

THE WEST VILLAGE

Many years ago I found myself in a tiny, dimly lit restaurant in the West Village drinking red wine with the playwright Sam Shepard.

It was a year before I graduated from Juilliard with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drama, a few more before I learned that red wine always leaves me on the bathroom floor, and more still before I'd come to understand that writing would be the love of my life.

It was 2007 and Mr. Shepard was at Juilliard to receive an honorary doctorate. I was his escort for the day, which basically meant it was my job to make sure he wore the robe and hood correctly and didn't wander off on his own. The ceremony passed as expected and was followed by a champagne cocktail reception in the President's suite—the same place the Rolling Stones had kicked off their world tour two years before; Juilliard was a mostly odd and wondrous place. The administration had warned us that none of the honorees would likely stick around for the event, but on this occasion, everyone seemed game for a party. Which is how I found myself sitting next to the pre-eminent American playwright talking about things I now mostly can't remember.

At the start of the reception I stood at one end of the room, drink in hand, shifting back and forth on my feet. I badly wanted to speak to Mr. Shepard but was too afraid to approach him. Despite my being the person charged to look after him for the day we'd said no more than five words to one another, and it was clear that he was deeply skeptical as to why I was there. Another student, a guy I didn't know terribly well, came and stood next to me. He watched as I squirmed, and listened as I mumbled something about *Famous playwright* and *What must he think* and *Should I say something*, and this boy half-laughing said, *If you want to talk to him, all you have to do is walk over there*. How simple, how easy, how very much like jumping off a cliff! But courage requires first a decision, and then a leap. And so in a moment of rare grit I walked across the room and sat next to him. I laugh now because it is almost always in this way that good things happen—one person walks towards another—a small, seemingly unimpressive act that gives way to better things.

The cocktail hour lasted several more, and when it was nearly done Mr. Shepard turned to me and asked if I'd like to attend an event that evening—it wasn't a big thing, he was going to be introducing a film he'd written many years before. *Yes*, I said, another leap. And so, hours later, I sat in the basement of the Rubin Museum on 18th Street. The guy at the front desk had let me in without asking for either my name or a ticket—New York is a tremendous place to be both young and a

woman. I found an open seat, and a few minutes later Mr. Shepard stood at the front of the stage and read aloud from his screenplay of the film *Paris, Texas*. And then, just as the movie began, he took a seat, a single beer on the table in front of him. Twenty minutes into the film, when he pushed back his chair, I took a breath and followed him out. We nearly bumped into one another on the street. *I didn't think you'd come*, he said smiling. *I know, I'm sorry, but here I am*, I replied, a quiet laugh born of nerves and something ever so slightly sturdier than fear. *Have you seen the film? Do you want to go back in*, he asked? *No, I'll watch it another time*, I said. Which is how I came to spend a night in my early twenties drinking red wine in the West Village with one of the greatest American playwrights.

This is what I remember: Amy Winehouse played on the radio. We talked about horses, his farm in Kentucky, and his not being terribly keen on New York. And when we walked down the street he placed the palm of his hand against the back of my neck in a way that I have spent every day since hoping another man will do without me having to ask. When the night ended, he kindly walked me to the subway, and we never saw each other again.

What everyone wanted to know right after, as I attempted to describe the event of my *pseudo-date with Famed American Playwright, Sam Shepard*, was if he spoke about writing—he was notoriously private about such things. And the thing is, he did. I'm quite sure he did.

My only hesitation is that, through the muck and fuzz of red wine and a time in my life that I don't remember terribly well, might I just have imagined the next part? He spoke of his love of music and how what he really wanted to do was be a musician—a rocker—but because he didn't know how, or couldn't, he wrote plays. And writing, just as he did, was his attempt at music.



After I was accepted to Juilliard I visited the college with both of my parents. It was April and snowing. We sat with the administrative director and asked the expected questions and, when it came time for a tour, I asked to go alone. My father now describes this day—and this moment in particular—as one of the saddest of his life. I can't help but wonder if something in him could sense all the heartache that would happen in that building on 66th Street, or if it was simply that I was leaving—that I was doing what he and my mother had raised me to do: to chart my own course, willfully and without fear. After the visit, when it became clear that there would be no reasoning with me about bachelor's degrees from other fine universities, a deal was struck. I'd be allowed to attend but under one condition: I was to keep a journal. No one would read it; rather its purpose was to continue to exercise that part of my brain that liked to write. It would serve as a sort of renegade education to develop a different set of muscles. How prescient that now seems.

I moved to New York the following August, eighteen years old, so sure of my future. I was dating Colin, a man six years my senior. We had met the month before, working at a summer camp in Florida, and had been pushed together by friends. He was tall and lanky and bright, but not my guy, which I knew right away. But I was so unsure of how love was meant to go that I thought, *Well okay, maybe*, and ignored the small tug of the gut that said, *Nope, not this*. And I'd nearly convinced myself that it could work, until I visited Colin's apartment for the first time and he handed me a single key. As I closed my hand around it, all I could think was, *I don't want this*.

Sitting on the floor of his living room one night, eating pecan ice cream, we looked through his pictures and vinyl records, and I felt totally unprepared for the intimacy of learning about this man's life. He put Ella Fitzgerald on the record player and hummed along. I flicked through the photos and scribbled notes, trying to reconcile the young boy smiling at the camera with the man sitting next to me.

Who is your Ella? he asked.

What? I said, looking up, startled.

Who is your Ella? he asked again.

I didn't understand the question and said so.

What is the music you most love—the music that undoes you?

I didn't yet have the life experience to understand the question, let alone answer it. *Oh. I don't know*, I said quietly, returning to the photos in front of me.

I can't wait for you to find out, he said, smiling at me. The finding out is the best part.

I broke up with him not long after, a month after arriving in New York, at a small table next to a large window in a cheap diner on the corner of 68th and Broadway. He was too far ahead of me—those six years between us too loaded and full. Already he had the answers to so many questions I had yet to even ask. “Time After Time” played on the radio as we sat there, a plate of fries between us, mostly untouched.

Maybe if we'd met at another time, I said, trying to cushion two words: “not you.”

Don't do that. Don't lie to make this easier, he replied.

At the 66th Street subway station we hugged uncomfortably and he disappeared down the steps, the city seeming to rise up and swallow him whole in that moment. I turned away and walked up the steps towards college, the air suddenly cooler, sweeter; fall coming in fast and hard.

Colin was a valuable lesson in listening to that voice that says, *Not this*. I don't think of him often, but when I do, I think of the question he asked as we sat on the floor of his apartment that night. *Who is your Ella?* Which is to say, what do you love? What has meaning for you? What fills you with joy?

The thing is, he was right: the finding out is the best part. In my early twenties I mapped New York by its small concert venues. The Bowery Ballroom on

Delancey Street. Mercury Lounge on the corner of Houston and Essex. Rockwood Music Hall on Allen. Standing in those dark spaces, people pushing in from every side, I found “Ella” in the broken voices of Charlie Fink and Kristian Matsson. I found her in the vulnerability with which Laura Marling sings and Johnny Flynn plays the fiddle. I found her in lyrics that called upon Bukowski and Shakespeare. In songs that stirred those low unknowable, unnamable parts of myself, and that upon listening granted a perfect moment in which I stood just as still as I could because someone else had given voice and melody to what I thought singular and secret.

But it was more than that. I found Ella as I sat on too-long subway rides furiously scribbling notes in the margins of books. “Ella” became not a question of who, but what. And the answer, fundamentally, was language—words written and spoken and sung. Language, endlessly malleable, and frighteningly insufficient and still human.

I graduated from Juilliard in 2008 just as the economy plummeted, and I began to write as a way to stave off and sort through a personal sadness. Writing felt like wrangling storm clouds, which is to say, impossible. But so did life. Writing became a way to make peace with that which was flawed. The writer Jack Gilbert began his poem “The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart” with “How astonishing it is that language can almost mean, and

frightening that it does not quite.”¹ Writing became an exercise in sitting with discomfort, accepting that which is imperfect, and reveling in the *almost*.

The thirteen years since Colin first asked that question have been almost entirely in service of finding Ella, and my place in New York, and myself, too.

I may never be able to fully say what this swath of time took from me, nor what it gave in return, but I know that it made me, shaped me—gave with both hands but took even more.

And Mr. Shepard was right, too. Arranging words is much like making music. Flawed and small and still with a beat and a pattern and the capacity to empty the air from one’s lungs.

Like him, I can’t write music and I sure as hell can’t make it. But everything I’ve written here is my best attempt at it. My graceless offerings that I lay at the altar of Art. Small essays made up of imperfect words that *almost* mean—my own humanity made manifest.

¹ Jack Gilbert, “The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart” from *Collected Poems*, copyright © 2012 by Jack Gilbert. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.