

“Three Girls” by Joyce Carol Oates

In Strand Used Books on Broadway and Twelfth one snowy March early evening in 1956 when the streetlights on Broadway glimmered with a strange sepia glow, we were two NYU girl-poets drifting through the warehouse of treasures as through an enchanted forest. Just past 6:00 p.m. Above light-riddled Manhattan, opaque night. Snowing, and sidewalks encrusted with ice so there were fewer customers in the Strand than usual at this hour but *there we were*. Among other cranky brooding regulars. In our army-surplus jackets, baggy khaki pants, and zip-up rubber boots. In our matching wool caps (knitted by your restless fingers) pulled down low over our pale-girl foreheads. Enchanted by books. Enchanted by the Strand.

No bookstore of merely “new” books with elegant show window displays drew us like the drafty Strand, bins of books untidy and thumbed through as merchants’ sidewalk bins on Fourteenth Street, new this week, best bargains, world classics, art books 50% off, reviewers’ copies, highest price \$1.98, remainders 25¢—\$1.00. Hard-cover/paperback. Spotless/battered. Beautiful books/cheaply printed pulp paper. And at the rear and sides in that vast echoing space massive shelves of books books books rising to a ceiling of hammered tin fifteen feet above! Stacked shelves so high they required ladders to negotiate and a monkey nimbleness (like yours) to climb.

We were enchanted with the Strand and with each other in the Strand. Overseen by surly young clerks who were poets like us, or playwrights/actors/artists. In an agony of unspoken young love I watched you. As always on these romantic evenings at the Strand, prowling the aisles sneering at those luckless books, so many of them, unworthy of your attention. Bestsellers, how-tos, arts and crafts, too-simple *histories of* Women’s romances, sentimental love poems. Patriotic books, middlebrow books, books lacking esoteric covers. We were girl-poets passionately enamored of T. S. Eliot but scornful of Robert Frost whom we’d been made to memorize in high school—slyly we communicated in code phrases from Eliot in the presence of obtuse others in our dining hall and residence. We were admiring of though confused by the poetry of Yeats, we were yet more confused by the lauded worth of Pound, enthusiastically drawn to the bold metaphors of Kafka (that cockroach!) and Dostoevsky (sexy murderer Raskolnikov and the Underground Man were our rebel heroes) and Sartre (“Hell is other people”—we knew this), and had reason to believe that we were their lineage though admittedly we were American middle class, and Caucasian, and female. (Yet we were not “conventional” females. In fact, we shared male contempt for the merely “conventional” female.)

Brooding above a tumble of books that quickened the pulse, almost shyly touching Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Crane Brinton’s *The Age of Reason*, Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*, D. H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow*, Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, Mann’s *Death in Venice*—there suddenly you glided up behind me to touch my wrist (as never you’d done before, had you?) and whispered, “Come here,” in a way that thrilled me for its meaning *I have something wonderful/unexpected/startling to show you*. Like poems these discoveries in the Strand were, to us, found poems to be cherished. And eagerly I turned to follow you though disguising my eagerness, “Yes, what?” as if you’d interrupted me, for possibly we’d had a quarrel earlier that day, a flaring up of tense girl-temper. Yes, you were childish and self absorbed and given to sulky silences and mercurial moods in the presence of showy superficial people, and I adored and feared you knowing you’d break my heart, my heart that had never before been broken because never before so exposed.

So eagerly yet with my customary guardedness I followed you through a maze of book bins and shelves and stacks to the ceiling anthropology, art/ancient, art/renaissance, art/modern, art/asian, art/western, travel, philosophy, cookery, poetry/modern where the way was treacherously lighted only by bare sixty-watt bulbs, and where customers as cranky as we two stood in the aisles reading books, or sat hunched on footstools glancing up annoyed at our passage, and unquestioning I followed you until at poetry/modern you halted, and pushed me ahead and around a corner, and I stood puzzled staring, not

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knowing what I was supposed to be seeing until impatiently you poked me in the ribs and pointed, and now I perceived an individual in the aisle pulling down books from shelves, peering at them, clearly absorbed by what she read, a woman nearly my height (I was tall for a girl, in 1956) in a man’s navy coat to her ankles and with sleeves past her wrists, a man’s beige fedora hat on her head, scrunched low as we wore our knitted caps, and most of her hair hidden by the hat except for a six-inch blond plait at the nape of her neck; and she wore black trousers tucked into what appeared to be salt-stained cowboy boots. Someone we knew? An older, good-looking student from one of our classes? *A girl-poet like ourselves?* I was about to nudge you in the ribs in bafflement when the blond woman turned, taking down another book from the shelf (e. e. cummings’ *Tulips and Chimneys*—always I would remember that title!), and I saw that she was Marilyn Monroe.

Marilyn Monroe. In the Strand. Just like us. And she seemed to be alone.

Marilyn Monroe, alone!

Wholly absorbed in browsing amid books, oblivious of her surroundings and of us. No one seemed to have recognized her (yet) except you.

Here was the surprise: this woman was/was not Marilyn Monroe. For this woman was an individual wholly absorbed in selecting, leafing through, pausing to read books. You could see that this individual was a *reader*. One of those who *reads*. With concentration, with passion. With her very soul. And it was poetry she was reading, her lips pursed, silently shaping words. Absent-mindedly she wiped her nose on the edge of her hand, so intent was she on what she was reading. For when you truly read poetry, poetry reads *you*.

Still, this woman was—Marilyn Monroe. And despite our common sense, our scorn for the silly clichés of Hollywood romance, still we halfway expected a Leading Man to join her: Clark Gable, Robert Taylor, Marlon Brando.

Halfway we expected the syrupy surge of movie music, to glide us into the scene.

But no man joined Marilyn Monroe in her disguise as one of us in the Strand. No Leading Man, no dark prince.

Like us (we began to see) this Marilyn Monroe required no man.

For what seemed like a long time but was probably no more than half an hour, Marilyn Monroe browsed in the poetry/modern shelves, as from a distance of approximately ten feet two girl-poets watched covertly, clutching each other’s hands. We were stunned to see that this woman looked very little like the glamorous “Marilyn Monroe.” That figure was a garish blond showgirl, a Hollywood “sexpot” of no interest to intellectuals (*we* thought, we who knew nothing of the secret romance between Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller); this figure more resembled us (almost) than she resembled her Hollywood image. We were dying of curiosity to see whose poetry books Marilyn Monroe was examining: Elizabeth Bishop, H.D., Robert Lowell, Muriel Rukeyser, Harry Crosby, Denise Levertov . . . Five or six of these Marilyn Monroe decided to purchase, then moved on, leather bag slung over her shoulder and fedora tilted down on her head.

We couldn’t resist, we had to follow! Cautious not to whisper together like excited schoolgirls, still less to giggle wildly as we were tempted; you nudged me in the ribs to sober me, gave me a glare signaling *Don’t be rude, don’t ruin this for all of us*. I conceded: I was the more pushy of the two of us, a tall gawky Rima the Bird Girl with springy carrot-red hair like an exotic bird’s crest, while you were petite and dark haired and attractive with long-lashed Semitic sloe eyes, you the wily gymnast and I the aggressive basketball player, you the “experimental” poet and I drawn to “forms,” our contrary talents bred in our bones. Which of us would marry, have babies, disappear into “real” life, and which of us would persevere into her thirties before starting to be published and becoming, in time, a “real” poet—could anyone have predicted, this snowy March evening in 1956?

Marilyn Monroe drifted through the maze of books and we followed in her wake as through a maze of dreams, past sports, past military, past war, past history/ancient, past the familiar figures of Strand

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5 regulars frowning into books, past surly yawning bearded clerks who took no more heed of the blond
actress than they ever did of us, and so to natural history where she paused, and there again for unhurried
minutes (the Strand was open until 9:00 p.m.) Marilyn Monroe in her mannish disguise browsed and
brooded, pulling down books, seeking what? at last crouched leafing through an oversized illustrated
10 book (curiosity overcame me! I shoved away your restraining hand; politely I eased past Marilyn Monroe
murmuring “excuse me” without so much as brushing against her and without being noticed), Charles
Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in a deluxe edition. Darwin! *Origin of Species!* We were poet-despisers-of-
science, or believed we were, or must be, to be true poets in the exalted mode of T. S. Eliot and William
Butler Yeats; such a choice, for Marilyn Monroe, seemed perverse to us. But this book was one Marilyn
15 quickly decided to purchase, hoisting it into her arms and moving on.

That rakish fedora we’d come to covet, and that single chunky blond braid. (Afterward we would
wonder: Marilyn Monroe’s hair in a braid? Never had we seen Marilyn Monroe with her hair braided in
any movie or photo. What did this mean? Did it mean anything? *Had she quit films, and embarked on a
new, anonymous life in our midst?*)

15 Suddenly Marilyn Monroe glanced back at us, frowning as a child might frown (had we spoken aloud?
had she heard our thoughts?), and there came into her face a look of puzzlement, not alarm or annoyance
but a childlike puzzlement: *Who are you? You two? Are you watching me?* Quickly we looked away. We
were engaged in a whispering dispute over a book one of us had fumbled from a shelf, *A History of
Botanical Gardens in England*. So we were undetected. We hoped!

20 But wary now, and sobered. For what if Marilyn Monroe had caught us, and knew that we knew?

She might have abandoned her books and fled the Strand. What a loss for her, and for the books! For
us, too.

Oh, we worried at Marilyn Monroe’s recklessness! We dreaded her being recognized by a (male)
customer or (male) clerk. A girl or woman would have kept her secret (so we thought) but no man could
25 resist staring openly at her, following her, and at last speaking to her. Of course, the blond actress in
Strand Used Books wasn’t herself, not at all glamorous, or “sexy,” or especially blond, in her
inconspicuous man’s clothing and those salt-stained boots; she might have been anyone, female or male,
hardly a Hollywood celebrity, a movie goddess. Yet if you stared, you’d recognize her. If you tried, with
any imagination you’d see “Marilyn Monroe.” It was like a child’s game in which you stare at foliage,
30 grass, clouds in the sky, and suddenly you see a face or a figure, and after that recognition you can’t not
see the hidden shape, it’s staring you in the face. So too with Marilyn Monroe. Once we saw her, it
seemed to us she must be seen—and recognized—by anyone who happened to glance at her. If any man
saw! We were fearful her privacy would be destroyed. Quickly the blond actress would become
surrounded, mobbed. It was risky and reckless of her to have come to Strand Used Books by herself, we
35 thought. Sure, she could shop at Tiffany’s, maybe; she could stroll through the lobby of the Plaza, or the
Waldorf-Astoria; she’d be safe from fans and unwanted admirers in privileged settings on the Upper East
Side, but—here? In the egalitarian Strand, on Broadway and Twelfth?

We were perplexed. Almost, I was annoyed with her. Taking such chances! But you, gripping my
wrist, had another, more subtle thought.

40 “She thinks she’s like *us*.”

You meant: a human being, anonymous. Female, like us. Amid the ordinary unspectacular customers
(predominantly male) of the Strand.

And that was the sadness in it, Marilyn Monroe’s wish. To be *like us*. For it was impossible, of course.
For anyone could have told Marilyn Monroe, even two young girl-poets, that it was too late for her in
45 history. Already, at age thirty (we could calculate afterward that this was her age) “Marilyn Monroe” had
entered history, and there was no escape from it. Her films, her photos. Her face, her figure, her name. To
enter history is to be abducted spiritually, with no way back.

As if lightning were to strike the building that housed the Strand, as if an actual current of electricity were
to touch and transform only one individual in the great cavernous space and that lone individual, by pure

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chance it might seem, the caprice of fate, would be the young woman with the blond braid and the fedora slanted across her face. Why? Why her, and not another? You could argue that such a destiny is absurd, and undeserved, for one individual among many, and logically you would be correct. And yet: “Marilyn Monroe” has entered history, and you have not. She will endure, though the young woman with the blond braid will die. *And even should she wish to die, “Marilyn Monroe” cannot.*

By this time she—the young woman with the blond braid— was carrying an armload of books. We were hoping she’d almost finished and would be leaving soon, before strangers’ rude eyes lighted upon her and exposed her, but no: she surprised us by heading for a section called judaica. In that forbidding aisle, which we’d never before entered, there were books in numerous languages: Hebrew, Yiddish, German, Russian, French. Some of these books looked ancient! Complete sets of the Talmud. Cryptically printed tomes on the cabala. Luckily for us, the titles Marilyn Monroe pulled out were all in English: *Jews of Eastern Europe; The Chosen People: A Complete History of the Jews; Jews of the New World.* Quickly Marilyn Monroe placed her bag and books on the floor, sat on a footstool, and leafed through pages with the frowning intensity of a young girl, as if searching for something urgent, something she knew—knew!—must be there; in this uncomfortable posture she remained for at least fifteen minutes, wetting her fingers to turn pages that stuck together, pages that had not been turned, still less read, for decades. She was frowning, yet smiling too; faint vertical lines appeared between her eyebrows, in the intensity of her concentration; her eyes moved rapidly along lines of print, then returned, and moved more slowly. By this time we were close enough to observe the blond actress’s feverish cheeks and slightly parted moist lips that seemed to move silently. *What is she reading in that ancient book, what can possibly mean so much to her? A secret, revealed? A secret, to save her life?*

“Hey you!” a clerk called out in a nasal, insinuating voice. The three of us looked up, startled.

But the clerk wasn’t speaking to us. Not to the blond actress frowning over *The Chosen People*, and not to us who were hovering close by. The clerk had caught someone slipping a book into an overcoat pocket, not an unusual sight at the Strand.

After this mild upset, Marilyn Monroe became uneasy. She turned to look frankly at us, and though we tried clumsily to retreat, her eyes met ours. *She knows!* But after a moment, she simply turned back to her book, stubborn and determined to finish what she was reading, while we continued to hover close by, exposed now, and blushing, yet feeling protective of her. *She has seen us, she knows. She trusts us.* We saw that Marilyn Monroe was beautiful in her anonymity as she had never seemed, to us, to be beautiful as “Marilyn Monroe.” All that was makeup, fakery, cartoon sexiness subtle as a kick in the groin. All that was vulgar and infantile. But this young woman was beautiful without makeup, without even lipstick; in her mannish clothes, her hair in a stubby braid. Beautiful: her skin luminous and pale and her eyes a startling clear blue. Almost shyly she glanced back at us, to note that we were still there, and she smiled. *Yes, I see you two. Thank you for not speaking my name.*

Always you and I would remember: that smile of gratitude, and sweetness.

Always you and I would remember: that she trusted us, as perhaps we would not have trusted ourselves.

So many years later, I’m proud of us. We were so young.

Young, headstrong, arrogant, insecure though “brilliant”—or so we’d been led to believe. Not that we thought of ourselves as young: you were nineteen, I was twenty. We were mature for our ages, and we were immature. We were intellectually sophisticated, and emotionally unpredictable. We revered something we called *art*, we were disdainful of something we called *life*. We were overly conscious of ourselves. And yet: how patient, how protective, watching over Marilyn Monroe squatting on a footstool in the judaica stacks as stray customers pushed past muttering “excuse me!” or not even seeming to notice her, or the two of us standing guard. And at last—a relief—Marilyn Monroe shut the unwieldy book, having decided to buy it, and rose from the footstool gathering up her many things. And—this was a

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temptation!—we held back, not offering to help her carry her things as we so badly wanted to, but only just following at a discreet distance as Marilyn Monroe made her way through the labyrinth of the bookstore to the front counter. (Did she glance back at us? Did she understand you and I were her protectors?) If anyone dared to approach her, we intended to intervene. We would push between Marilyn
5 Monroe and whomever it was. Yet how strange the scene was: none of the other Strand customers, lost in books, took any special notice of her, any more than they took notice of us. Book lovers, especially used-book lovers, are not ones to stare curiously at others, but only at books. At the front of the store—it was a long hike—the cashiers would be more alert, we thought. One of them seemed to be watching Marilyn Monroe approach. Did he know? Could he guess? Was he waiting for her?

10 Nearing the front counter and the bright fluorescent lights overhead, Marilyn Monroe seemed for the first time to falter. She fumbled to extract out of her shoulder bag a pair of dark glasses and managed to put them on. She turned up the collar of her navy coat. She lowered her hat brim.

Still she was hesitant, and it was then that I stepped forward and said quietly, “Excuse me. Why don’t I buy your books for you? That way you won’t have to talk to anyone.”

15 The blond actress stared at me through her oversized dark glasses. Her eyes were only just visible behind the lenses. A shy-girl’s eyes, startled and grateful.

And so I did. With you helping me. Two girl-poets, side by side, all brisk and businesslike, making Marilyn Monroe’s purchases for her: a total of sixteen books!—hardcover and paperback, relatively new books, old battered thumbed-through books—at a cost of \$55.85. A staggering sum! Never in my two
20 years of coming into the Strand had I handed over more than a few dollars to the cashier, and this time my hand might have trembled as I pushed twenty-dollar bills at him, half expecting the bristly bearded man to interrogate me: “Where’d you get so much money?” But as usual the cashier hardly gave me a second glance. And Marilyn Monroe, burdened with no books, had already slipped through the turnstile and was awaiting us at the front door.

25 There, when we handed over her purchases in two sturdy bags, she leaned forward. For a breathless moment we thought she might kiss our cheeks. Instead she pressed into our surprised hands a slender volume she lifted from one of the bags: *Selected Poems of Marianne Moore*. We stammered thanks, but already the blond actress had pulled the fedora down more tightly over her head and had stepped out into the lightly falling snow, headed south on Broadway. We trailed behind her, unable to resist, waiting for
30 her to hail a taxi, but she did not. We knew we must not follow her. By this time we were giddy with the strain of the past hour, gripping each other’s hands in childlike elation. So happy!

“Oh. Oh God. Marilyn Monroe. She gave us a book. Was any of it real?”

It was real: we had *Selected Poems of Marianne Moore* to prove it. That snowy early evening in March at Strand Used Books. That magical evening of Marilyn Monroe,
35 when I kissed you for the first time.

1. How did you interpret the story’s final sentence? Were you surprised by it?
2. Why is Marilyn Monroe so prominent in the story? Why Monroe and not, say, Lucille Ball?
3. What is the conflict of the story? What is the climax? Is there a resolution?
4. What is the central point of the story?