

# MILWAUKEE

## Celeste

Celeste Ontario, forty-two, five-foot-eight, buxom, with shoulder-length hair of the darkest variety of blonde, resembles both her handsome French-Canadian father and her striking Swedish mother, as does Celeste's sole sibling, a two-years-younger sister named Margarite who teaches yoga and *tai chi* in Toronto and has two teenaged children, three dogs, and no husband.

A successful professional actress, Celeste has no children of her own. Married for two unhappy years in her late twenties to a man who turned out to be homosexual, Celeste has been in three relationships with men since then, none lasting more than a year. For the last seven years she has been resolutely single, save for occasional sexual entanglements with other actresses, none of those entanglements lasting more than a few weeks.

A voracious reader of fiction and an excellent tennis player, Celeste is a stylish dresser, though under no circumstances will she wear uncomfortable shoes. She attends jazz dance classes three times a week, takes twice-weekly singing lessons, and would love to have a dog but feels she moves too often. Her sense of humor runs to the ironic and she strongly identifies with the character of Rita, the stoic leader of a band of outlaws in Nicolas Thorsen's movie *Arc of Thunder*. When tipsy, Celeste likes to play the piano and sing old standards such as "Love Is Here To Stay" and "But Beautiful".

By the time Celeste was seven, she was keenly aware that she was more intelligent than most people, and at

her mother's urging she became adept at downplaying her braininess so as not to infuriate her father or intimidate the kids at school. To this day, Celeste keeps her smarts under wraps unless she is absolutely certain the person or people she's with won't mind her brilliance, though she would never characterize herself as brilliant.

Somewhat vain of her strength and athleticism, Celeste has known since late childhood that boys and men and girls and women find her attractive for both her physical attributes and her sparkling personality. Despite this awareness, she believes her nose is too small, her head and hips too big, her voice too deep, and when juxtaposed to the many slender women she encounters in the theatre world, she feels positively gargantuan.

Unless you have attended live theatre in Phoenix, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, Toronto, or Milwaukee in the last twenty years, you may not have heard of Celeste Ontario, though in the aforementioned cities she is a much sought after actress. And though she has yet to win a notable part in a Broadway or near-Broadway production, Celeste has few equals as an actor.

She met Daniel Niven nineteen months ago at Ollie's, a Milwaukee dive known for excellent fish & chips and inexpensive beer. A few moments after meeting Daniel, Celeste not only wanted to make love with him, but to be his life partner, and she has never stopped feeling that way about him.

## Daniel

**D**aniel Niven is fifty-four, five-foot-eleven, a hundred and sixty-five pounds, with short brown hair going gray. A prolific writer, excellent ukulele player, smoky tenor, walker of great distances, California-born Ashkenazi Celt, Daniel has a sense of humor running to existential absurdity. Twice divorced, gregarious, and quite handsome, he has never considered himself attractive, much like the character of Lundy, the good-natured good-looking innocent in Nicolas Thorsen's movie *Lundy's Folly* with whom Daniel strongly identifies.

Unless you are one of the three hundred and seventeen people who purchased or were given Daniel's one and only published work, a volume of short stories and memories entitled *To Whom Are We Referring?* issued four years ago by Tantamount Press, you probably haven't heard of him.

Despite his lack of commercial success, Daniel has written dozens of novels, plays, and screenplays, as well as hundreds of short stories, while making his living in a wide variety of capacities, most recently as the Editor-in-Chief of a weekly newspaper emanating from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, *Brazen Free Weekly*, known colloquially as *The Brazen*.

When Daniel introduced himself to Celeste Ontario at Ollie's nineteen months ago, he had just seen her in the role of Annie in the musical *Annie Get Your Gun* and thought she was stupendously sexy and strong and heartbreaking in the role.

Expecting nothing more from Celeste than a *Thank You* for his gush of compliments, Daniel was pleasantly surprised by her undisguised interest in him. They blabbed excitedly

for the better part of an hour, both of them thrilled to have found an intellectual and emotional equal of the opposite sex with similar taste in movies and plays and literature and art and food.

Celeste then beat Daniel at darts and billiards, during which beatings he not only wanted to make love with her, but to be her life partner, and he has never stopped feeling this way, though he hasn't the slightest doubt she is at least eleven million times too good for him.

February 12  
**Josephine and Jasmine**

**A**t noon in a marvelous old house on the East Side of the aforementioned Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the outside temperature minus-three degrees Fahrenheit, Celeste sits in the middle of a large gray sofa in her psychotherapist's cozy den, explaining for the umpteenth time why she will not initiate sex with Daniel, despite her eagerness to embark on a sexual relationship with him.

"I know I could easily overcome his reluctance to take the final step, so to speak," she says, her subtle accent neither Swedish nor Quebecois but a little of both. "He's so ready every time I'm with him I don't know how he keeps from dragging me to bed. But if I seduce him, I will have supplied the crucial impetus and thus empower him to remain non-assertive, which would launch yet another emotionally imbalanced relationship, something I refuse to participate in ever again."

"Could we be overthinking this?" asks Celeste's therapist, Josephine Katz, a reassuringly relaxed Jewish gal from Chicago in her late sixties with long gray hair, a wearer of colorful capes and serapes.

"No," says Celeste, toying with the pleats of her darling green jumper. "The last thing he needs from me is to be rewarded for his insecurity. I've done that too many times with other people, men *and* women, always with disastrous results, and I vowed never to be that sort of enabler again. Ever."

"You seem very sure about what Daniel needs and

doesn't need," says Josephine, frowning. "I wonder how you can be so sure."

"I will never again be the relational aggressor," says Celeste, hating how haughty she sounds. "What I mean is, I don't want to reward him for being afraid to assert himself. I just don't think that's good for him *or* me."

"I find it interesting," says Josephine, pausing for a moment before completing her sentence, "that you began today's session by saying you haven't returned Daniel's last four phone calls. I wonder why you don't see that as a rejection of him and a confirmation of his fear that you don't care about him as much as he cares about you."

"It is not a rejection of *him*," says Celeste, emphatically shaking her head, "but of his negative self-image. If he's going to call me and leave messages berating himself and whining about the unfairness of life, I'm not going to encourage that kind of self-abnegation by calling him back. I'm done enabling other people's neuroses. I have enough neuroses of my own to worry about."

"He whines about the unfairness of life?" Josephine purses her lips. "You've never mentioned that before. I wonder why."

"Well, he doesn't whine," says Celeste, mad at herself for characterizing Daniel as a whiner. "But I imagine that's what he's thinking."

"And he berates himself?"

"No. Not really, but... I'm so tired of waiting for him to..."

"What?"

"Initiate sex."

"Maybe he feels your impatience as dislike. I mean..." Josephine shrugs. "Who wants to get sexy with somebody who dislikes them?"

"I don't dislike him. I'm crazy about him." Celeste glares at the sunlight slanting through the window. "But I *hate* that he doesn't believe in himself. He's brilliant and funny and kind and thoughtful, he's a fantastic writer, and he's ten thousand times better than any man I've ever known, but he thinks he's shit. I hate that. I just hate it."

“So maybe you hate *him*.”

“No. I love him.” She grits her teeth. “I just... I shouldn’t see him anymore. We’re not helping each other.”

“Why do you say that?” asks Josephine, smiling curiously. “Your friendship with Daniel has been a great boon for you.”

“But I want him to be more than my friend,” says Celeste, her eyes filling with tears. “It’s insane we can’t be lovers.”

“Your biological clock is sounding the alarm, Celeste. You want to have a child.”

“So?” she says petulantly, disgusted with herself for acting this way with Josephine. *Of all people. What is wrong with me?*

“So...” says Josephine, taking a deep breath, “maybe it’s unrealistic to think Daniel will suddenly become confident and secure and relationally aggressive after fifty-some years of being given little support for what he does and for who he is. Maybe there isn’t a perfect man out there for you. Maybe perfection is an illusion. Maybe this is an illusion. Life. I don’t mean to lecture you, Celeste. But we are fragile, all of us, in some ways. And you know he’s doing the best he can, as are you. So have mercy. Be kind to him. I’m not suggesting you seduce him. I’m suggesting you love him as he is and not for what you wish he was. And if being with him and not being his lover is too painful for you, then by all means stop seeing him. But don’t make him a villain. He’s been a healing light in your life, and I must remind you of this.”

Celeste goes from therapy with Josephine to lunch with her friend Jasmine Schwartz, fifty-two, a long-time stalwart of the Braverman Theatre Company, a voluptuous redhead from Boston with a brassy voice.

They dine at *Plush*, a swank East Side eatery, and when their waiter strolls away with their order, Jasmine gives Celeste a wide-eyed look and says, “So what’s the latest with the divine Daniel? I am *so* jealous. You’re not only the best actress in Milwaukee, you have the hottest boyfriend. Not fair.”

“He’s not really my boyfriend,” says Celeste, shaking her



head. "He's... we're friends, that's all."

Jasmine gasps. "You're not sleeping with Daniel?"

"No," says Celeste, looking away.

"Jesus," says Jasmine, looking in the direction Celeste is looking. "Why did you stop? What happened?"

"We never started," says Celeste, thinking of the countless times she and Daniel have been on the fabulous verge of making love. *But we never go over the verge.*

"Why not?" asks Jasmine, aghast. "You're obviously madly in love with each other. What's stopping you?"

"It's complicated." Celeste smiles bravely. "We both have a history of things not working out, so we've been taking it slow and..."

"Slow?" says Jasmine, outraged. "You've been seeing each other for almost two years. That's more than slow. That's... glacial."

"I'd rather not talk about this," says Celeste, shaking her head. "Are you excited about doing *The Man Who Came To Dinner*?"

"No," says Jasmine, grimacing. "I'm excited about you giving Daniel my number and telling him to call me ASAP. Please? Because if there was ever a man who should be frequently busy in bed, Daniel is that man, and I am that woman with whom he should be busy." She frowns gravely. "Don't tell me he's gay. He seems so not gay."

"He's not gay," says Celeste, clearing her throat. "He's..."

"Impotent?" whispers Jasmine, horrified.

"No," says Celeste, shaking her head. "But he's having a very hard time right now. He just lost his job, doesn't know what he might do next, and..."

"What he might do next is come live with me," says Jasmine, gaping at Celeste. "Assuming *you* don't want him. He's stupendous. Who cares if he doesn't have a job? How can you not just... fuck his brains out?" She closes her eyes and puts a hand on her heart. "Sorry. Raging hormones."

"Don't be sorry," says Celeste, forcing another smile as the waiter approaches with their lunch. "Mine are raging, too."

## Halbert and Karen

On that same February twelfth at three in the afternoon, Daniel sits on a small well-worn leather sofa in his tiny studio apartment a few blocks from the freeway in Milwaukee's economically chaotic Sherman Park. He is wearing two long-sleeved T-shirts under two sweatshirts under a down jacket under a heavy rain parka. He has on thermal underwear, thick brown corduroy trousers, two pairs of socks, heavy leather boots, and his head and ears are covered by a gray wool cap, yet despite these many layers of clothing, he is freezing because he is out of money and can't afford to turn his heater on.

The temperature outside is stuck at minus three degrees and Daniel hasn't had a decent meal in five days, having lost his job two weeks ago when *Brazen Free Weekly* went out of business and the publisher gave him no severance pay. Daniel moved here from California two years ago and took the helm of the benighted weekly, circulation ostensibly seventy-three thousand, unaware the publisher was planning to shutter the paper sooner than later because he thought print media was dead. Daniel wishes the publisher had given him a couple months notice before killing *The Brazen*, but he did not, so here sits Daniel in dire straits.

The phone rings. Hoping the caller is Celeste, Daniel answers the old landline phone—he doesn't have a mobile phone because of the aforementioned lack of funds—and a man with a Danish accent says, "Daniel Niven? This is Nicolas Thorsen. Perhaps you've seen some of my movies."

As most people over the age of forty know, Nicolas Thorsen is one of the most famous and influential movie

directors in the world. Thus, following a brief upsurge of wild hope, Daniel realizes the caller can't possibly be Thorsen and must be Halbert Halsey, Daniel's friend, playing a not-very-funny joke.

Halbert has been one of Daniel's most persistent pals since they were fifteen and sophomores at Woodbury High in Woodbury, California, a remote suburb of San Francisco. Today Halbert is a successful psychotherapist, a fact that would boggle the mind of anyone who knew him in high school.

A frustrated actor, Halbert loves to call Daniel and pretend to be publishers interested in Daniel's unpublished novels, or actors and directors and sometimes actresses interested in Daniel's unproduced plays and screenplays. The most telling thing about Halbert's many such calls to Daniel is that Daniel always, at least for the first few seconds, believes Halbert really is the person he says he is and *I am about to be lifted out of poverty and anonymity into a realm where women as marvelous and complicated and funny and bright as Celeste Ontario routinely give me the time of day and much more.*

And only because Daniel was planning to call Halbert and beg for a loan of a thousand dollars does he humor his old friend by saying, "Yes, this is Daniel Niven. How may I help you?"

"Well," says Halbert, his imitation of Thorsen holding up rather well, "I've just finished reading *To Whom Are We Referring?* a second time and I was amazed by how much more I laughed the second time through. I rarely use the word *genius*, Daniel, but for you there is no better word. I'm hoping we can entice you to come to England and work with us for the next year or two, and longer if things work out. I may have to go to Los Angeles and New York during your time with us and I will be delighted if you would accompany me on those travels. In any case, we will cover all your expenses and pay you two thousand dollars a week to collaborate on various projects with us. I feel your writing voice is the twin of my cinematic voice. When I read your stories I feel I am watching movies I might have made. Your dialogue is so natural, which is something I strive for and could use your help with."

Impressed by the length of this Danish-accented spiel, but feeling mightily abused, Daniel says, “Halbert that was your best impersonation ever. Did you work from a script or was that entirely off the cuff?”

“Oh, Halbert!” says Halbert, laughing uproariously. “I love when Halbert appears in your stories. I laughed until I wept when he called pretending to be Greta Gerwig. So preposterous, yet I desperately wanted to believe he was Greta. And by the way, you captured her way of speaking exactly. Oh, Daniel, you are brilliant, and this really is Nicolas Thorsen. How can I prove this to you before we meet? Maybe if we send you a small advance you will believe me. I haven’t laughed so hard in years. Thank you so much, Daniel. Please come to England. Say yes.”

“This isn’t funny, Halbert,” says Daniel, resisting the urge to shout. “I’m down to my last few dollars. My rent is due. Celeste has stopped returning my calls and I can’t afford to heat my apartment, though it’s minus three degrees outside. I would tell you to fuck off except I desperately need to borrow a thousand dollars from you. May I? Please? You sound just like Thorsen. Bravo. But enough already.”

“Daniel,” says Halbert, continuing his imitation of Thorsen, “give me your email address and I will send you some money. When you are convinced this is not a joke, write me back or call me and I will have Nisha arrange for you to come to Oxford, assuming the idea of working with me appeals to you.”

And because Daniel is so desperate for money, he recites his email address, enunciating each letter slowly and clearly and finishing with, “A thousand will save my life.”

Enraged and humiliated, Daniel braves the murderous cold and walks four icy blocks to Ollie’s to thaw out and have a much-earlier-than-usual beer. He drinks his first bitter stout in a single angry gulp, spends his last few dollars on a second stout, and accepts Karen’s offer to smoke a joint with her when she takes her break—Karen Goss the bartender at Ollie’s from three in the afternoon until eleven at night.

They stand by the kitchen heater vent in the alley behind the old brick building, and as the cannabis

reconfigures the circuitry in Daniel's corpus callosum—his first taste of marijuana in twenty years—it dawns on him that Halbert is incapable of sustaining a decent imitation of anyone for more than a sentence or two and never in ten million years could have come up with those lines spoken by whoever that was imitating Thorsen.

"Which means there is a possibility, however remote," says Daniel to Karen, who is thirty-nine, six-foot-two and magnificently Rubensesque, her black hair piled high on her head, "that Thorsen himself, *the* Thorsen, may have actually called me, little Danny Niven stuck in his freezing little cave in freezing Milwaukee with no money and no job and no chance with Celeste."

"I'll bet it *was* Thorsen," says Karen, who hails from Kentucky and used to be a massage therapist before her wrists and thumbs gave out. "I'd sure call you if I were Thorsen. You're a great writer, Danny. Reading you in *The Brazen* is the high point of my week. Was."

"Impossible," scoffs Daniel. "Thorsen? Call *me*? Little me? Never. He who made *Arc of Thunder* and *The Beach of Fond Farewells* and *Lundy's Folly*? Three of the greatest movies ever made? Ridiculous. But then who *did* call me if not Halbert? And why would anyone want to torture me like that? Little me. Did one of my ex-wives hire an actor to rub salt in the wound of my never succeeding at anything? No. They don't hate me. They may pity me, but they don't hate me. I doubt they ever even *think* about me. But who else would do this to me? Who else knows of my adoration of Thorsen? Grady? Celeste? You?"

"The thing is," says Karen, wearing only sandals and a flimsy green Milwaukee Bucks sweatshirt over a red T-shirt tucked into purple harem pants, yet she is somehow not cold, "we are mostly what we believe we are. Right? Not entirely, but mostly. So if you believe you're a tiny person stuck in Milwaukee with no money and no job and no chance with Celeste then that's what you'll be. Mostly. Right? Correct me if I'm wrong. I mean... who *does* have a chance with Celeste? You know? How did *she* end up in Milwaukee? Whenever she comes into Ollie's I feel like God has arrived."

"Every time I'm with her," says Daniel, seeing Celeste

sitting across the table from him at the Thai restaurant where they used to meet for lunch on Tuesdays *before I lost my job*, “I’m amazed she has two minutes for me, let alone two hours. It beggars belief that such a goddess would want to spend time with a wee wastrel such as I.”

“Why those adjectives, Danny? Why that noun? Why wee wastrel? Why choose diminutives when you might choose *large* and *free* and *hero*? You’re brilliant and charming when you’re not choking on self-doubt, and believe me, I know all about choking on self-doubt. Let’s try shining an enlarging light on you. Okay? Go on. I’m listening.”

“I’m an excellent writer,” says Daniel, giggling. “Okay, wait.” He quells his giggling by recalling the last time he and Celeste were erotically enmeshed at his place and he asked if she thought he was too old for her and she swiftly terminated the enmeshment and skedaddled.

“Much more positive,” says Karen, blowing a dense cloud of smoke into the frigid air of the dimly-lit alley, the kind of cloud Thorsen dissolves from into a seemingly unrelated scene until hours later you realize the two scenes are *entirely* related, though not immediately obviously so. “You’re an excellent writer and...”

“I loathe unclarity. Non-clarity. Unclearness. I abhor poetical efforting. If we’re in an alley, say we’re in an alley. On a sub-zero afternoon in Milwaukee. How can you not be cold? I have six layers on and I’m freezing. I’m dressed like Nanook of the North and you’re practically naked. Don’t write three paragraphs before you let the reader know where we are and how cold it is.”

“And?”

“How can you not be cold?”

“I’m going through menopause. I get hot flashes you wouldn’t believe. I was melting in there. Feels delicious out here. Say more about not being a wee wastrel.”

“My stories are to literature what Thorsen’s movies are to cinema,” says Daniel, giggling again. “He even said so. Sort of. The person imitating Thorsen.”

“Fine, but what are you according to *you*?” Karen rises up on her toes as if lifted by invisible wires. “Forget about

what other people think, Danny. What do *you* think you are?"

"I'm sweet," says Daniel, thinking of how Celeste is always telling him with her eyes how sweet she thinks he is, *or so I imagine*. "I want to bring joy to people with my writing and my music and my gently ironic sense of humor."

"You do bring joy," says Karen, looking at her watch. "You just brought me some and now I have to go back to work."