of eight stanzas of ten lines each, had been written in a single morning. Keats reportedly was sitting in a garden. The biographer, a professor at Harvard, had stated that, "No other poem in English of comparable length and quality has been composed so quickly."

Maybe the story is true, but Nick didn't believe it. It was unlikely that any poet could produce an eighty-line finished poem in such a short time. Allen Ginsberg wrote

that rapidly, but he produced free verse. Keats was bound by rhyme and meter. He probably made his initial notes and observations that morning, wrote most of the lines, then put them into a rough draft. Completing his "Ode to a Nightingale" surely took longer, with revisions and polishing and several drafts. Nick thought of the Harvard professor. What the hell did academics know about the work involved in writing poetry?

The Fruit Stand

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Nick looked at the bountiful display and thought of one of his favorite songs: *Yes, we have no bananas, we have no bananas today. . . .* Some of the fruit had arrived early this year. Because of global warming? Would Earth eventually have polar jungles? He checked the quality and prices of the red seedless grapes, the southern peaches, and the California cantaloupes. The growing of fruit was better than any poem. He always had dreamed of being in a vineyard a few days before the grapes were ready, of walking through a peach orchard when the fruit was about to be picked, and of standing in the middle of a vast green field in California, with ripening cantaloupes in every direction.

He looked at the colorful labels at the ends of the fruit boxes. The labels had pictures of luscious fruit and names like Calexico, Salinas, Modesto, Stockton, Indio, Coachella, Madera, Fresno, Visalia, and Watsonville. Books had been published with reproductions of the best labels, praising them as American folk art. He noticed that a box of grapes was from a place in California named Wrath. Next to him an attractive woman was selecting bananas and grapefruit. After a few seconds he thought of an opener.

"When I buy grapefruit," he said, "I have a problem with fallout."

"Fallout?" she asked. She looked at him.

"Yes, one of them will usually fall out of the bag."

She smiled, but then Nick realized what she was buying.

He changed his mind about meeting her, left the fruit stand, and continued walking. Women who buy bananas and grapefruit in the middle of June, when prime grapes, melons, and peaches are available, were not for him. He wondered what else she did wrong. "Never sleep with a woman," said Nelson Algren, "whose troubles are worse than your own."

Breakfast on the West Side

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Nick crossed 110th Street and continued walking south on Broadway. After a few blocks he paused and sniffed the air, like a bear smelling bacon. It *was* bacon, and also ham and eggs, and toasted muffins, and pancakes and waffles. The West Side was having breakfast.

He walked on, the aromas making him hungry. Near the subway station at 103rd Street and Broadway was a coffee shop that featured breakfast specials. The neighborhood had a few ungentrified blocks nearby and many of the coffeeshop customers were Latino workers. Nick read the menu in the window and then walked in. It was an ordinary place, crowded because of low prices. It had a back room, tables by the window, and a counter.

Nick remembered reading about the president of a giant corporation. The man went to the same coffee shop every day, precisely at noon. He sat at the counter in his business suit and always ordered the same lunch, a hamburger and a slice of apple pie. Then he read *The Wall Street Journal* and ate the apple pie while the hamburger was cooking.

Nick found a seat at the counter near the grill. A waitress with *Mary* on her name tag came over to take his order, apologizing for a slight smell.

"There's a dead rat in the wall."

"That's nothing," Nick said. "I heard of a restaurant in Africa with a dead elephant in the wall." He asked for the menu. While reading it he overheard a Presbyterian order

soft-boiled eggs. Then a Buddhist ordered two fried eggs, one up and one over.

Nick looked up from the menu to observe the waitresses, who were all Irish immigrants: nervous red-haired Mary, quick conscientious Sheila, cheerful big-breasted Kathleen. He chatted with a friendly woman next to him at the counter. When the waitress came back she ordered scrambled eggs with a toasted West Side muffin. "It's the fastest and easiest for the short-order cook," she said. "The toasted muffin will take longer than the scrambled eggs."

Nick ordered the Special Healthy Breakfast. Along with coffee and fresh-squeezed orange juice, it featured poached eggs, steamed vegetables, and brown rice with carrot-ginger dressing.

"How much protein is in the eggs?" he asked.

"About fourteen grams," the waitress said.

He looked over at the short-order cook. Nick loved to watch the rapid, efficient making of eggs on a grill while other dishes were cooking on it at the same time. And a short-order cook was far more interesting to watch than a long-order cook. The man effortlessly made baked eggs, coddled eggs, *huevos rancheros*, eggs Florentine, and masked eggs.

The cook saw that Nick was observing him and knew he had a fan. He looked over his shoulder. "Twenty years at this grill," he said, "and I never broke a yolk." He told his assistant how to make shirred eggs. "Be sure to put a poaching paper over the ramekin," he said.

Nick watched him slice tomatoes with lightning movements. He made sandwiches rapidly and with flair: turkey club, Monte Cristo, fried ham and egg, grilled cheese and bacon. With precision, he quickly chopped onions and peppers for a Western omelet, then broke the eggs with one hand. Orders piled up from the waitresses, but he remained calm. Nick was impressed with his composure and grace.

One of his friends from high school was a short-order

cook. Sammy started as a dishwasher, then became a kitchen helper. He watched the short-order cook whenever he could. The cook let him prepare a few items whenever it was slow, giving him tips on technique. One day he screamed, "Too many orders!" in the middle of a rush, threw down his apron, and walked out the door. Sammy was the only one available to fill in, and later got the job when the cook never returned. Now Sammy was saving money to go to cooking school and then become a chef in a good restaurant.

At the end of the counter a young woman sat alone, reading a magazine while she had breakfast. Did the dog outside belong to her? So much for the comradeship of counters. A truck driver who was illegally parked came into the coffee shop and gave his order directly to the short-order cook. "Make it fast," he told him. "I only got a few minutes."

The cook smiled. "I got all day," he said.

A woman complained about her toast, saying that she wanted it without butter. "You shoulda told me, lady," said the short-order cook. "We automatically put it on." Then she said that her *huevos Mexicana* were overcooked. "Lady, don't give me a hard time," he said. "You've got me climbing the walls already."

Nick looked up and down the long counter. Orders for waffles were piling up, but the griddle girl was in a panic. "I can't get the griddle open!" she cried, as smoke began to curl up. All the members of the breakfast team tried to help her, but the toastmaster and the juice boy and the waitresses and the short-order cook were unable to budge the lid. Nick observed the commotion and could not resist. "It's gridlock!" he shouted.