

Where We Met

By

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"You're positive," he said to me. He said it like, "You have earwax," or, "you have dandruff." Some kind of vaguely distasteful condition that everyone has but which is not mentioned in social situations. In any event, his tone made me start, and blurt without thinking.

"Yes, I am." He clucked his tongue at me, tapping his ring against his beer glass: cluck-tap. The silver lambda gleamed in the barlight. Smoke drifted, people danced. Drinks were served.

I looked up at him. I had been sitting alone, drinking. And drinking. I was actually very fuzzy, and that may have helped loosen my tongue. I felt almost compelled to respond. It was, all things considered, one hell of a line. Then again, no one but my physician had ever said those particular words to me. I sipped. He sipped. And tapped his ring again. I could see it in his grey eyes, sort of flirting with me, dancing: don't you want to know how I knew? And I did, so I asked him. His eyes lit up then. Aha! they said. He wants to know.

"It's a talent," he said. "Like seeing an aura."

A talent.

"Oh," I said. "And what does my 'aura' tell you then?" Have a seat, I thought. The invitation was received and accepted. He pulled the chair out and sat down, looking at me across the tiny disk table. Draining the last of his beer, he licked some foam off his mustache.

"It tells me you're positive, for one," he said. "And that you've been diagnosed...within the past month, I think." I tipped my glass at him.

"Right again," I emptied my glass. He left then, and returned with another round, getting my drink right without even asking. He was an intriguing fellow, all shaggy and whiskered, with a halo-mass loosely curled red-brown hair and short, stubby hands. I let my drink sit, fizzing quietly...I'd had enough. "Have you ever been wrong?" A smile teased his mouth.

"Not yet," he said. Ring tap again. Pointing at my drink, he said, "you don't want that, do you?" I shook my head. "I don't want mine, either." We let that sit there for a minute. Eventually, we got up, shrugged into our coats, and exited.

He had driven there, and so we took his car to his place, across the river in New Hope. It was on the main street, above a new age bookstore that I visited every so often. I found that interesting. I had been there--right there, in the same building--dozens of times, and had never seen him. He had never seen me. And yet there we were.

"Here we are," he said, fumbling briefly for the light switch. A table lamp flicked on as I closed the door behind me, illuminating a small, unassuming flat, furnished in classic Early Garage Sale. Bookshelves lined the walls, holding more bits of small, miscellaneous sculpture and knickknacks than books. Highlighted on one wall, above the scruffy couch, with its own little lamp, was a framed poster depicting the '87 March. Tucked in one corner, between the poster and the glass, was a snapshot of him, his arm slung around the waist of a sandy-haired fellow wearing the black-jeans-white-tee-shirt New York

fellow wearing the black-jeans-white-tee-shirt New York uniform. Tucked in the other corner was a closeup photo of a section of the quilt.

That made my gut go all funny. Seeing that little display there, all alone on the bare wall, with its own little poster lamp. Here it is, it said. Here is a piece of me, on a poster and two photographs. Here is where I have been, here is where I am, and here is where I'm going.

"Hello in there?" he said, amused.

"Um," I said, focusing on his face. His eyes flirted again: don't you want to know? they said. But I knew. So I didn't ask.

He took my coat and motioned vaguely towards the couch, leaving me for a moment to use the bathroom. He returned with some fuzzy towels and a bowl, setting them on the low endtable at the end of the couch. Direct, to the point. He futzed about with the stereo for a moment. Yanni faded up, all pianos and bowed strings.

"Take your shoes off and stay awhile," he said as he sat down next to me. I fumbled with my laces and slid my shoes off. Bump, bump, they hit the carpet. "Do you like Yanni?" he asked.

"I have his albums," I said, staring at my hands, which had folded themselves primly on my lap. "He dates Linda Evans." That was an odd thing to say, I thought. His hand reached over and took mine, stroking the ridge of ring-finger tendon.

"You have a piano player's hands," he said. "Do you play?"

"Yes, some," I said, letting my hand be held. "And guitar." I paused, then added "I also play panpipes." There it was again, I thought. Panpipes have nothing to do with my hands. I shouldn't have mentioned it. Why did I? I felt nervous and itchy, and suddenly wanted to be somewhere else. My fingers clutched abruptly at his. I looked up, into those slate eyes. They went quizzical on me, and he canted his head.

"Are you alright?" he asked. I nodded slowly. "You looked...I don't know, tense or something." I shrugged.

"Maybe the drinks." He clucked his tongue.

"You want a backrub?"

"That would be good, actually." I started to unbutton my shirt, quickly, and almost recoiled when he reached over and lightly took my hand away, unbuttoning it himself, stripping away the soft fabric and dropping it. I lay myself down on the couch, and he knelt to one side, his fingers working and kneading. He was good, with a practiced, delicate touch. His "backrub" was better than some massages I'd paid for.

As his hands worked down my back it was good, and as his fingers slipped under the waistband of my jeans it was wonderful, all electric and gentle. He pressured me gently to roll over, and I did so, seeing that somehow, during my backrub, he had gotten his shirt off. A tinyfine gold chain circled his neck, its lower arc lost in mats of wiry hair. I pulled him down to me, and we met there for a time, hot and wet.

He nuzzled my neck, and I reveled in the roughness of it...whiskers were good for me then. His hand felt the button and buckle, undoing each, and slid down, and down. I arched my back, stretching catlike, and at the top of the arch--swish!--jeans were off and gone. My eyes caught the reflection of the posterlamp overhead, in the frameglass, and beneath it the two photographs: there I was and here I'm going. I could see sandy-hair's eyes, just then. You! they said. Get away! He's mine! And then

it all went away, the energy draining from my fingers, my prick, it all went, puddling, stolen. He looked up at me, feeling it go, seeing it.

"What's wrong?" he said. He followed my gaze, and seeing the snapshot there said, "he was a friend of mine." He looked away.

I sat up then, throwing his hands aside, and curled up in one corner of the couch, feeling very cold, and very far away from everyone and everything. "I'm sorry," he said. "Did I...was I doing something wrong?"

"No," I said. "Yes. No. I..." He moved closer, and I cringed. "I'm sorry. I don't want to be fucked on your altar." His face went blank, frozen, unreadable, and we sat there, the energy cold and slow, unreal. We were just strangers then, one naked and huddled, one torn and confused, with a mile of napped upholstery between the two of us. Yanni's piano and strings whispered to us. He got up awkwardly, and stood with his back to me. Even his back was hairy.

"I just wanted to ball," he said quietly. "That's all."

"I know," I said. "So did I. It just...got funny all the sudden. I'm sorry."

"I'm going to make a drink for myself," he said. "Do you want one?"

"Water," I said, and he went to the kitchen, returning with two highball glasses. I took mine, and pulled an afghan off the arm of the couch and over me, warding against the chill of the air. He sat on the middle cushion, his drink clutched tightly in his lap. Raising it slowly he took a large pull from it, his throat clicking audibly, and tapped his ring against the glass. I sipped my water, and felt my desert throat suck it in.

"Five years," he said quietly, staring into his glass. "We were together five years."

"That's a long time," I said, more because I needed to say something than because I thought it was a long time, or thought anything at all. It was one of those things you say because a comment seems expected, or needed. "Then he was diagnosed," he said, gulping the rest of his drink. He had mixed it strong, and I saw his eyes grow bright and his nostrils flare as he forced it down. "And I watched him fight, and fight, until it got him, and dragged him down, and tore him up." Tap. "Then he was gone." I huddled up under the afghan, hearing him, but not listening, not really. I was all small inside, tiny and hairless. Feeling, somehow, abused.

"And now you bring your tricks here for him," I said bitterly, no sympathy, only the raw, red edge of vague anger. He heard it, and his eyes grew flinty, full of sparks and mica-chips.

"And who did you lose?" he spat.

"No one," I said, and the red edge in my voice bloomed into sharp crimson focus, bitter, aseptic, dry. It was all there, in two words: no one. "I never had anyone to lose. My first was positive. And now here I am." I sipped water again, to wet my lips. "Dead in the closet."

We sat with that for awhile, listening to the music.

"That's how I knew," he said presently. "Because you've already given up. I can see that in a person."

"Given up," I repeated dully. "What's there to give up?"

"Only you," he said, and moved closer to me, hand outstretched. I drew away, but there was nowhere left to go. I felt it coming, and I fought it, locking my throat, holding my breath, but it came anyway, and we fell together, and I was weeping, grinding my teeth with the wrenching of it. It might have been the drinks. But it came and I let go to it, hating it and yet feeling it, feeling it deep inside, in my core, where all the festering rage was, against god, against man, against my nameless first lover, against myself. I beat my piano-player fists against his furry back, and he held

onto me, held onto me tight, and soon I was just telling him not to let go. Then there was only grief, a moaning sadness that was neither good, nor bad, nor indifferent: it just was. I felt his shoulders hitch, heaving, and I felt his own demon rise up and grab hold of him, and then it was my turn to hold on and not let go. For a brief, terrifying moment I thought that I couldn't do it. But I did, and we were there together in that space, holding on to each other, and rocking. We stayed that way for a long, sweet time.

When our lips met, then, it was good. There was fire, and strength, and desperation, all entwined, rolling around us like the coils of an impassioned snake. An image: that tiny fine gold chain, snagged by my clenching fist, snapping, sliding off his neck, golden oil. That has stayed with me, a moment in time, frozen, a memory-polaroid.

When we came we came together, both of us reaching that searing nonmoment of exquisite orgasm with the same gasped breath, the same convulsion, the same primal cry. Spent, we collapsed upon each other, our minds and bodies humming contentedly, like high tension wires in the rain.

Eventually we slept.

I gave him my number, but he and I both knew that what we needed from each other we had gotten that night, and that there was nothing to do for it but keep on. If things had been different, I might have caught his eye while I was at the bookstore beneath his flat. I'd been there dozens of times. We could have met, and been in love together, and done some things. But I'd never seen him. Which was sad, in a way.

Before I left that morning he kissed me deeply. I looked in those eyes of his and said, "You're not positive, are you?"

"Not yet," he said. "But I will be."

I looked at my feet, then at his silver lambda ring. The cabbie's horn beeped impatiently.

I kissed him then and left, heading down the stairs and out. The cabbie must have seen it in my face as he checked me out in his mirror, because after awhile of driving he said, "You know, you don't look so good."

"No, I'm fine," I said, staring out the window at the winter trees and gray sky. "Someone I know just died."

"Family?" the cabbie asked sympathetically.

"No," I said, feeling sad. "He was a friend of mine." ◆