

TWO BOOKS IN ONE
A SEASON IN NEW YORK
AND
WINTER SOLSTICE



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A Season in New York & Winter Solstice by J. L. McDonough

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Lynn lay on her back, watching the stars scattered above her drift slowly across an unusually clear late July sky. Raising her head from the mattress she had hauled to the roof of her apartment building, she could see the lights of barges and ships traveling the East River, and beyond the river the brilliant towers of Manhattan loomed into the night, overpowering stars that would have shined above a natural horizon.

In contrast to the frenetic human hustle just across the water Lynn's Long Island City, Queens, neighborhood was as silent as the vast heavens overhead. The southernmost blocks of her street, Vernon Boulevard, comprised an active, bustling neighborhood in the daytime, but nightlife was the province of other, more lustrous areas of New York.

Truncated by the wide Long Island Expressway at its descent into the mid-town tunnel to Manhattan, the Boulevard's dead end had been turned into a tiny, but pleasant park, the most important element of which was the final subway station in Queens, one stop from Grand Central Station. The subway entrance drew thousands of commuters each weekday, but the significant life, energy, and commerce of the neighborhood remained those of a traditional, insular Italian enclave. It had always amazed Lynn that many Long Island City residents rarely crossed the river to Manhattan. With the single exception of Belomini's Bar, an institution that never closed, simply drawing its blinds to ignore the city's ordinances and to admit at any hour those who knew the proper knock, the area closed down at night as tightly as any small midwestern town.

It was surprising, then, when the sound of an approaching automobile disturbed the evening's silence. Even more surprisingly, the auto stopped somewhere near Lynn's building. She rolled over on her mattress and cautiously, much like a soldier lying in ambush, peered over the roof's low rampart. Across the street Belomini's, hosting the anointed, cast a warm glow of subdued light through drawn blinds, and to both the left and right the street, as she would have expected, was deserted.

Searching for the source of the sound that had disturbed her, Lynn stretched a bit farther over the ledge, and discovered, three stories below just

in front of her doorway, a car parked at the curb. While she watched, two men stepped out of the vehicle and quietly pushed the doors shut. Though from Lynn's perspective they were just tops of heads and moving arms and legs, one was clearly bald, and she thought she recognized the other to be the tenant of an apartment above the cigar store opposite her building. Confirming her surmise, the two men crossed the street to the doorway leading to the apartment above the tobacconist's.

The bald man, waiting for his companion to unlock the door, turned to the street and looked up at the sky. Instinctively, Lynn lowered her profile, just barely peering over the ledge. She could see that though the unknown man had no hair on his head, he could boast a thick and full mustache. When the two men had disappeared into the building, Lynn gazed idly for a few moments at the once more vacant scene below, then rolled over to resume watching the stars. Her mood, however, had been interrupted and, beginning to feel a bit chilled, she sat up, grabbed her T-shirt from beside the mattress, and pulled it on, tugging it a bit to watch it form over her small, almost child-like breasts. She cupped a hand over each breast, enjoying the sensation of each one's shape.

Pleased with herself, she rose and walked across the roof to the rear of the building, stepped over the edge onto a steel ladder affixed to the wall and climbed down one flight to another roof. Beside the ladder was an open window through which Lynn climbed into the living area of her apartment.

Carved from a former factory floor, the apartment was really one large room. It's only separate room was the bathroom, which filled most of one side of the apartment, leaving a narrow alcove that had been outfitted as a kitchen. A larger second alcove, partially closed off by a tall Japanese screen and occupied by a double bed, a dresser, and an armoire, served as a bedroom.

Lynn placed an expandable screen in the open window, then edged her way around a couch and a stone pillar that testified to the apartment's former nature and entered the bathroom, emerging some minutes later wearing a long, lacy nightgown. A few steps brought her to the bed alcove and within minutes she was soundly asleep.

Just at dawn the next morning, beating, as she usually did, her alarm clock, she sprang from bed fully awake. She opened the armoire door, hung her nightgown on a hook, pausing, naked, to look down at her breasts, just

touching them gently with the fingers of each hand. She closed her eyes to savor the sensual pleasure of touching her nipples, a reverie that was interrupted by her alarm urging her to begin preparations for her ritual morning run.

From the floor of the armoire she grabbed a large sweatshirt and a pair of sweatpants. After adding socks and running shoes, she hurried to the bathroom, brushed her teeth, and pulled her long hair into a ponytail.

Under the thick sweatshirt her breasts all but disappeared, becoming more suggestions than unmistakably female characteristics. Though she regretted it, the resulting compromise of her desired gender identity was dictated by the need to compensate for an even more suggestive bulge in the crotch of her sweatpants, a concession to her masculinity that was necessary for comfortable running.

Resigned, as she had to be each morning, to the reversion, she went into the parlor area of the apartment and devoted fifteen minutes to careful stretching before bounding out the door and down the two flights of steps to the building's tiny lobby.

Stepping outside, she drew the pleasant morning air deeply into her lungs and performed a few final stretches. Though the sidewalks were not exactly crowded, increasing numbers of people were moving south along Vernon Boulevard, the early tricklings of a human stream that would grow to a torrent flowing from the north to be joined by others from the east and west, all headed for the tiny park and its entrance to the subway that bore uncountable numbers of workers beneath the river to Manhattan.

Lynn began her run, passing the early morning commuters, many of whom were entering or leaving Nick's Restaurant, having set out early enough to enjoy breakfast at the early opening diner on the western edge of the park. She ran to the corner south of her building and turned right onto a still deserted street of modest bungalow homes scattered among unawakened and nondescript warehouses and wholesale businesses, then crossed the empty parking lot of a tennis club that was little more than a large inflated dome covering a pair of asphalt courts and served foreign Manhattanite yuppies.

Running out of street, she turned north at the edge of the river and ran steadily on along the carcass of what had once, decades ago, been a street,

pounding in solitude along crumbling and cracking concrete that had served a once vibrant river front. Decayed, abandoned, weathered and rotted wharves and isolated, moss covered poles rising in defiant survival above lapping waves outlined the forms of long collapsed piers. Before Lynn throughout this leg of her run loomed the soaring arch of the 59th Street Bridge connecting the Borough of Queens with Manhattan.

Though raucous seabirds or loudly intrusive boat traffic occasionally caught her attention, her focus as she ran north was on the bridge, on its gracious, triumphant engineering that dominated the view before her. With a bit of regret she at last reached it, running then beneath its gargantuan pillars for several blocks until she returned to Vernon Boulevard and turned south toward home.

None of the charm of the riverfront colored her return run. She negotiated traffic, pedestrians, and in one particularly tricky block, the tangle of nighttime cab drivers returning their hacks to a garage for the day crew. She extended her run a bit each day, and reaching her limit, she looked ahead with anticipation at her own block. While still several blocks away, she discerned unusual activity near her home. Red and blue lights were flashing somewhere near her building, and there seemed to be a crowd gathered.

As she closed on the end of her run, she discerned that police cars and an ambulance had closed off the final block of the boulevard and that the people crowded about, rather than moving to the subway, were milling about the building across the street from her own. Of no interest to the onlookers, she slowed to a walk and approached the crowd from the rear, seeking to discover the source of the trouble.

"What's happening?" she asked a particularly tall man straining to look over the top of the crowd.

"Well," he began, but upon turning to see who was speaking, he hesitated and with some perplexity studied Lynn. "I think," he resumed, "someone has died in there." He indicated the building containing the cigar store. "I heard it was a murder." He turned his back to Lynn moved several steps away.

Lynn watched for a few moments, but unable to see much and unwilling to inquire further, she walked off to the entrance to her own

building, took a cool-down stretch, then went inside.

2

Leaving a trail of discarded sweat clothes behind as she passed from the apartment door to the bathroom, Lynn took a shower and soon emerged clean and refreshed. Standing before the mirror, she dried her hair and applied makeup. Gingerly gathering the dirty athletic gear, she deposited it in a dirty clothes hamper beside the armoire from which she then selected a dress, placing it on her bed. With considerable pleasure she felt the morning's gender ambiguity recede as she replaced running gear with panties, brassiere, and a slip. As she sat on the bed to draw on a pair of nylon stockings, she noticed the clock on her dresser and, surprised by the lateness of the hour, hurried the usually protracted pleasure of securing the stockings with garters.

She yanked the dress down over her head and, while struggling to zip it, ran to her desk and stuffed several papers and notebooks into an attaché case. Satisfied that she had everything, she stepped into a pair of high-heeled shoes, grabbed her purse from the dresser, and opened the apartment door.

Standing on the landing outside were two men in conservative business suits, one about to knock, and both as startled as Lynn at the opening of the door.

"Oops," she stammered, surprised. "I didn't know anyone was here." Regaining sufficient composure to be cautious, she stepped back and partially shut the door. "Can I help you?"

The two men stood one behind the other and both presented serious, rather somber aspects. The one who had raised his hand, about to knock, was somewhat younger and considerably taller than his partner, who himself was far from short. A stocky man, he had conspicuously large ears, their size accented by his severely short haircut, and a rather flat, bent nose, the nose of someone who had perhaps spent some time in a boxing ring. He opened his suit coat, revealing a police badge and identification.

"I'm sorry we startled you, Ma'am," he spoke with a gravelly, yet gently pleasant voice. "I'm Detective Anderson, and this," he indicated the scowling older man to his rear, "is Detective Matthews. There has been some trouble across the street, and we're just checking through the neighborhood to see if anyone heard or saw anything unusual last night, probably sometime after midnight."

Lynn's attention, during the younger detective's speech, was held by his silent, but somewhat menacing partner. She stared into the man's eyes, barely paying attention to what the other detective was saying.

Matthews also apparently ignored his partner "The name plate on the mailbox in the lobby says, 'B. Williams.' Is that you?" he asked brusquely.

"What? I'm sorry." Lynn was rattled by her interlocutor's intensity.

"Do you reside here?" he continued. "Are you B. Williams?"

Lynn hesitated, obviously flustered. "Yes. I live here. I'm B. Williams."

Detective Anderson pulled out a small notebook and pencil, but before he could resume his questions, the other officer nudged him aside and directly confronted Lynn.

"It's, 'Mister B. Williams, is it not?" He shot the *mister* out as an accusation. "Is that Bradley? Bruce?" He took a step closer.

Lynn capitulated, answering dejectedly. "It's Brian."

As triumphant as Detective Anderson was dumbfounded, Matthews took over the inquiry.

"May we come in, Mr. Williams?" Again he emphasized the *mister*.

Lynn stepped back and directed the two policemen to the living area. They took the offered seats on the couch, and Lynn sat, awkwardly self-conscious, on the chair at her desk.

The younger detective remained stunned, fixedly watching his partner as he continued his questioning.

"So, Mr. Williams, we have what appears to be a homicide in your

neighborhood. A..." he looked to Anderson who failed to follow his partner. "What's the victim's name?"

"Name." He consulted his notes. "Jason Victor."

Matthews turned to Lynn. "Yes, Jason Victor. He apparently lived on the second floor above the tobacconist's. Did you know him, Mr. Williams?"

"No." Lynn's voice altered just slightly. It didn't adopt a lower range, as it had never had any falsetto; it just became a bit less gentle, less soft. "I'd seen him a few times on the street. I didn't know his name. I'd never spoken with him."

"Well, now he seems to have been murdered." Matthews said.

"Really? That's... astounding." Lynn fidgeted, becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

"It seems he was gay, Mr. Williams."

"Ah." Lynn understood the detective's implication. "I see." The unsubtle suggestion served to inspire some defensive spark. "Well I didn't know him, detective, and actually, as I suspect you know, most firmly gay men have no interest in someone such as myself."

"Yes, I do know." The detective's smug affirmation bore the weight of accusation. "Perhaps that was a problem." Before Lynn could respond, he altered his direction. "You say you were going out, Mr. Williams?"

The abrupt shift cost Lynn some of her recovery. "Yes. I have an appointment and actually, I'm kind of late."

"An appointment?" the detective was unimpressed. "With whom is that?"

"It's in Manhattan, with my agent."

"Agent?" The younger detective had regained sufficient professionalism to return to his notebook. "You're an actress... actor?"

For the first time since the policemen had entered her apartment, Lynn shifted her attention to the less aggressive Anderson. "No. I'm an author." With a sweeping gesture she indicated her cluttered desk. "Or at least sort of."

"An author?" Anderson seemed intrigued. "You sell your work? You're successful?"

Lynn answered with another sweeping gesture, this one displaying her surroundings.

"But you've sold pieces? You're published?"

The senior detective had enough. He put his hand up to silence his partner and resumed questioning Lynn.

"So, Mr. Williams, you were about to go out. Are you under doctor's care for this?" the detective indicated Lynn's gender appearance.

"Yes, I am."

"And you have documentation?"

"Yes, I do."

Lynn reached for her purse, but the detective stopped her.

"That's not necessary, Mr. Williams. I'm sure we can take your word for it. Were you home last night?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"I see your windows give out only to the east, not to the street side. Did you by any chance go out at all last night, say, to Belomini's?"

The detective's smirk revealed how unlikely he knew it to be that Lynn would enter the local bar.

"No," Lynn struggled to turn her concentration from the seemingly uncomprehending stare of the younger detective. "I did however, see the victim, deceased, last night."

"And when and how was this, Mr. Williams."

"I had worked most of the evening. It was warm, so when I quit, I went up on the roof to watch the stars for a while before going to sleep. It's relaxing."

"The roof?" Anderson returned to his notebook.

Lynn turned to him, glad that he was writing and no longer staring at her. "Yes. There's a ladder outside my window," she indicated the window behind the detectives and beyond which was her alcove kitchen, "and I've put a mattress up there for comfort."

"You were alone."

Lynn turned an angered gaze to Matthews.

"Yes, alone. Anyway, Vernon Boulevard is a pretty quiet street in the night, and I heard a car pull up and stop nearby, so I looked over the edge of the roof."

"Go on."

"The car had stopped in front of my building, and two men got out, but they went across the street. One was the guy who lived there."

"You could recognize him?" "He was right below me. Besides, they went in his door."

"What time was this?"

"I'm not certain. Sometime just before 2 AM, I guess, because that's what my clock said when I went to bed, and I didn't stay on the roof long after they had arrived."

"No?" Matthews leaned forward, "Why not?"

"It was getting cool, and the car had kind of ruined the quiet."

"Who was driving?"

"The other man."

"Can you identify the car?"

"Not precisely. I'm not much of a car person, and the street lights tend to wash out colors..."

"Are you an artist, too, Mr. Williams?"

"No, Detective Matthews," Lynn stood defensive ground, "I'm not an artist. It's just true. Anyway, the car was large, probably dark blue. Maybe a Buick. The other man, though, I can tell you, is bald and has a large, bushy

mustache."

"And how do you know that, Mr. Williams?" Matthews asked.

"They were right below me. The man wore no hat, and while he was waiting for Victor to unlock the door, he looked up at the sky."

Matthews looked at Anderson who, when he had completed his notes, responded with an inquiring expression.

The senior detective rose, and spoke to Lynn. "Well, Mr. Williams, you may have been the last person to see Mr. Victor alive, other than his murderer. I'm afraid we're going to have to ask you to miss your appointment and come to the precinct with us. You seem to have some valuable information."

Lynn also rose. "I seem to have missed my time, anyway. You're convinced it's murder?"

"So it seems."

"All right. Just give me a few minutes to call my agent and then... change."

"You needn't do that, Mr. Williams. You're just fine."

Resigned to her exposure, but unwilling to be subjected to possible humiliation on a larger scale, Lynn was unintimidated. "Am I under arrest? Do I need a lawyer?"

"No, no, Mr. Williams," Matthews backed down just enough. "You're not under arrest."

"Then I'm coming voluntarily?"

"We greatly appreciate it."

"Then sit," Lynn picked up the phone, "I'll change."

Matthews shrugged and sat down again.

After a quick call to her agent, Lynn walked to the bed alcove, pulled a suitcase from beneath her bed and carried it into the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later Brian emerged, clean of makeup with his hair in a ponytail, wearing blue jeans and a somewhat battered U. S. Army fatigue

shirt.

Matthews scowled at Brian's appearance and, pointing at the Combat Infantry Badge on the shirt, was unable to contain his disgust.

"Are you trying to be funny? You have no business wearing that badge of honor."

Brian took the offensive. "I have every business wearing it. Check the name, Matthews," he pointed to the nametag: "'Williams.' This is my shirt learned the CIB in Viet Nam in 1968. I have every right to wear it, and I'm going to. Shall we go?"

The three started toward the door, but as Detective Matthews reached for the knob, he turned back.

"By the way, Mr. Williams, just what sort of writing do you do? Do you happen to have any examples we could see?"

Brian sighed with some exasperation. "Yes, I do. Actually, I've published only one thing, a book of short stories. I have a copy here. If you think you can profit from reading it, you may have it.

"I'd like to see it," Detective Anderson eagerly responded to the offer and took possession of the book when Brian had retrieved it from a shelf by the desk.

Brian followed the two detectives out the door, locking it behind them, and down the stairs.