

Elle and Oz, strangers ready to start new lives, meet by chance and swap stories in an abandoned house. They realize the stories are coming to them from an unknown source and discover connections with one another in previous lives.


We First Met in Ithaca, or Was It Eden?

By Richard Seltzer

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A detail from a classical painting, likely Caravaggio's 'Boy with a Basket of Fruit'. It shows a close-up of a man's grey beard and a woman's face. A hand is holding a piece of fruit, possibly an apple, which is the central focus of the scene. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the skin and the fruit.

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Chapter One — Welcome to Oz

Oz woke up with an urge to draw. He didn't have art pencils, just an ordinary number 2. He waved it over a blank page, with dramatic flair.

What should he draw? Still life? Landscape? To his surprise, before he'd decided, his hand started moving on its own. He watched with delight as, with broad strokes, it sketched the outline of a face, full frontal, then filled in eyes, nose, mouth, hair. The body — nude, as in a life-drawing class he'd meant to take. He was whistling the Joni Mitchell song *Both Sides Now*, imagining that clothes, not clouds, got in the way.

He drew a young woman, innocent but experienced, wounded yet not broken, with the grit to start over. She was a recently divorced mother of two; no, of four children. She'd married young, a mistake. Her name was Penelope, Penny to friends. If he met her, he'd call her Elle; and, even though it sounded silly, he'd use his real name — Oz, short for Oscar.

Refreshed, inspired, he skipped breakfast, apologizing to the owner of the B&B. Down Rogers Avenue he walked, toward the beach, sketchpad in hand.

He was dressed, as he had for decades, like a professor — button-down shirt with button-down collar, gray sweater vest (despite the summer heat), khaki chinos. That was what he had in his suitcase, not who he wanted to be now.

He should be wearing a blue tunic and a beret — red, not black. He should have a backpack stuffed with art supplies and a box of red wine. He should have the garb and accoutrements of an artist yet to be discovered, who draws and paints what he wants, when he wants. He imagined himself in a village in the south of France, walking toward the docks, settled on a bench, painting till sunset. On his canvas he'd portray passersby in motion, all in the same place but at different times,

and all shown on the same canvas. It would be like an ancient palimpsest, with one layer of writing on top of another.

Though he'd never been in Eastport, Connecticut before. It felt familiar, as if he'd once lived here and was returning for the first time in decades. He'd made the B&B reservation online, having picked this town on a whim.

Arriving at sunset, he'd driven to the beach and, on the way, had passed a house that resembled one he had dreamt of repeatedly — a dilapidated cottage atop a hill above the harbor. 26 Rogers Avenue. *For sale*. To his surprise, he was walking there now. Not house hunting, just curious.

On the doorstep, fliers in a wooden box advertised the sale by auction. A white clapboard, one-story cottage. The lot extended to the harbor, with a ramp for launching boats. For details, call or check online.

At this early hour, no one would be in the real estate office, so he checked the online listing. *Two bedrooms, one bath. 1,268 square feet. Built in 1948. Hot water heat. In need of rehab.* (Lots of rehab, he thought). *Sold as is, together with any personal property left behind. Offers by Friday, August 13, 4:00 pm.*

The target price was \$499K. The lot alone was worth that much. The buyer would probably demolish the house and build something else.

He walked around the outside. In need of paint. Gutters bent and sagging, heavy with leaves. Shingles missing from the roof. Probable water damage. What might be inside?

The people managing the sale didn't value the contents. They had no incentive to be careful about locking up. One of the windows was open a crack; stuck, not locked. Thick curtains prevented him from seeing inside. He could smell mold.

Oz had no intention of buying a house, much less this one. But if he did, he would fix it up rather than tear it down. And he would cut down the oak tree in the back yard that blocked the view of the harbor.

He walked back to the street and checked the mailbox, a miniature lighthouse painted like a barber-shop pole with red and white stripes, a slip of paper inside. He took it out, looked at it, and did a doubletake. *Welcome to Oz*. Neighborhood kids probably played here and pretended the mailbox was a portal to Oz. But the message could also be interpreted as a welcome to him in particular, as if the house knew who he was and was expecting him. Today, he was susceptible to the strangest thoughts — first the drawing, now this. On impulse, he sat on the sidewalk and started to sketch the mailbox, with the house in the background.



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