

**Adult Short Story  
Winner**

**Letter to an Unfinished Love: About That Night at the Noshery**

**By Elliot Wilner**

Dear Marta,

I hope this letter finds you well—alive and well, I should perhaps say, considering that 65 years have passed since we met. You won't remember me, of course, after all this time. Why would you? Back then, we had a conversation that lasted little more than half an hour, and I never saw you again. What's more, I was just a high school kid, a month shy of my 16th birthday, and you were 26 years old, already a sophisticated woman, so there's really no reason why you would have realized the kind of impression you were making on me. But you certainly did leave a lasting impression, for I still think of you from time to time after all these years. And I do hope that you're alive and well—and happy.

It was midsummer of 1953 when we met—if I may remind you—in Miami Beach, in an ice cream parlor called the Noshery, which was situated at street level beneath the luxurious Saxony Hotel on Collins Avenue. A few days earlier I had quit my job as a waiter at a hotel in the Catskills and had come to Miami Beach to join my parents, who were vacationing there. After a few days of idling on the beach, and becoming painfully sunburned, I set out in search of a job. I inquired at several of the fancy hotels along Collins Avenue, hoping to find work as a waiter, but was unsuccessful. Finally, after a brief interview at the Noshery, I was told that there was an opening for a busboy on the night shift—and that I should report for work at 6 p.m. that evening.

The Noshery, as you will certainly recall, Marta, was the ultimate ice cream parlor in Miami Beach, maybe in the United States. Cavernous, capacious yet always filled to capacity with ravenous customers from the time it opened at 10 a.m. until it closed at 2 a.m. Did I say ravenous? I should say gluttonous, right? The place was famous for the extravagant portions that were served to the customers: The smallest dish contained a pint of ice cream, and some dishes exceeded a quart, all of it lacquered with chocolate or butterscotch syrup and then lathered with a thick application of whipped cream, and deposited on top of it all were macadamia nuts, cherries, sliced bananas and chunks of pineapple. During the night that I worked with you, when I lugged hundreds of dishes back to the kitchen, I don't recall that I ever returned an empty bowl. Seldom did anyone consume more than half of what they had ordered. Even gluttons have physiological limits, it seems. (By the way, did you notice that I just made reference to "the night" that I worked? Of course, you wouldn't remember, but it was the *only* night that I worked there. I'll explain later.) When I showed up for work that day, shortly before 6 p.m., I was handed my "uniform," a pair of white pants and a white jacket. While I was changing clothes in the locker room, I looked about at the other busboys, most of whom were a few years older than myself, and I realized that they were all speaking Spanish to one another.

Almost all of them were Cuban, I soon learned. The waitresses and busboys at the Noshery worked in teams: one waitress, one busboy at each station. The place was staffed with at least a dozen waitresses, and I, just by chance, was assigned to work with you, Marta. I'm sure it was a random managerial decision, but I can tell you that it was a stroke of fantastic good luck for me. What I mean by good luck is, in the first place, that I was assigned to work with a strikingly good-looking woman, tall, slender, with auburn hair and a dimpled smile. I was immediately drawn to you. And what I mean by fantastic is that, yes, I was smitten with the sort of fantasy that could only smite a still-innocent almost 16-year-old boy. My fantasy *was not* that I might seduce you, Marta—because I wouldn't have known even where to begin—but rather that *you* might seduce *me*. (Can you believe that? My fantasy was that you had a fantasy about me! And this was more than a decade before *The Graduate*, before anyone had heard of Mrs. Robinson.)

My memories of you, however, have nothing to do with your physical appearance or even my fantasy; they are about the story you told me at the Noshery. If you'll indulge me, I would like to briefly retell your story. And I might add that your story has, with the passage of time, become conflated with my story—of an unfinished love—and I have bundled all of it together in this account of “About That Night at the Noshery.”

When I reported to your station that evening, you greeted me warmly and asked my name. “Elliot,” I replied. And you immediately responded, “Why, that was the name of one of President Roosevelt's sons, wasn't it?” You spoke in accented English, which only added to your allure. It wasn't easy for me to identify the accent exactly, but it sounded sort of European. And I was really surprised that you knew about Roosevelt's son. Hardly anyone remembered that one of Roosevelt's sons was named Elliott, even though—faint praise—during his lifetime he was probably the most famous Elliott in the world. So, I knew right away that you were not just another waitress but a sophisticated woman. And I was just an almost 16-year-old boy with acne who had never had a serious relationship with a girl, let alone with a mature woman who spoke with a European accent. Also, I wasn't sure that I knew how to perform the job for which I had just been hired. But I knew that it was destiny that had brought me to that place, to work at that job, to partner with you.

You told me that your name was Marta and that you had been working at the Noshery for about five months, and you cheerfully offered to show me exactly what I needed to do. “Don't worry about anything,” you said. “I'll help you out, everything will be fine.” What I needed to do was actually quite simple: When the diners at one of our assigned tables stood up to leave, I was to clear all the dishes, glasses and cutlery from the table, loading them onto a tray for transport back to the kitchen, and there I would dump the dishes into a huge sink of soapy water and put the glassware and cutlery on a counter near the sink. The dishwashers would do the rest.

The busboys were expected to clear the tables very quickly, because there was always, day or night, a large number of customers sitting or milling about in the reception area, waiting to be seated. After a table had been cleared it was the busboy's responsibility to wipe down the tabletop and arrange clean placemats, cutlery and napkins. I remember, Marta, that you had to show me how to arrange the spoons, the larger tablespoon (for ice cream) next to the knife, the

smaller teaspoon (for coffee or hot chocolate) next to the larger spoon. You'd think I would have known that, but I didn't. Come to think of it, why was there a knife? Or a fork? I can't be sure after all these years, but I suppose the menu included waffles with ice cream, or something of that sort. Does that sound right?

It took all the strength that I could muster to lug one of those loaded trays back to the kitchen. The dishes in which the ice cream concoctions were served were large ceramic bowls, thick and heavy, and there was always a pool of melted ice cream sloshing around in each bowl. As the evening hours passed—and they passed oh so slowly—and we became busier and busier, I was shuttling nonstop between the dining room and the kitchen, and my arms ached and my back ached and my flat feet, which were shod in loafers that lacked any arch support, were paining me even more. It puzzled me no end that the other busboys, most of whom were, as I said, Cuban, and smaller than myself, were lifting their trays with seemingly little effort and moving about at a pace that I could not hope to match. Why was that? I wondered. Were Cubans just stronger—or were they just accustomed to hard work? When it came time for you and me to take our “dinner break,” at 10 p.m., I had already decided that this night would be my last night at the Noshery. I didn't want to find out if I could become accustomed to hard work. Perhaps I would have stayed on the job longer if you had urged me, if you had reciprocated my infatuation—but that, predictably, didn't happen.

We had our “dinner” in a small room off the pantry, known as the “break room.” The room was just big enough to accommodate two small tables and a few chairs, which sufficed for a waitress and busboy team. A half-hour break was allotted to each team on a rotating schedule from 8 to 11 p.m., and we had our break at 10 p.m. I was thrilled to be sitting alone with you in that room, but I was also exhausted, almost too exhausted to eat or to talk. No matter, you did practically all the talking. In the pantry, there was an assortment of sandwiches, potato chips and other snacks, and, of course, ice cream, provided free to the staff for their dinner breaks. You chose a BLT sandwich, I recall, while I had just enough energy to nibble some potato chips and sip from a bottle of Coke.

“Do you keep kosher?” Your question came out of nowhere and took me aback. Why were you asking? I hesitantly answered, “Yes.”

“I'm Jewish, too,” you replied, “and I used to keep kosher when I was younger, when I was together with my family. Before the war. My family was all very religious.” I wasn't sure how to respond to that information. But I didn't have to, because, between bites of your sandwich, you continued talking—almost as if you were pressured to talk.

“Have you noticed that I have an accent?” That was a rhetorical question, obviously, but you thought the question perhaps needed to be qualified, so you added, with a grin, “No, it's not a Spanish accent. I'm not Cuban.” I simply nodded my head as if to say, “I didn't think so.”

“Well, I'm from Czechoslovakia. I was born in Prague and I lived there until I was 14 years old. Just a little younger than you are now. The Germans had taken over the country and it was very

dangerous for the Jews. I suppose you know about the Nazis and the Holocaust, don't you?" Again, I nodded my head affirmatively. (In fact, "Holocaust" was a word that had not yet been widely adopted, but it was familiar to me.) "So," you continued, "my family arranged for my brother and me to be smuggled out to the countryside, where a friend of my father, who was Christian, owned a farm. We hid there for three years."

I was struck dumb. Just a few weeks earlier I had finished reading *The Last of the Just*, one of the first novels to be published that dealt with the Holocaust, a novel that had affected me greatly, and not long before that I had read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. And here I was, actually having a conversation with Anne Frank—not *the* Anne Frank who had been betrayed by neighbors, routed from her hiding place and deported to Bergen-Belsen, but another Anne Frank, who had been hidden for three years and survived! And somehow, Marta, you had found your way from Nazi-occupied Europe to this decadent ice cream parlor in Miami Beach. The irony was stark: Anne Frank—the one whose diary I had read—had starved and died a wretched death in a concentration camp, and now you—the other Anne—were employed in a place where people were gorging on ice cream and eating themselves to death.

"And your brother survived, too?"

"Yes, we both made it; we were never discovered. And after the war, we were adopted by the Christian family that had hidden us." You paused to take another bite.

"Adopted? Why would they adopt you?" My question was naive, but, then again, I was naive about a lot of things. Including the possibility of a romantic relationship developing between a nearly 16-year-old schoolboy and a 26-year-old woman.

"My family didn't survive the war. My parents, my aunts and uncles and cousins, they were all sent to Theresienstadt, and from there they were sent to Auschwitz. No one in the family survived except my brother and me. We had nowhere to go, so the Christian family that had hidden us, the Hruskas, decided that they would adopt us and help us with our education. But I kept my own family's name, Lowy, so that my family's name, at least, would survive."

"What did you do for the three years that you were hiding? You couldn't go to school if you had to stay all the time in the farmhouse."

"No, we couldn't even go downstairs during the day when other people were around, people who came to plow the fields and do other jobs on the farm. But the farm owner and his wife had a son, a couple of years older than my brother and me, who was in high school, and during the evening he would tutor us."

I had a lot of questions I wanted to ask, but our half-hour "dinner break" would soon be over, so I knew I couldn't ask you everything about which I was curious. *Did you ever go outside when it was still light? Were you ever able to enjoy the warmth of the sun?* But what I wanted to know most of all was: *How did you get to America? Why are you working here at the Noshery?* I

waited until you had pushed your plate aside, leaving your sandwich half eaten, and then I asked, “What did you do when the war was over?”

“Well, after the war I went to high school for a year, so that I could graduate and get a diploma. And then I applied to medical school. My parents—who had adopted me—helped put me through medical school. But I didn’t want to stay in Czechoslovakia, so I went to school in Montpellier, France. And my brother moved to Paris, where he still lives.”

“Really? You went to medical school? Did you graduate and become a doctor?”

“Yes, I have a medical degree. I am a doctor.”

Again, I was dumbstruck, and I probably blinked my eyes when I asked, “How...how...how come you’re working as a waitress if you’re a doctor?”

“Well, after I graduated, my boyfriend and I decided that we would come to America. Because of the Displaced Persons Act—do you know about that?—I could come and apply for permanent residency. But since I had graduated from a foreign medical school, I would need to take some additional training and pass another examination, and I just wasn’t ready for all that. So, when we came to Miami last March I looked for a job and here I am.”

It was almost time for us to get back to work. We picked up the napkins, sandwich wrappers and other items from the table and dropped them in a trash bin. As I stood next to you in that small room, I suddenly felt that I was being enveloped by a sort of ambient melancholy. Was I sad because I was condemned to work a few more hours at this job that I had come to hate? Yes, but that wasn’t the main thing. Was I sad on your behalf, because you were working at the Noshery when you deserved to be working as a doctor? Yes, that bothered me. And, of course, your entire story—the loss of your family, the lost years of your adolescence—was profoundly troubling. In years to come, I would often dwell on those matters. But at this moment, as we stood near the pantry door, I was consumed with one overwhelming thought: You had just informed me, in a most casual way—as if it were just an incidental fact, of no concern to me—that you had a boyfriend! That fact was actually of great concern to me.

The more you had talked, sharing with me your experiences of the Holocaust, the more I had become drawn to you. Moreover, we were both Jewish, and you had been raised, like me, in a religious home. Maybe there was too much of an age gap for us to have a romantic relationship, although I, for my part, would have been willing to give it a go, but we could at least have continued to meet and have conversations for the rest of the summer. I would find another job somewhere in Miami Beach and we would meet during our off-hours and talk—about your life, about my life—and get to know one another better. But now all my fantasies had been blown up by the revelation—which you had so casually divulged!—that you had a boyfriend.

Marta, do you remember, I needed to know one more thing before we walked through the pantry door and back into the ice cream parlor: Who, exactly, was this boyfriend? Did he deserve you? Were the two of you serious? Or was it possible—in the best of all my possible worlds—that the two of you weren't getting along very well and were on the verge of a breakup? So I more or less composed myself and blurted out an indirect question, "Where did you meet your boyfriend?"

You smiled at me benignly and even allowed yourself a subdued laugh, no doubt because you knew where that question was coming from and how absurd was my infatuation. "Well, his name is Jan...he is the son of the farm family, the Hruskas, that rescued me and my brother. He was my tutor while I lived in the farmhouse. After the war, he went to medical school in Montpellier, and later I joined him there. We have been together for many years. He became a surgeon, and now he's a resident in a hospital in Miami. He has also, you might be interested to know, been studying with a rabbi, because he wants to convert before we get married."

By now it was 10:30, three and a half more hours to go before the end of our shift. The customers kept coming, even at 1:30 in the morning. You did not appear tired and you managed to smile all the while that you worked, but I barely survived to the end. While you were helping me clear a table, I confided to you that this would be my last night working at the Noshery. You did not appear to be surprised, and you simply said, "Yes, I know it's a very hard job, and I know you don't really need the job," and then, tilting your head in the direction of a busboy who was passing by with a loaded tray, you added, in a soft voice, "not like some other people do."

At 2 a.m., the last customers were ushered out and a CLOSED sign hung on the door. I went to the locker room to change into my street clothes, and then I entered the manager's office to collect my pay. When I told the manager that I would not be returning the next evening, he just shrugged and said, "OK." As I walked out the door, I spotted you and one of the other waitresses standing at the curb, waiting for a cab. I called out, "Goodbye, Marta." You immediately approached and gave me a tight hug and a kiss on each cheek. I suppose that's just how European people say goodbye, kissing each cheek. It might have been just a routine goodbye for you, but I would like to think that it meant more than that. Anyway, it meant a lot to me. I was now on the verge of "losing" you, yet the hug, the kisses and your fragrance would linger always in my memory.

"Marta," I said, "I'm very sorry that I decided to quit and that I won't be working with you anymore."

"That's all right," you replied with a smile, "you can always come back for a dish of ice cream."

I knew, intuitively, that I shouldn't come back, that the story should end here, that I should be content to cherish this experience, my first "unfinished love." But I couldn't help myself and I blurted out, "I'm going to miss you, Marta." What I had actually intended to say was, "I love

you, Marta,” but there was some sort of a speech monitor in my head that blocked out “love you” and permitted only “miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” you said, generously.

“I hope that someday you will be able to quit the Noshery, too, Marta, and that you will be able to work as a doctor. It would be a shame if you didn’t.”

“I don’t know, maybe I will, but I’m not sure. I could probably be happy if Jan and I would get married and have a bunch of children, and then I would just stay home and take care of the children. And I hope that someday I will have a kosher home...just like my parents’ home. Anyway, one doctor in the family is enough, I think.”

You paused for a second, then looked straight into my eyes and said, “I’ve enjoyed talking with you, Elliot. And I’m sure that one day you’ll find a Jewish girl who will be right for you and you’ll be very happy together.”

A cab had pulled up to the curb and you hurried to join the other waitress, who was already entering the cab. Then, after one more wave of your hand, the cab chugged away and I started my walk down the nearly deserted avenue toward my parents’ rental apartment in the South Beach neighborhood. My poor brain could hardly contain all the thoughts that were leapfrogging over one another in my mind. Why did you decide to share your story, such an affecting story, with me? Could I be sure that your story was true? Is Jan Hruska, whom you describe as your longtime boyfriend, a real person? Or did you just invent him in order to quash any idea I might have entertained about making my fantasy come to life?

I did eventually find a Jewish girl who was right for me, and we’ve been very happy together—just as you had predicted, Marta. I haven’t thought about my “unfinished love” very often during the passage of decades, but when I do, my only fantasy is that all your expectations should have come to fruition: marriage to Jan, a bunch of kids and perhaps a kosher home.

Still, all of that having been said, wouldn’t it be nice if you and I could meet once again, however briefly, and share a dish of ice cream at the Noshery?

All the best,

Elliot