

## Unpretty

by Caren Gussoff

About this story:

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When I was twelve years old, my sister traded me to a Frenchman for a kilo of coke.

She's met Philippe when their subway stalled between East Seventy-second and Eighty-first. Teresa described it: no lights, a soft sway, the clanging sounds of a marina. There were just the two of them.

Teresa was already damaged by then. She was beautiful, if you knew what to look for, past the beard from birthing a son in the eleventh grade, testosterone leaching through the amniotic fluid.

She tried to make Philippe sound like he was my idea, so to this day I hold nothing against Teresa. "You want to be a woman?" she asked. "Act like one."

I'd basically stopped aging around that time. At twelve, I looked seventeen or eighteen, and I easily sailed past the club's doorman to meet Philippe.

At thirty, I still look seventeen or eighteen. I get carded for cigarettes and police often stop me for truancy.

I met Philippe at 3-B's a splintered bar at the corner of Third and Avenue B, popular with NYC polisci majors and men who look like Lee Harvey Oswald. It's since closed down, become something else.

I wasn't positive at first that she traded me for cocaine, but the week before the meeting, Teresa's eyes were glossy, the house was clean and smelled like a fired gun.

I decided myself on the kilo because that's what I'd be worth, fairly speaking.

Philippe waved at me and we took a table at the back. He didn't believe I was twelve and I had no ID to show him. I ordered a tequila sunrise because I didn't know any better.

Philippe ordered me another, then another. Then he told me I was unpretty, from what I could understand. Not ugly exactly, but that I needed to grow into my face. Unpretty. At the moment, the word held no meaning for me. Instead, I felt the tequila. This is how I describe it: no lights, the wave of my head above my neck, the jingle of his accent. He touched the top of my hand, sliding up to my elbow and back down. A deal was a deal. He bought me six tequila sunrises.

In the ladies room of 3-B's I stared at my unpretty face in the mirror after discovering my underpants dirty with blood. I wrapped toilet paper around the crotch, over and through, over and through.

Later, at Philippe's apartment, he would discover this. The toilet paper fell onto the carpet and he started at it. That's when I bashed in his skull and stuffed the wad back into my pants. The subway ride home was long, the walls ringing like bells all around me.

"How did it go?" Teresa asked. She was on her knees scrubbing holes through the floor.

"Well," I said. "I became a woman."

When I was twelve, I needed to grow into my face. Now, at thirty, I stare at my reflection, blinking back exactly who I have always been.