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ED FALCO

FIVE MILLAT STORIES

MILLAT AT A FAMILY GATHERING AS A CHILD

Two uncles are on the back porch talking softly as a cloud of smoke floats around them. They're both smoking, one a pipe and the other cigarette after cigarette. Millat is seated inside the house, by a window that opens onto the porch. He's been punished and he's sitting quietly in the dark, his hands folded in his lap, dreaming and vaguely listening to his uncles, who don't know he's there, within earshot. For a long time they talk about cars, before the subject turns to football. It's a summer night and the cicadas are roaring, along with crickets, and from the pond down the hill comes the low croak of bullfrogs. The uncles' conversation turns to Millat's mother and an Italian boy she dated in high school. He was a football player, and they talk about a game in which he scored the winning touchdown. One uncle says to the other, referring to Millat's mother, "What's that girl got against white boys?" and they both laugh before the conversation moves on to other subjects. Millat doesn't remember how old he was at the time, but he already knew he wasn't a white boy. He'd learned that in school from kindergarten upward. It's the plural they used, "boys," that confused him for a moment, before he figured out that they meant the Italian boy and Millat's father. That's what sticks in his memory, that to his mother's brothers, his uncles in West Virginia, Italians weren't white either, just like him and his father.

Unpredictable, the things that stick in memory. He loved his uncles and as far as he could tell, they loved him, too.

He met her in 1969, on his 23rd birthday. These were the years right after college, when he lived in Brooklyn, in an apartment he shared with two musicians: Clark, who played tenor sax in *The Buried Seed*, a jazz ensemble; and Ursula, who played violin for the Brooklyn Philharmonia. Millat wore his hair long, for a time shoulder length with curls his various girlfriends uniformly commented on with mock jealousy. He still keeps a picture of himself from those days, in bell bottoms and a silky white top that looks more like a blouse than a shirt, with all that profusion of hair spilling over his shoulders. He finds it amusing to look at in the present moment, but back then it wasn't anything out of the ordinary, at least not in Brooklyn hanging around with musicians.

He met Maria through Ursula, at a club in the West Village where the *Buried Seed* was playing. Clark had just embarked on a slow, passionate solo, the wailing of his sax filling up the room. Maria was seated across from Ursula at a small round table, holding a drink in one hand and tapping her fingers on the tabletop with the other. She wore a fringed vest and a leather headband across her forehead. Millat was seated at the bar. When he looked her way, she smiled.

Millat thinks back to that moment now and then: Maria's smile in a crowded barroom, how that instant shaped all of his life going forward. He brought his drink to her table; she invited him to join her; he asked her out on a date the following weekend; they slept together two dates later; six months after that they were married; he took a job in the personnel department of an international corporation; they had their first child in 1973 and the second in 1975; they were married for 23 years, until they divorced in 1994, when Millat was 48 and Maria was in love with another man. After that he lived alone for two years, before meeting Stav, his Irish girlfriend whom he loves and whom he's been with ever since.

What he believes, what he feels, what he thinks he knows or doesn't know, every bit of him forged by choices made or refused, who he is, is who

he became once he stood up from that bar and crossed the room to Maria's table, all of it beginning with a smile in a crowded bar, accompanied by a long, aching saxophone solo.

Once, in the first few months after they met, they were lying side by side in bed holding hands, Maria on her belly, Millat on his back. They had just had sex and Millat saw a small bright ball of light rise up out of his chest and travel in a short arc to Maria, where it entered her through her back, between her shoulders. The memory is vivid. Now he believes he must have been dreaming, but in that moment it was real and even now he accepts the possibility that it happened just as he remembers.

At Stav's kitchen table, Millat thinks what a mystery it all is. It's early morning and he'll leave for work soon. He's wearing a tailored suit, his hair is cut neat and short, and he's gazing out an open window at a city street, seeing nothing: the city all around him hazy as a dream.

MILLAT'S GIRLS IN AN AUTUMN STORM

Long before the divorce, before the recriminations, the therapy, the lawyers, on a sunny October afternoon with a bank of slate storm clouds approaching in the distance, Millat's girls ran in circles as leaves fell like snow in fat gusts of wind: from the crown of a chestnut tree, the red, yellow, orange leaves rising and falling in sunlight, swirling over a green lawn as the girls with their children's yelp and howl snatched them from the air, running madly in circles, each wild with a spirit that filled them like ecstasy, spinning dervishes wheeling and running, leaves in their hands, in their hair, beneath their feet, everywhere under wind-stripped branches lashed by the coming storm.

This was early in the eighties, when the girls were still children. Two years apart: Julia, the older, named for Millat's mother; Ashley, the younger, named after Maria's sister. Maria, Millat's wife of twenty-three years.

That afternoon, the afternoon of the autumn storm, it was still a couple of decades before the divorce, something that seemed impossible at the time, that they should ever break up, Millat and Maria, she from an old-fashioned Italian family and right in the middle, three older brothers, one younger brother, and two younger sisters. Not a divorce in the whole, huge extended family. She was the wild one, Maria, marrying out of her Catholic faith, but not so wild she didn't insist Millat sign a prenuptial "declaration of promise," agreeing to raise the girls as Catholics, which was necessary back then to be married in the church. And it was fine with Millat. Still in their twenties, they had both, Millat and Maria, come of age in the era of the Vietnam war, of protests and counter-culture, of pot-smoking and promiscuity in the name of a coming millennium of love and peace—which of course never came. What came was a resurgent militarism and the long, steady shift of wealth and power into the hands of fewer and fewer; from pacifism to militarism; from "power to the people" to a government of, by, and for the rich. But that wasn't obvious then, when they were still young parents with two beautiful girls, Maria a stay-at-home mom, Millat a young man with a good job in the city, working in what was then called Personnel, before it became Human Resources.

What did Millat imagine back then would be his future? He didn't think about it much. He was too busy being a father and a husband in a time when those roles were still clearly defined. He made the money. Maria raised the girls. He assumed their personal wealth would grow; the girls would go to college and eventually marry; there would be grandchildren; they'd retire, he liked to dream, to a home near the ocean in coastal Georgia, where they went every summer for a two-week vacation. Something like that. If someone had asked him. Not Julia struggling with drugs, and Ashley suffering a bad marriage. Not Maria falling out of love with him and in love with another man. Not years of mutual misery before the final break. Maria keeping the house. Millat finding a place for himself hours away, where he lived a long time alone.

That October afternoon Millat could not have imagined such a future. Then there was only Millat and Maria on their doorstep, hand in hand, watching their girls snatching bright leaves out of the air in a wind storm. In that moment there was neither past or future, only their children in the wind and leaves, as happy as the human animal ever can be, and Millat and Maria with them.

He can still close his eyes and be there.

MILLAT IN THE MOUNTAINS WITH JULIA

She wants to know about her grandparents, who she never met and about whom little has been said; and why she was raised Catholic and not Muslim; and why Millat was never there for her as a child; and couldn't he see that his absence was the reason for her mother's affairs and eventually marrying that jackass Anthony, with his gold chains and tacky jewelry; and what could have been so important that he was never home for more than a few hours; and did he see or didn't he see how he had wrecked all their lives; and he was probably all that time having affairs of his own, cheating on his wife in the city, wasn't he, because he was a man and that's the way men were, all of them.

They're walking, Millat and his daughter Julia, along a mountain trail in rural North Carolina, where they left Julia's husband raging in an A-frame cabin, throwing things against the wall. Millat has come to take Julia away. He has learned through Maria that she and her husband are both addicts. Maria learned through a friend of Julia's, who was afraid for Julia's life, because Hal, Julia's husband, could be violent, and because she knew they were running out of money and drugs, and she feared where it was all heading; she feared for her friend and felt she had no choice but to call and explain because maybe they could help, as her parents. Millat and Maria were dumbfounded. Millat said it felt like someone had hit him in the face with a rock. Julia had just finished college and was supposed to start

grad school in the fall. She had been married to Hal for less than a year. The money Millat had sent to help them through the summer, after they moved to North Carolina where Hal was supposed to be looking for a job, was spent on drugs.

Millat wants to know how long it's been since Julia's eaten. She looks so thin it's frightening. Julia ignores him. She goes on with her litany of recriminations. Millat listens and says nothing. He lets her rage until the fight slowly ebbs to nothing and she's walking beside him crying silent tears. He puts his arm around her and she buries her head in his chest. She whispers, *Dad, take me away from here, please.* Millat takes her back to the city, where he's living with his Irish girlfriend, Stav. Julia stays with them a few terrible days where she's sick all the time before starting rehab. When she gets out of rehab she lasts only a few weeks before going back to Hal. After that, Millat won't see her again for two years.

What he remembers most vividly is this: on the ride back from North Carolina he stopped and bought her a meatball hero, his picky eater, the delicate child who had to be coaxed to eat at every meal—and she devoured the sandwich in a few bites, shoving it into her mouth like an animal.

His beautiful, brilliant child, who he loves beyond measure, starving.

MILLAT ON SUMMER VACATION

His girls have come to join him at the beach, where he's rented a house on the ocean with Stav and Stav's sister and brother-in-law and their three children, ages four, six, and ten. The girls have come with their families: Julia, his oldest, with her husband and one-year-old son, Karim, named for Millat's brother lost to a stroke; Ashley with her girlfriend and her girlfriend's two boys, ages nine and eleven. It's a big house, five bedrooms and bunk beds on the second floor, and still sometimes it feels to Millat, who lives in a one-bedroom apartment in Chelsea when he's not staying with Stav in her one-bedroom apartment in the Village—it feels like living in a bus

station. Kids are everywhere, getting lathered with sun screen, searching for towels, playing video games, watching cartoons, crying, screaming, yelling, demanding and pleading. To get away, Millat takes long walks late in the afternoon, returning in time for the dinner chaos. Often, when he's alone on the beach, Millat talks with Nasir, his youngest brother, drowned at seventeen. Nasir is always with him.

Late night is his favorite part of the day, after the kids are all sleeping and the adults still standing and not too exhausted are out on the deck, some with drinks in hand, talking softly among each other about their lives, their children, their shared pasts, their plans.

Millat is the old man of the group at 58. He drifts off at times watching the horizon, where the dark of the ocean meets the dark of the sky, where a streak of silent lightning lights up the dividing line, clouds above ocean below. The buzz of chatter around him, the occasional laughter, like a comforting shawl thrown over his shoulders. A cooling breeze comes in off the water. Stav is close by, the murmur of her voice keeps him from floating off to sleep. She covers his hand with her hand, interlocks her fingers. Ashley is telling a story about her girlfriend, how they met and fell in love, how she discovered who she really is, how happy she is, how much she's come to love the boys. Millat is listening though his eyes close now and then as he momentarily succumbs to sleep before rousing himself. He doesn't want to miss Ashley's telling, and he guesses she's more comfortable thinking he's half asleep, which, actually, he is. But he hears her. And Julia seated next to her, joining in with stories of her own, about her divorce, and meeting and marrying Ibrahim, about the birth of Karim, about rediscovering her Muslim faith. Ibrahim was also Millat's father's name, which is common enough it's not much of a coincidence, but it pleases Millat and the boy Nasir, who's out there on the horizon listening, the water his home, his element. Millat nods to Nasir, tells him he's sorry he wasn't there to save him from drowning. Nasir laughs, as if this is the most foolish thought ever. He tells Millat to be at peace, to be grateful he's here with his family. Millat agrees. Stav puts her arm around his shoulder and kisses him, a little

peck on the cheek. She begins telling a story about them, about their first meeting. He remembers and smiles. He rouses himself again and opens his arms to his family. I'm here, he tells them, meaning he's awake. And then he says it again, as much for himself as for the others. "I'm here," he says. "Go on. Tell the story."