

Excerpt: The Skylight Room, by Charlie Carillo

A crisp afternoon in October of 1950, the kind of day that makes Carmine Rotolo think about bringing the outdoor tables inside at Caffè Reggio's on MacDougal Street.

But he's reluctant to do that. Maybe one more week. It's so nice to have people outside, especially when they're all smoking. Bearded musicians, somber women and tortured poets, puffing away. Village folk, the scruffy and unshaven, bonding over their espressos and their Lucky Strikes.

It reminds him of Paris. He'd helped liberate Paris at the end World War II, and one of his favorite things about his brief time in the City of Light was all those outdoor cafes, and all those pretty girls sitting at them, happy that the war was over.

And here comes a pretty girl right now, in blue jeans and a denim jacket. Not a downtown girl, that's for sure - she's too chubby-cheeked, too well-fed for that. An out-of-towner? Must be. These days, they're pouring into the Village from all over.

She's got a canvas sack slung over her shoulder, and she stops and stands in front of Reggio's with a look of awe on her face, as if she can't believe she's here. Like Dorothy in "The Wizard Of Oz," when the tornado whisks her from her dreary black-and-white existence and drops her into a world of color.

Carmine stares into the biggest, greenest eyes he's ever seen. He knows he's being rude, but he can't help it. He feels as if he could fall into those eyes and drown.

"Hello," the girl says, shattering his stare.

Carmine clears his throat. "Inside or out?" he asks.

"I'm sorry?"

"Would you like to sit inside, or out?"

The girl seems to think it's a trick question. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

She tosses her head with a natural nobility, like a race horse in the winner's circle.

"Look," she says, "can I have a job?"

She says it plainly, abruptly, as if Carmine has been wasting her time. He can't help chuckling. "You want to work here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I read about it in a magazine. It seems like a cool place."

Carmine studies her, head to toe. Shoulder-length hair the color of honey, a flawless complexion and those eyes, those eyes! She could be a runaway, or a young wife on the lam from an abusive husband. He's seen that type before, but there's a strange sense of calm to this girl, as if she expects everything to work out, for no good reason.

He points at the canvas sack. "What've you got there?"

"My stuff. I just got here."

"Where are you staying?"

"Nowhere, yet."

Carmine is stunned. "You just got to New York, and you don't have a place to stay?"

"Figured I'd take care of a job first."

How can she be so relaxed, with no job, and no place to stay?

"Where are you from?"

She scowls at the question. "Does it matter? What matters is, I'm here now."

“But why are you here?”

She cannot tell him. It would be embarrassing to say it's because she saw a movie called “Portrait of Jenny” when it came out two years ago, and it changed her life. She saw Joseph Cotten and Jennifer Jones falling in love in New York City, and the beautiful skylight studio in Greenwich Village where Cotten painted her portrait, and she thought: I want to be there.

But he'd probably laugh at her, so instead she smiles and spreads her arms, to indicate the perfectly obvious.

“This is where everything's happening, isn't it?”

Carmine can't deny that. He's a Brooklyn boy, a mere borough away, but even he knows that the Village is a whole other world. Whenever he climbs the subway steps at West Fourth Street he feels the electricity of the neighborhood, like something that rises right up through the sidewalk and through the soles of your shoes.

It's all happening here. This girl has just gotten here, but she knows it, too.

Carmine can't hide a smile as he asks, “How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

“Let's try it again. How old are you?”

She rolls those remarkable green eyes. “Nineteen, next month.”

“Ever worked in a cafe?”

She shrugs. “Do diners count?”

“Depends. What was the coffee like in the diners?”

“Awful.”

“The coffee here is good. In fact, it's great. So are the pastries. We take real pride in our products.”

The girl giggles. Carmine feels himself blush.

“What's so funny?”

“Are you the owner?”

“Manager.”

“You talk like an owner.”

“It's my uncle's place.”

“Well, am I hired, or not?”

“What happens if I don't give you a job?”

“I'll ask someplace else. This is my first choice, though. I wanted to start with my first choice.”

It's a crazy situation. Carmine has all the waitresses he needs, and he knows nothing about this girl. But her confidence borders on arrogance, and he's gripped by a sudden fear, a crazy one - the fear that if he doesn't hire her, he might never see her again. He cannot let that happen.

“Okay,” he says, “you start tomorrow morning. Nine o'clock.”