

John McEnroe's Omelet

Why would Kelly recognize him at table six? He orders a tomato and spinach omelet with hash browns. This is SoHo. This is the 1990's. You only see what you expect to see. True, there's something familiar about him. The smooth bars across his forehead, the high hairline, the set of his eyes. But at first Kelly is caught by his companion, a redhead in a short skirt, legs bladed like scissors, swinging her gaze through other people as if afraid of seeing them. Kelly knows that look from the inside-out. It's the look of a woman who can't quite square her circles with men, trying to appeal and conceal at once.

When Kelly stops by their table to ask how's everything, she freezes at the sight of his empty plate. That's when she puzzles out his face. Wrinkles deeper. Hair graying and cropped closely. No headband, no tennis whites, no pout. But you don't need vintage video to call it a match.

Through the kitchen hatch Juan tells her McEnroe owns a gallery nearby. An art gallery? Come on. You can't be serious, man. You cannot be serious.

He becomes a regular, two or three times a week along with the other dealers and artists, the low-altitude execs, the untagged wildlife. The omelet disappears every time. Does he chew? He's pleasant and polite. He tips twenty-five percent. It's a welcome break from the ladies bussed in from the retirement home on Long Island every Tuesday morning who all want decaf with their meal, not before, so it's fresh and hot, the B&T gagglers asking what flavor coffees do you serve? Coffee-flavored coffee. Don't even ask about the food. There's enough heat in her day to keep her warm at night. McEnroe is an easy serve and return, with his girlfriend on some kind of tropical starvation diet.

Until one day she isn't there. McEnroe sits alone with his empty plate, reading the *Times* and staring out the window. Kelly knows that look too. While she's refilling his coffee he spots the infinity symbol on her wrist.

"A tattoo," he says, "is a permanent record of a temporary attitude."

She leans upright with the coffee pot, hand on hip. "Like video of someone yelling at an umpire."

"Regrets. I've had a few."

"But then again," she says, "infinity washes it all away. It goes on forever, with or without us. That's the point."

He gestures vaguely at the air. "We used to think the ocean was infinite. We used to think the stars were fixed. And now what? We don't even know if it's a single universe any more. Is it a multiverse? Is it expanding forever? Or will it contract and crush us in the end?"

"This is what happens when you read the Science section."

He smiles sadly. "And the Sports."

Should she show him her other wrist? A circle with a diagonal line. The empty set. Everything on one hand, nothing on the other. It could have been a real slash, blade against skin, to mark her unfinished math degree, her boyfriend's wandering eye, but that was a momentary wish.

She nods at his empty plate. "How's the omelet?"

"Is or was?"

"Answer my question." She says it softly. "The question, jerk."

His eyes brighten for a vivid instant like a ball hitting the line, chalk flying up.

"Good and gone."