



# *The Age of Infidelity*

AND OTHER STORIES

Valerie Sayers

# THE AGE OF INFIDELITY



THE AGE  
*of*  
INFIDELITY

— *and other stories* —

Valerie Sayers

S L A N T

## THE AGE OF INFIDELITY AND OTHER STORIES

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For Lillian Bayer and Jill Godmilow



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## COMPANY

WHEN LILY CALLS TO SAY I should come talk some sense into Diego before he ends up destroying himself, I remind her that I've made a point of avoiding that sweet cheater for years and years now. He seems to have managed just fine.

"Fine? He's been on hunger strike since this last surgery."

What surgery?

She rolls it out as if it's old news: last week, after all those years of diabetes, they amputated again. I don't know about any diabetes, much less years of it. I don't know about any amputation. Vertigo swoops me up. Lily says that the surgeon is waiting to see whether the right foot will have to go too, so I stop listening entirely. While the world somersaults, I catch sight of a skinny leg hacked off mid-thigh: I see ribbons of bloody flesh and hear Diego—flâneur, lover of women, cock-a-doodler—howl.

\* \* \*

Once upon a middle-aged time, reader, Diego O'Dowd and I lived together in an artists' co-op I'd founded back in the days when artists in downtown Manhattan bought decrepit lofts, unsafe at any price, with money they begged from respectable relatives. By the time Diego moved in, I was forty and Diego fifty, our marginal existences long established: my proper Southern mother had almost resigned herself to my unmarried, childless state, though I'm pretty sure she never resigned herself to Diego. We painted at opposite ends of the same studio where we slept, breathing in the toxic fumes of our art, and consoled each other about our rescinded charge cards, our adjunct teaching gigs, our dwindling shows. We ranted together about the torture regime Diego once fled. I even made a little film about his uninsured adventures

in emergency rooms. We danced tangos, Diego counting time to keep me in step: ONEtwoThreefour.

At two or three or four in the morning, he returned triumphant from a night of bar-hopping and stood at the refrigerator door considering the sparse pickings. In the light of our antique icebox, his belly hung loose and easy, his skin darkening with the wine he'd downed and the moles that sprouted like mushrooms as he aged before my eyes. His appetite was insatiable.

And so was mine. Why, reader, did his flaccid arms and skinny legs make me so tender? Why did I crave his touch? Other artists had moved on—to video, to text, to performance—but Diego, who wasn't faithful to much, was faithful to paint. His colors were sublime. His subjects were women: nudes who morphed into fruits and vegetables, surreal mangos and artichokes in neon colors of such pure intensity that I prickled in their presence.

He bragged, he bellowed. He fretted about his grown daughter in Buenos Aires, but did he go to see her? No, he put a scratchy LP on the turntable, came to stand over our bed in the small hours of the morning, and held his hand out:

“Just one, Maisie, and then we sleep like angels.”

I'd been sleeping like an angel till he woke me. I rose to dance.

When my little film about a swaggering artist sans medical insurance made it into Sundance, Diego fevered up with jealousy: *Your exotic Latin lover with empty pockets*, he sneered. *But maybe you'll make a dime off me*. When my little film won Best Documentary, he burned hotter still.

But all that was long, long ago, reader: another lifetime. Now I'm a retired Best-Documentary professor living in paradise. I have bought myself a marshside house in a Southern hometown I once fled the way Diego once fled Argentina. I've made my peace with Due East: Spanish moss festoons the live oaks outside my windows, porpoises swoop in my tidal creek. The light is as surreal and sublime as Diego's colors ever were, and for the first time in my life, I have all the time I need for paint, that old honest pal. I'm perfectly content, past the need for company I didn't invite, certainly past the need for tangos with pot-bellied cheating men. I held onto my loft, so I get to the city when I need to, but lately this place, this light, this stretch of time are all I need.

Only now Lily—Lily, of all people—has summoned me. I'm in a sufficient state of shock to run the numbers. If I'm drawing Social Security, that makes Diego seventy-six. Seventy-six? Unfathomable. In his seventies, on one leg, Diego's probably even behaving.

I indulge in an ugly sense of obligation, an overcooked, stewing-in-its-own-juices, Rivera-and-Kahlo, Picasso-and-his-many-mistresses, resentful-woman bitterfest before I get round to sitting at the computer and googling Rock Bottom Air. It has always struck me as a perverse name for a travel site, and the prices don't look all that rock-bottom to me.

\* \* \*

I slip in while Diego's drooling and snorting. When he realizes someone's entered his dreams, he blinks and blinks again, cartoonlike. His hair's still thick for an old man's hair: it's gone past gray to a zinky white, and in his new emaciated state, flesh loops down his jaws. At the sight of me, he lets loose a brief delighted smile before he remembers where he is, what's happened, what might happen still. The other shoe, so to speak. The surgeon, Lily tells me, took his toes, then his foot, then his calf: this, it turns out, was the third surgery, the third mortification. Now, when he has nobody, I'm the lone volunteer, or maybe the lone draftee, to stand by this hospital bed. I contemplate the unlikeliness of Diego's securing a bed in the first place: if he's even bothered to signed up for Medicare, I'll know I've witnessed a miracle. He clamps his eyes shut.

"I ask for no visitors." Diego's English is perfect—he reads political theory in five languages—but he lives in the present tense. It's a Zen thing. He rings a buzzer he probably rings thirty times a day.

No nurse appears. I retreat to the visitor's chair and Diego, struggling his hips into a bearable position, retreats to dark silence. He's asked for no visitors to cover the absence of visitors. I think I can see, under the thin sheet, where they took the leg: just below the knee. I see his missing calf, too, its sparse hairs white as the hairs on his head, springing absurdly from a shin like a palmetto's trunk. I see his thick yellowing toenails, too much effort to hack through all these years. Now a surgeon's gone and hacked the whole thing. I want that leg. I want to paint it. What's the matter with me? Haven't I exploited him enough? That leg's no symbol, God knows, no metaphor. Its absence is as loud as the sad buzz of the fluorescent lights.

The nurse finally arrives, lumped into pastel scrubs, every inch of her lethargized by Diego's summons. "What's up, Diego?"

He won't even open his eyes: "Tell this lady to leave or I'll call my lawyer."

*This lady.* As if I'm some do-gooder who comes to harass him, to remind him that he needs to lose some weight, cut back on the drinking, stop picking

up every downtown babe too nearsighted to see how old he is. He can't call a lawyer unless I pay the bill. What can I do? The nurse shrugs back: what can she do?

\* \* \*

It's the same question I asked Lily when I walked in on Diego with a graduate student supposedly writing her dissertation on contemporary Argentine artists, though Diego hadn't had a solo show in years and the graduate student appeared to be an underage porn star. She was lying beneath him, naked on our rug—my rug—pierced everywhere with safety pins. He'd never been so flagrant before. He'd never been cruel.

After I kicked him out, I couldn't bear the city. I took my "Best Documentary" prize to a visiting distinguished-artist gig back home in South Carolina and proceeded through the stages of grief. I'd thought once that Diego and I would grow old together, that he would rub my arthritic shoulders. I knew how to live on my own—I'd lived on my own for a long time before him—but we laughed at the same jokes and railed at the same injustices. Reader, I liked his company.

Years passed, though, as years do, and after I parlayed my visiting gig into a permanent appointment in paradise, I managed to forget about Diego O'Dowd for days on end. Sometimes, drifting off to sleep, I pictured him humming Eladia Blásquez, rolling his hips lasciviously. I pictured him getting to work, whooping and going at it in a frenzy, in love with the brush in his hand.

*And you,* Lily used to lecture me, *are in love with the ultimate macho-man.* Lily (you may have heard of her, reader, the performing artist Lily Pons) is my oldest friend in New York, the one who founded the co-op with me. Lily gave up on men entirely at the age of seventeen, and the entire time I lived with Diego she despised him. But after I left she softened: she let him in to my place to pick up a brush he'd left behind, shared a drink with him when he brought back the key. Evidently he left a lot of somethings behind: over the years, Lily reported multiple sightings, reported that he'd sold a few big canvases, that now she railed with him about torture as practiced by his new country. Maybe she's even been letting Diego crash in my loft when I'm not there. The idea's strangely consoling, and gives me something real to offer Diego: he can stay in my place as long as he needs, rent-free, no subterfuge

necessary, so that Lily can look in on him. When I leave the hospital, I knock on her door to let her know the plan.

She laughs sarcastically. Diego, she says, gets on her nerves. She is certainly not going to look in on him. "But you will," she says. "If I know you, you'll wait on him hand and foot."

Not the best expression, under the circumstances.

\* \* \*

When I go back the next day, Diego's rage pitches higher. He hisses: "Go back to North Carolina."

I haven't corrected any New Yorker who inquired about *North Carolina* in years, but I correct this one. "You know perfectly well which Carolina."

"Go back there."

"I want to see the leg."

His lips twist. "Coño."

"I want to paint it."

I see the struggle of every vein in his neck. If there's one thing a painter understands, it's why another painter wants to paint some forbidden body part. He kicks the sheet off with his limbo leg. "Take your look, bitch."

In all our years together, Diego never called me such a thing, not in English. I get close, leaning low over the hospital bed to look at the stump, but there's nothing to see, nothing but strips of futuristic bandage leaking goo. I see anyway. I see where they sawed the bone an inch below the knee, where they left flaps of skin to cover gristle. The skin around his stump is wrapped neatly as a Christmas present, but the scar underneath will raise itself in one long angry welt, a fat line like a whiplash. Once they take those bandages off, the staples will shine. The flesh colors will be the muddy colors students use when they're starting out, though I see a pure light-infused green in there, a glint of old copper in Diego's scar. I move my hand to touch it—I'm not even aware of making the gesture, but Diego is. "Don't."

I don't.

This time, he doesn't bother to ring the buzzer or tell me, again, to get out. His eyes fill with such splattering pools of contempt that I pull the sheet up before he can stop me and leave him to his mourning. Have I mentioned, reader, that Diego cries easily, profusely? Have I mentioned that he once accused me of exploiting him?

The nurse tells me where to find the social worker, who explains that they're nowhere close to fitting him with any artificial limb, much less the titanium leg-of-the-future I've been fantasizing. Yes, Medicare will pay for a rehab facility for thirty days, and yes, he'll practice more on the crutches he didn't master the last time. Inconceivable, that you could overcome someone's despair in thirty days. The social worker—lumpy as the nurse but closer in age to me, closer in skin tone to Diego—looks as if she agrees about despair. Some woman like this must have done the Medicare paperwork for him.

"When he goes home," she says, "you'll have to—" I interrupt to offer my confession: I'm not Diego's wife. I don't live in New York anymore.

"Does he have somebody to look out for him?" We squirm together. She averts her gaze daintily to inquire whether I might be able to stay, just a few weeks, just to visit him in rehab and settle him back home, just till he can maybe get himself to the store for a quart of milk.

If I know Diego, a quart of Scotch is more like it.

\* \* \*

Reader, the good former-lover swallows gall and stays. The good girl reclaims a loft allowing her this proximity to Diego who has no one. The good ex marvels at her prosperity, summoning the spaces she needs, rolling in retirement dough.

The night I spring Diego from rehab and bring him home to my place, I make chicken soup. For years, I watched Diego, insouciant in his chicken-butcherling, make cazuela: I recall a hacked chicken, a bunch of carrots, onions, corn, potatoes. I tart it up with cilantro and chile. Too late I realize that I've made a Mexican, not an Argentine, cazuela and suspect that Diego won't appreciate a broad Latin bow.

Diego appreciates nothing, including the passive-aggressive home aide I realize I'm performing. So I slip out to buy a bottle of strictly-forbidden, wildly-overpriced Malbec and bribe him: if he sips my misbegotten cazuela, he can have a half-glass of wine. I realize perfectly well that I'm treating him as a five-year-old, that I'm using the lowest and possibly least effective blows in the Handbook of Mortal Gender Wars, but I won't watch him waste away. I water the wine and fool him: another miracle. Diego hasn't tasted wine in so long, it's moon-juice to him.

After he finishes two ounces of wine disguised as four, he opens his mouth as if to speak, but instead sips half a bowl of soup with a full measure

of resentment. When he sets down his spoon he allows me to test his blood, surely calculating that this might buy him another half-glass of wine. It buys him the insulin shot he's been letting me inject for mysterious reasons. What could those reasons be, other than wanting after all to live? He howls:

“That soup is glue. You’re the worst cook I know.”

\* \* \*

We drive each other crazy. We didn’t, in the old days; or maybe when I drove him crazy then, Diego went and found himself a graduate student. I can’t take him anymore, his unwashed smear of hair, his brown teeth. I can’t take the city either: not the wind off the Hudson, not my moneyed neighbors, not the new glass-and-steel glitz of dear old dirty TriBeCa.

When the co-op’s ancient boiler goes down and we’ve been two days without heat, I persuade him to board a plane, to stay awhile in the warmth of Due East. Reckless, I promise sun, and he snorts. In the old days, South Carolina was a concept that made him shiver: nobody with brown skin, he said, was safe down there. But that word *sun* gets to him. What he says now is: “Good a place as any to die.”

Which is, after all, not so different from what every geezer in New York says, packing for winter in Florida. From what I said, heading south after Diego broke my heart. From what prompted me, newly respectable and newly retired, to buy a house on a tidal creek.

\* \* \*

Some previous owner of my Due East house—*probably an artist*, the agent said accusingly—knocked out walls to make a big central room with an old-fashioned kitchen at one end. The space resembles a New York loft—my New York loft, as it happens—but this light’s other-worldy. An endless bank of windows looks out on a shallow yard where, at water’s edge, two live oaks poke through either end of a deck, gnarly limbs extended. The light slithers through a latticework of leaves and moss; sawgrass springs from the marsh beyond; the creek stretches out serene. To enter this house is to enter a peaceable kingdom, but Diego and I, exhausted, enter biting our tongues. Finally Diego says: “You pay big bucks for the water.”

On either side of the house are a sprawling bedroom and bath, each wing with a lockable door. When I first saw the place, I pictured a recalcitrant

teenager in one wing, or maybe an exiled errant spouse. The people who lived here could live together without living together, retreat always possible. How prescient of me to buy a house with two wings: retreat may keep me from murdering Diego. Within an hour, he's lying on the couch and complaining about the way my watercolor easel blocks his view.

"Go lie in the hammock."

"I can't get in the hammock much less out."

"How do you know if you won't try."

"You sound like my first wife."

First wife? I only know about one. Reader, I don't even ask.

\* \* \*

Perhaps this return home is where you're rooting for a *getting-better-every-day* story, a *love-conquers-all* story, an *older-wiser-lovers* story. You can forget all that. Diego's catatonic twenty-three hours a day, and for the remaining hour alternates between rage and sarcasm. No, he won't see a shrink, a *Southern* shrink. No he doesn't care if he dies, he wants to die.

"What's the matter with you, Maisie, you don't see that?"

I drop sketchpads on low tables, buy a new tube of titanium yellow. Diego makes no moves in their direction. He makes as few moves as possible. Too much effort to fetch a knife or a razor blade; his plan is to disintegrate into dust and float away. Most nights, he doesn't make it back to the angry-teenager wing, but falls asleep on the couch, the T.V. blaring chase scenes into my dreams. He shrinks before my very eyes. I remember my time alone with sad nostalgia: a time when there was no one to resent, no one to punish.

*You're not the one who's lost your entire identity*, my mother lectures from the grave. *Tell him to shape up*, Lily barks from New York. *Duh*, the doctor says, and refers me to a social worker. I'm getting like Diego: I fold the name of the social worker and put it in my pocket, and a week later the name shreds in the wash like the dignity Diego's been shredding since I met him.

\* \* \*

Lily calls to say the boiler's fixed and it's warm enough now to come back if we want. Diego hasn't said a word about going back—maybe, like me, he has dreams about a one-legged man tumbling down the subway stairs. He lets me drive him to the beach, to sit under a palmetto and listen to the ocean,

but points out that our tree is rotting from the inside out, swarming with monstrous bugs. A buzzard circles, as if echo his ominous tone. The doctor says if he can hang on for another six months and keep those numbers stable, they can start thinking about a prosthetic. I watch Diego cringe.

He tries the hammock, but he was right: he can't get in, much less out. From the kitchen counter I watch him crawl to the picnic table to hoist himself up. I wait the requisite hours to look for the folding chairs, to persuade him to sit on the deck with me, but I don't know whether it's his pride or mine I'm salvaging.

"The water rises," he growls, and because the tide's going out, I know he means our planet, not our marsh. We sit together, lost in our exile, at the edge of the dying world. Pileated woodpeckers have sprung up in every tree, their mad percussion the closest we will get to a twilight tango. The first streak of sunset, Nehi orange, struts across our horizon.

I'm not sure Diego sees the sun setting, or the cormorants or the egrets or the Carolina wrens who have built a city in the pines that separate my property from the absentee landlord's next door. I wonder what that landlord thinks when he comes to check on his place after a Dreamvacation.com renter drives off. I wonder what the dream vacationer thinks: that we are an old married couple, I reckon, that I have stuck by my wounded vagabond of a man. Little does he know: I wouldn't say that desire still hounds me night and day, but I wouldn't say either that I'm out of its claws.

Diego, I believe, has escaped desire on one leg, and I don't think he will ever look back.

\* \* \*

In the morning, he's crumpled on the couch as usual but I notice that he troubled to take his trousers off before he drifted—that's a new development. I creep closer to see if he's awake, to take my first long look at the stump since the hospital. I was right: that surgeon wrapped it neatly as a Christmas present. It's no stranger than a foot—reader, have you ever looked at an old man's foot?

I have my chance. Maybe it isn't my right—maybe I should ask—but I can't stop myself. That stump is as beautiful to me as Diego's body ever was. I bend to kiss it, and Diego, deep in the sleep of despair or release or resignation, doesn't so much as stir. You tell me: does this last transgression signal that I'm still exploiting him?

Diego farts his answer, the way Diego would, and beyond him the marsh stirs to life: the algae blooms, the sawgrass struggles to breathe, the oysters squeeze themselves in disbelief. I know perfectly well what will happen if he stays. The time to paint I've so jealously amassed will be wrenched away as I fetch pills and prepare injections and hide wine. I'll witness every second of his decline. I'll watch despair, the unforgivable sin, take the form of flesh—and I'm not entirely certain whose flesh will succumb first.

Resentment sends my heart clattering, but in the marsh, the birds consult each other about the weather—an afternoon storm, maybe?—and decide to go about their business, which is not the dying planet but their prospects for breakfast. Reader, what can I do? I go about my business too. I spoon the coffee.

The room fills with light, with the yeasty smell of Diego, the sound of coffee dripping: ONEtwoThreefour. I perch on a stool at the edge of the world and let my eyes rest on the horizon. I don't have much time, and I have all the time in the world.