

## Short-Short Fiction

**Barbara Zimmermann**

*Manhattans Imperfect*

*My laughter makes my sister cry. Doubling over and clutching my sleeve, she chokes and sputters, "Oh, Bobbie, bless you." Each time, I wait until Kate has sat upright and settled into a mild sniff and snort before asking why my cracking up grieves her. She never answers directly, instead changes the subject to close out sales at the mall or the price of gas at the pump.*

Today, we settle into our booth at Yorkie's for our weekly lunch date and wait for the server. Kate tightens the band on her ponytail and says for the hundredth time this month, "I really should get my hair cut." Shoulder-length and naturally blonde, her hair is flecked with white and thinning a bit on top. Once, when we were in our mid-thirties, she allowed me to wind her stringy hair in brush rollers and apply makeup to her pale face. When she looked in the mirror at her defined brows, glossy lips, and curled locks, she barked like a dog. "I look like a cocker spaniel!" So much for makeovers.

Now, almost thirty-five years later, her face remains bare of makeup, her hair still straight and anchored at the nape. We're as opposite as vinegar and syrup, me with aqua eye shadow and amber blush, thick hair dyed brown and bobbed. She wears a man's T-shirt and pull-on jeans; I choose to show off my new V-neck top and low-slung crop pants. A great grandmother, Kate has been married for fifty years. I'm divorced, childless.

We order cheeseburgers, fries, and milkshakes that we devour in fifteen minutes. "Smoking keeps you skinny," she mumbles around her last fry. "You lost more weight lately?"

"Don't think so," I say, hoping she won't preach. She's never smoked and a sign on her front door bans the habit in her house. At one-hundred-twenty-five, I'm four pounds less than last week. Of course she would notice, damn it.

She points to the sheet of paper I've pulled from my purse. "What's that?"

"I've written my obituary," I venture. "People are doing that now, you know—to get it right."

"What's to get right? Your date of birth, death, survivors, that's it."

"I want mine to read like a requiem."

"You mean like a hymn?" she asks, then pops vitamin pills and slurps the last of her shake.

"Not really," I say, leaning in. "Just read the obit and play my favorite music in the background. Dance, even." I laugh and her eyes brim with tears. "Cut it out, Kate."

She awakens each morning, she's told me, with her hands balled into fists, jaw clenched, afraid of the end of the world, weekly bills on a fixed income, one grandson's penchant for pulling out hair by the fistfuls, a ten-year-old with a bald spot up front. What would she do if I

told her I had colon cancer, spread to the lymph nodes, all over? So far, only my oncologist and favorite bartender at the Oasis know. I hand her the obituary, which she reads.

*Bobbie Loren Kamens loved her sister Kate and brother-in-law Robert Neely, their kids and grandkids, her lilies and limericks, Saturday evening mass before barhopping, perfect Manhattans and bingeing on burgers, her ex's and friends, didn't do doctors, treadmills, or teas but loved meditation, Oprah and opera, Friday night movies and Flannery O'Connor, blues and Beethoven, former students and colleagues at Central State College, the ones with gonads, they know who they are, and most of all sunsets, fireflies at dusk flickering over the cornfields, sleeping till noon.*

Kate glances up, her eyes narrowed and lower lip trembling. "You loved *all three* ex's?"

"Sure. Ex-husbands are like old girdles, worn out but still comfortable when you're in a pinch. While we're at it," I add, "here are my funeral instructions."

"Enough already of the dying crap." She tugs at her ponytail and glances up at the clock, dabbing her eyes with the table napkin.

I press ahead, knowing she's anxious to check on her husband mowing the back acres of their home in the country. I hand her a pen and flip the obituary over. "Jot this down. After the funeral mass, hold a memorial. Invite my last ex, my favorite, and lie to his lover and tell her I liked her." Kate stares down at the pen. I jab her elbow and she starts scribbling. "Dig for the bong that I stashed in the shoebox marked 'favorite pumps.' The weed's in the coffee can, top shelf of the pantry. Mourners can toke on the terrace at Meeks Mortuary, no one will notice."

My sister starts crying. Finally between sobs, she stammers, "That's awful."

She said the same when I ran away from home at sixteen, each time I married, divorced. Ditto for the two abortions, cigarettes overflowing in ashtrays, empty bottles of Jim Beam and vermouth pitched in the trash. "But it's what I want." I pick up the tab and make my way to the register, leaving Kate to count out quarters for the tip. A few moments later, we head for my car parked at the curb, my sister's eyes swollen and red. At least she's no longer bawling.

After dropping her off, I'll stop at the liquor store, buy a bottle of Beam, bitters not needed, white and red vermouth. No matter how hard I try, though, no two Manhattans ever turn out the same, or perfect. Sort of like sisters, I guess.

I lean forward to kiss her cheek and, instead, we bump foreheads, hard. She laughs. In my mind, for a moment she's eighteen, eager to marry, and I'm two years younger, angry I'll be left on my own with our mother guzzling scotch till she's stupid and a stepfather with wet kisses and groping hands.

"Oh, Kate." I hug her to me. The tip of her ponytail tickles my nose. "It's not your fault," I say for the first time and mean it.