

What She Wanted to Believe
Dru Allyson Burtz

The Bronx? He told her *Carol needed to go home—to the Bronx*. That's when it started to make sense.

It was a Saturday night, the summer of 1991, when Marianne received that call. It was more subtle than a *eureka* moment, when the perfect solution bursts forth from deep in your brain like an unexpected thunderclap on a warm summer evening. Instead, it was a creeping realization; it made her cold and dizzy.

Marianne had decided to stay in on that Saturday night in the ground floor apartment of an early nineteenth century Victorian house in Salem, Massachusetts that she rented with Anastasiya. It was the only place in the neighborhood they could afford. Marianne had recently landed her first job out of college, an entry level research assistant in a psychiatric hospital, and Anastasiya worked as a restaurant hostess while she figured out what to do next. They got used to the chipped paint, the faucets that leaked and rattled, and the flickering lights from an electrical system that dated back to the construction of the house.

Anastasiya had tried to convince her to go out that evening, first to the Cashew for a light dinner with a group of friends, and afterwards maybe the Kowloon for drinking and dancing, or wherever the night might take them. Anastasiya—a magnet for people and fun—had a steady stream of invitations to parties and clubs. Marianne was tempted to join her—she always was with Anastasiya—but since they had rolled in at five that morning, after a night of dancing at The Channel, she needed a break. She was happy to stay home and watch TV with Wilbur purring in her lap.

From her seat on the couch, Marianne watched Anastasiya stretch an emerald-green headband over her hair and fix it in place behind her ears. She ran her fingers through the length of her ginger hair. It cascaded down her shoulders and back, and over the curve of her tight black tank top. Anastasiya took out her antique mirror compact and applied a deep red lipstick. She smacked her lips together and tilted her head to consider the color. In her clipped British accent (the one that turned heads when out in public), she said to Marianne, “You sure? Aw, come on, Mari, we’ll have an adventure.” With her pinkie, she corrected her lip contours in the mirror, then clicked the compact closed and slid it into the side pocket of her bag. She called it her good luck talisman, handed down to the eldest daughter each generation, originally from her great-great-great Russian grandmother, Princess Aleksandra.

Anastasiya curtsied and stretched her arms at Marianne. “Voilà!” And Marianne told her again that she was too tired for another late night. She wanted to keep up, but it

was too exhausting with her new (and real) job and lots of plans for her future. Anastasiya borrowed thirty dollars, gave Marianne a peck on her cheek, and sashayed out of the room in her slinky mini skirt and sandals.

Marianne listened to the click click click of Anastasiya's heels when she left the apartment and walked down the porch steps. Marianne pulled her legs up close to her body, wrapped her arms around them, and rested her chin on her knees. She felt mousy and insignificant, a sense of inadequacy that engulfed her sometimes when confronted with Anastasiya's statuesque flair. She was still dressed in the rose motif nightgown that she had slept in, a birthday present from her grandmother. She pulled at the high neckline and puffy sleeves. She hadn't bothered getting dressed when she woke up after two that afternoon. Her hair, matted and oily, needed a shampoo. Her face, unwashed, was shiny. A homely maiden from Nowhere, Ohio, Marianne knew to avoid the mirror on the other side of the room so she wouldn't feel even worse. She had a flash of the time she had dyed her hair ruby-red and pierced her nose. People said that she looked like Anastasiya's little sister, gently omitting her "short and chubby" little sister. She closed her eyes and blinked away the memory.

Marianne watched *Cheers* while she ate a bowl of minestrone soup. That's when the phone rang. "Hey, is Carol there?" Marianne told the caller that he had the wrong number. But he insisted, he needed to speak with Carol. You know, Carol. Carol with the long red hair, freckles. Tall-ish, about five seven, five eight. He had a thick New York accent; he dropped his Rs. He said he was her "brotha." She needed to call him. Their father is very sick. She needs to come home to "New Yawk." And added, "To the Bronx."

Yes, the Bronx. That's when it started to make sense.

The first time she saw Anastasiya, about four years ago, was at a pub near her college. The bar was dark and smoky. The linoleum was sticky with spilled beer and screwdrivers, creating a sucking sound when the patrons stepped across the floor. A pyramid of bottles flanked the wall behind an old-fashioned wooden bar, which was tended by Jack. He mixed drinks and chatted with the locals who sat on stools that hugged the length of the bar.

Marianne and her college friends stood at one of the high-tops in the back. In the lull as the jukebox slipped "Woolly Bully" into its slot and "A Whiter Shade of Pale" queued up, she heard a scream. "Owww, my foot. You stepped on my corn!"

Marianne looked up. A guy was doubled over. To his side was Anastasiya, wearing high-heeled, knee-length boots. Marianne imagined the boot heel digging into the poor guy's foot. Anastasiya raised her eyebrows and winked at Marianne, and then looked at the guy and redirected her charm his way.

Taking both his hands in hers, she said, "Can I get you some ice? Can I rub it? Can I buy you a drink?"

Marianne saw the guy smile at Anastasiya. He stood up straight and ran his hands through his hair. The man said he was fine, but looked flustered. Anastasiya signaled to the waitress and ordered two top shelf gin & tonics, one for him and one for her. "Hmmm," Marianne uttered to herself, impressed by Anastasiya's smooth moves. But when the waitress returned with the drinks, she noticed how Anastasiya fumbled for her wallet, checking her pockets, then reaching deep into her bag; it took so long that the guy paid for their drinks.

Their paths crossed again a month later. It was early October. The temperature was dropping, the wind was picking up, and the trees were blazing with gold and scarlet leaves. Soon they would fall from the branches and swirl down to the street below.

Marianne, dressed in a plaid skirt with heart-shaped hair clips that framed her baby face and an *Introduction to Psychology* textbook clutched to her chest, walked briskly up a hill near campus. A couple walked down in her direction. The man was tall and lanky. So tall that his stomach seemed to curve inward. The woman was short and round, the top of her head level with the man's stomach. She huffed to keep up with his long strides, her plump cheeks smudged pink from exertion. The woman smiled at Marianne.

"Excuse me dear, can I ask you a question?"

Marianne was worried she would be late for class. Still, she stopped walking. "Um, yeah... Sure." Next to this woman, who was her same height but double her size, Marianne felt small. The gigantic man stood to their side, towering over them.

"Do you believe in God?" the woman asked.

"Um... um, I, I guess so."

"Well God loves you. What's your name, dear?"

The man handed Marianne a brochure. She didn't want to be late (even though she had a half hour to spare), but just stood there, the pamphlet dangling from her fingers. She looked down at her watch trying to come up with an excuse to get away without offending them. She felt the heat rise in her body and unbuttoned her jacket while looking around trying to figure out what to do next, when she noticed the "corn" woman (Anastasiya) turn the corner. Marianne signaled her with widened eyes. Anastasiya's long hair, swept back beneath a leopard print headband, exposed a splattering of freckles across her face. She walked up to the group and smiled.

"Hey, what's going on here?"

"Hello. We are talking with your friend... about God and love... God loves you, too," The man offered her a brochure.

"Yep, that I know for sure." Anastasiya plucked the brochure from his hand and winked at Marianne.

"Well that's wonderful," the woman said, and added, "We give bible lessons to young men and women."

Anastasiya thumbed through the brochure. She stopped to look at some illustrations and then looked back up at the woman. “Sure. Lessons. Where do I sign up?”

They agreed to the following Tuesday, at four thirty. Anastasiya gave them her name and address.

Once on their way, Anastasiya wrapped her arm around Marianne’s shoulder, drew her close, and burst into laughter. Marianne joined in the laughter as if she knew all along that Anastasiya had made it all up.

Marianne had assumed that Anastasiya had come to her rescue because she had recognized her from the bar, but later found out it was just a coincidence—Anastasiya did not remember her at all. The chance meeting was the start to their friendship, and Anastasiya often teased Marianne that she would still be meeting with Frick and Frack for bible lessons if she hadn’t come to her rescue.

You had to be on your toes with Anastasiya. She was always one step ahead.

They agreed to meet the next afternoon at a local café. When Anastasiya ordered a beer, Marianne followed and ordered a beer too. But she was carded—she looked too young and *was* too young, at nineteen. Anastasiya, twenty-four at the time, shared her beers with Marianne and told her that she would get her a fake ID. Marianne had never met anyone like her before. Anastasiya was bold and provocative, and seemingly wanted to be her friend.

Anastasiya explained to Marianne that she knew how to deal with religious freaks like Frick and Frack. She had deep experience. Her parents, from Salt Lake City, were Mormon missionaries. Since she was two, the family moved every few years to a new country mission in Africa and Southeast Asia. She had spent little time in the US, until a visit to their grandparents in Salt Lake City, when she was married off, the first time at eighteen, into a polygamous family.

The first time? How many times has she been married? Marianne had thought at the time.

Anastasiya described leaving the Salt Lake City compound one day to run an errand for the family, with only twenty dollars and a shopping list. She crumpled the list and threw it in the road before boarding a greyhound bus. “I had the clothes I was wearing, nothing else. Except for my heirloom compact in my purse.” She leaned her head against the bus window and watched the billowy clouds float through the immense blue sky, and when the bus reached the outskirts of town, she explained, it turned east towards Boston.

“To this day,” she would often say, “my family has no idea where I am. And I have no idea where they are. What country... or continent.” Once she left Salt Lake City, she disappeared.

Anastasiya showed up at Marianne’s apartment two days later, and took her to make a fake ID. On Friday night they went clubbing and returned home at dawn, after

Marianne threw up in the bushes, outside the Tip Top Lounge, with Anastasiya holding her head. Marianne cried, while Anastasiya rubbed her back and made her laugh through her tears and vomit. After that, the two of them were inseparable. Anastasiya offered life experience and adventure to Marianne. And Marianne, a plain and simple rule-follower, was her enthusiastic and adoring sidekick.

Marianne was like the woman from *Silence of the Lambs*, who helped Buffalo Bill load the couch into his truck and became his victim. Marianne didn't know how to say no. And she didn't have the savvy or courage to make up something on the fly. She knew that she was too nice, too polite. Anastasiya, instead, would have looked him in the eyes and said, "Are you fucking kidding me? You're probably some sort of serial killer. Creep!"

Anastasiya was tall and slender but seemed curvy and solid too. Like a chameleon she had a highly developed sense of her surroundings and would adjust her look and adapt her affect according to the circumstance. Her grey eyes would turn green or brown depending upon the color of her shirt, or the changing light of day. But with a curtain of red hair that fell to her waist, it was hard not to notice her when she walked into a room. At first, her red hair and freckles hinted at innocence—she seemed sweet. But beneath the wall of freckles, cracks emerged in her façade.

Marianne didn't know it then but Anastasiya, Carol, or whatever her name was, was carefully constructed.

Anastasiya got married a second time, at twenty-one, to Juan Carlos, a Spanish count. In a whisper so low that Marianne had to move close to catch all the words, Anastasiya took her hands and offered the details: A balmy June evening in Valencia. The plaza was full of young Spaniards. She and her cousin Tatiana were looking for a place to sit when she accidentally hit Juan Carlos's arm with her bag. "He looked up, ready to be annoyed, but when he looked into my eyes, a big smile spread across his face and he insisted that we join him." She squeezed Marianne's hands. "Boy, Mari, he was gorgeous." She sighed, and added, "and we were together from that moment on." But, she explained, the marriage lasted barely seven months. She felt constricted. "He was possessive and jealous. And when he hit me, and gave me a black eye, I was out of there..."

When Marianne first met Anastasiya, long after her second divorce, she had a French boyfriend. Her *long-distance love*, she would say. She would meet Yves for weekends in New York or Los Angeles, or semester breaks in Paris or at his ski chalet in Chamonix. She would invite Marianne. "Mari, come on, come with me." But with no follow-up, no insistence, they weren't real invitations.

Now she knew—those "trips" were to the Bronx.

"Mari, you are so lucky to be single, not tied down," Anastasiya murmured in Marianne's ear, hugging her after returning from a trip with Yves.

Marianne had often asked herself, *Why can't I have a Juan Carlos? Or an Yves? Why don't I have a boyfriend?*

But did Yves even exist? Or Juan Carlos? She now wondered.

During college, Marianne worked in the local ice cream shop, scooping cones for the college crowd. When she wasn't working, or studying for an exam, or writing a psych paper, they would go off in Anastasiya's sky-blue AMC Pacer, sometimes without a destination, other times with invitations to openings and concerts or weekend trips to the mountains. Anastasiya piloted, and Marianne played First Officer, dressed in a miniskirt or bell bottoms—her hip, new “look” since meeting Anastasiya. They called the Pacer the “fishbowl” because they could view, comment, and laugh about the outside world from their safe perch behind the exaggerated bubble-shape of the car.

Marianne remembered that time at the Sunoco station. Anastasiya pulled up to the pump. She cranked open her window when the attendant arrived. She smiled at him while twirling her hair into a messy bun. “Hello there. Ten dollars. Regular.”

While he filled the car, Anastasiya looked over at Marianne. “You see that space between his two front teeth? Just like poor Miguel, my gorgeous Guatemalan rebel. His sister Dani says he's in prison now. Hey, can you spot me a ten?”

When Anastasiya took the ten from her, Marianne noticed how Anastasiya's fingertips glided slowly over the attendant's palm when she handed the bill to him. *Why did she always need to be admired?* Marianne had thought.

Still, Marianne, her passionate devotee, looked to Anastasiya as her life model and listened to all her stories in quiet rapture. The deep green eyes of a waiter reminded Anastasiya of that mysterious man, Ronald, from Nairobi. “He wined and dined me and begged me to marry him...” Or the gray murky Atlantic on the north shore after a winter storm was like the churning ocean in Accra. Marianne imagined the exotic places: the African safaris, the coup Anastasiya's family lived through before they were airlifted to Germany, the political prisoners, the rebels, and the noble families.

And she would ask herself, *Why is my life so ordinary? What's wrong with me?*

“You're truly lucky, Mari,” Anastasiya said, “to have grown up in a comfortable house, with a loving family.” Marianne thought, *Yes, I am lucky. She doesn't even know where her parents are.*

“I would trade my life of hell, no running water or electricity in the African outback—for an uneventful life in Ohio.”

Marianne squinted. This seemed a bit over the top to her: “no running water and electricity” *and* living in the “African outback.”

Anastasiya must have seen doubt in Marianne's expression, and added, “Well my father was involved in covert work. I'm not allowed to talk about it...”

The CIA. Yeah, I guess that makes sense, Marianne thought at the time, and she let herself believe it to be true.

On Sunday morning, after last night's call from Anastasiya's—or Carol's—brother, Marianne sat on the living room couch with a mug cupped in both hands. A nutty aroma filled the air. Behind the couch were three opened bay windows that overlooked the entry porch and the small patch of front lawn. Wilbur sat in one of the windows. His tail moved back and forth.

Marianne stared into the room, not focusing on anything in particular, and sipped her coffee. Up until that call, Marianne had always harbored a *feeling* that maybe some of Anastasiya's *truths* were created. But she had refused to acknowledge the feeling. She had preferred to believe that Anastasiya was passionate, and she would defend her in her own mind as an “embellisher.”

When faces were made about something Anastasiya said, or doubts emerged because of conflicting stories, Marianne was her defender. She would insist that Anastasiya was drunk when she couldn't remember the capital of Kenya, where she had supposedly lived for four years. Or that, “it's all a huge jumble to her, you know her family was constantly on the move when she was growing up.” Anastasiya's thrilling stories were fun and enchanting, Marianne had always figured. Now she thought about the many tales she had heard over the last four years. Pure fantasy and lies. She was an imposter—an imposter with a phony British accent.

She remembered how Anastasiya would wheedle and charm her way through life. She lived in a world of adventure and pleasure. She would look into a stranger's eyes, one hand on her hip, her pelvis jutting forward—she dazzled like a cuttlefish. She would hypnotize her prey to get what she wanted. Marianne was part of this life, even if the people they met seemed to look at her like an afterthought and often didn't remember her name.

Like that dinner at the Mexican restaurant when the Mariachi band came over to their table. While the guitar player serenaded Anastasiya, the trumpet player played for Marianne. He swayed side to side and winked at her. Marianne grinned back at him and Anastasiya mouthed, “Oh, Mari, he likes you.”

After the set, the trumpet player stopped by their table. Marianne lit up, but he turned his back to her, and pushed a piece of paper into Anastasiya's hand, “Here's my number, call me.” He brought Anastasiya's hand up to his lips and kissed it. Marianne sank deep into her chair and stared down at the food on her plate. When they left the restaurant, Anastasiya unfolded the paper: “I await your call sexy. Manu.” Marianne saw her crumple the paper into a ball and rather than throw it into the street (Anastasiya's style), she tucked it into her back pocket.

But Marianne was mesmerized too, and eagerly went to the premieres in New York, to the private clubs and restaurants. They even made it backstage at a Stones concert. “Follow me,” Anastasiya said breathlessly. She gripped Marianne's hand and pulled her through the arena, past numerous security check points. Anastasiya captivated the backstage crew. Thinking about it now, Marianne remembered that they

had made fun of her accent. “Hey, lovey, that’s a strange accent you got there, where you from?” They were British. They knew it was phony. Marianne and Anastasiya never did get to meet Mick, but they danced and drank with the crew all night.

Marianne knew that their backgrounds, even their physical traits, couldn’t have been more different. They had a special bond, a kind of symbiotic relationship. A deep friendship—yes, she was sure of it. Still, how could Anastasiya lie to her face, over and over, for four years? Had the friendship harmed her, like the tick living off the deer? Or had it benefited them both, like the bee collecting nectar while pollinating the flowering plant? Yes, she was complicit, but she pitied herself for her foolishness.

Anastasiya, the idolized. Marianne, the idolizer.

The scream of the cicadas took Marianne out of her trance. She took a deep breath and stood up. Wilbur turned to her, his tail froze in place when Marianne stomped across the parquet floor to the front hallway. She stepped out onto the porch. With the Sunday paper in her arms, she closed the door and turned the bolt. Marianne left the newspaper on the couch and went to the kitchen for more coffee. Wilbur jumped onto the couch.

Marianne didn’t hear the pacer when it turned the corner and parked behind the bushes that abutted the property. When the engine cut, the music stopped. Anastasiya climbed out of the car, hauling her large canvas bag over her shoulder, and slammed the car door shut. She walked towards the house with its steep gabled roof, turret, and bay windows. Her mascara was smudged around her eyes. Her red hair was stringy and tied back in a loose ponytail. She slipped off her sandals and stepped onto the grass. She walked up the porch stairs to the front door and turned the knob. It was locked. She went to peek through the bay window to see if Marianne was home. Inside, Wilbur sat on the arm of the couch, dirty plates covered the coffee table, the ceiling fan rotated above in slow circles. She sat down on the porch steps, right below the opened window, and reached into her bag to look for her house keys.

Marianne came back into the living room with her coffee. She sat down on the couch. Wilbur jumped back onto the windowsill. The phone rang and she picked it up. It was Anastasiya’s brother. He wanted to know if Carol got the message that he called last night and he reminded Marianne of the emergency—their father is sick.

“I’m sorry your father’s not well, but Anastasiya... Carol, whatever her name is... isn’t home. I don’t know where she is or what to tell you. I didn’t even know that she had a brother, or that she’s from New York. She told me that she grew up abroad.”

Anastasiya had looked up when she heard the phone ring. She stared at the window and listened. Wilbur sat on the sill behind the couch where Marianne sat and talked on the phone. Wilbur looked at Anastasiya. He closed and reopened his emerald eyes.

“I don’t know what to say. I’ll let her know when she gets home. She’ll be moving out. But I will *definitely* let her know. Sorry,” and Marianne clicked off the phone.

Anastasiya slumped over. She held her head in her hands, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. She reopened her eyes and twisted her head back towards the window. Biting her lip, she looked up in the direction of the car, parked behind the bushes. With opened palms, she pushed herself up from the steps, picked up her bag and sandals, and walked down the porch steps and onto the small grassy yard. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes. The heirloom compact fell to the ground. She lit a cigarette, took a deep drag, and stared back at the house. She walked back to the porch and placed one foot on the bottom step as she looked up at the bay window. She took another drag on the cigarette, then backed away from the steps and went on her way. Wilber sat in the window. His tail swished back and forth.

Later that afternoon Wilber would slip out the front door. He would find the compact splayed open in the grass, broken like the spine of a book stretched beyond its range, the pages severed from the binding, unhinged and scattered. He would pounce on the mirror, unstuck from its casing—*Made in Japan* stamped inside. And in the waning summer sunlight Wilber would play with the case until Marianne opened the front door and he would run into the house for dinner.

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