

## Gentlemen Friends

All through that year at a certain Christian university in Tulsa, Oklahoma, back in '82, men were my friends. I would tell you the name of the university, but I was sworn to secrecy for like one hundred years or something when I entered those hallowed halls. Anyway, the gentlemen were just friends. They all made that perfectly clear. "I like you as a friend," they would say. "I'm not looking for a serious relationship."

My second year, I dated this guy named Jim for a while. He played the upright bass in the chapel band. He dated me for like a month and even kissed me once but then left a note in my campus post office box saying he felt, "He was getting too close to me and wanted to remain" you guessed it, "friends." Then some garbage about how his thoughts of me were interfering with his studies and his dedication to God, etc., etc. At the time it seemed totally understandable and even sort of sweet, but since then I've come to realize it was just a boat load of shit.

I suppose I shouldn't complain. Men liked talking to me. I don't know why. But I wanted more than talk. I wanted to be appreciated in a particular way, frankly, a physical way. But then again, I was only nineteen-years old and committed to remaining a virgin until marriage as all women in my family had done for, I don't know, probably thousands of years, or so I thought then. A little touching and kissing was sort of what I had in mind.

I just wasn't prepared for Paul.

He was a graduate student, studying law at a Christian university, so logically, I assumed I was safe. Sure, he was also married, something of which I was aware, but it didn't matter because he only ever wanted to talk with me, right? I reasoned he only desired that rare and beautiful thing between a thirty-something man and a young virgin from Alabama—friendship.

Furthermore, my roommate Ellen, who worked in the university library, knew his wife, who also worked there. I never met her, but I knew through Ellen that Paul's wife was very nice and, I found out later on, after I became friends with her loving husband, six-months pregnant.

I used to see Paul, by accident, when I was studying in the law library on the fifth floor. I'd go up there because I could get away from other people and not be bothered. Of course, I didn't mind being bothered by Paul because I liked talking to him. He'd come over to my study carrel and lean his arm on the side. "How are you, Mary?" he'd say and I'd tell him. It wouldn't be long before we'd be talking about life and the nature of God and His relationship with Man and other safe, friendly things.

One night, when I had more than a usual amount of work to do, Paul came over and started talking, suggesting that we go have a cup of coffee in the student lounge. I was certainly naïve and vulnerable, but even I knew that in my conservative evangelical Christian world, young unmarried college students didn't have coffee with men whose wives worked in the library and/or were home pregnant. What's more, I didn't want to go with him.

He was making me nervous.

"Come on, we'll talk," he said, leaning over the carrel.

“I don’t know.”

“Why wouldn’t you go with me?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do,” he said softly and a little sadly too, it seemed, at the time.

He pulled up a chair and sat beside me. “You don’t mind if we just talk here, do you?”

I looked at my hands. They were small and white and weak. “I...I do have work to do. This paper is due tomorrow.”

“This won’t take long.” He sat there looking at me but didn’t say anything. At least I thought he was looking at me. I was still looking at my hands. Then, his hand covered mine. It was warm. “You know, I decided to lose my virginity before I got married,” he said, his voice low.

He was going to make a good lawyer.

Hesitating just long enough for me to feel the impact of his words, he continued, “I felt it would make me a better husband to my wife.” He gripped my hand a little tighter. “I picked an older friend of mine, just a friend, someone I knew wasn’t interested in a long-term relationship.”

I looked at him but didn’t pull my hands away. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Mary, you have...” He stopped and took a deep breath. “You have assets. As your older friend, I feel...”

Then it dawned on me. I know, I was a bit slow. “Are you coming on to me?”

“Well, I, I suppose....”

Now I pulled my hand away. “I’m not believing this. You’ve got a pregnant wife at home, and you’re coming on to me.”

“How did you know?”

“That you’re coming on to me or that your wife is home pregnant?” He looked at me, doe eyed.

“I got assets, remember?” Standing up, while still keeping an eye on him, I started packing up my books, shoving them into a canvas tote that said, So many books, so little time. Did I have stupid virgin tattooed on my forehead or something?

He tried to calm me down and get me to sit and talk some more, proving he was more stupid than I was despite him being a law student and me a lowly undergraduate virgin.

I just kept packing up. The next day I studied in the lounge of my dorm, safely overseen by a silver-haired dragon lady named Maureen, specially trained in spotting married graduate students, I hoped.

Gentlemen friends.

Paul was just one example. It’s a wonder I didn’t get kicked out of school because of them, or quit. The irony of ironies is I never really did anything. I was just there, you know—hanging out with guys who treated me like one of the guys, except when they didn’t.

Tomas was apparently another prime example of my kind of guy. He was tall and thin, an exchange student from Dusseldorf, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a taste for the oddest clothing in eastern Oklahoma. A theology student, he moonlighted in a band with a bunch of other theologians. They called themselves The Fathers of God. I thought

it was a little sacrilegious, but who am I? Since he was from Germany, and I was double majoring in English and German, we got to know each other pretty well. I worked in the modern language department too, so we saw each other a lot, talked a little. He found out I owned a car, and bammo, we were friends.

I guess I didn't put two and two together because I wanted to think Tomas liked me as a woman, but I soon realized, yes, it was the car, but I didn't care. I needed a friend and Tomas needed to get around. That's just the way it was.

For example, he came to visit me at the Chinese restaurant I worked at one night. Should have tipped me off. He never visited me there. I told him I couldn't talk to him because I had to work, so he said he'd actually sit down to have a meal, and spend real money, and wait until I was finished working, so he could talk to me.

I was stunned. Were things going to change? Was he going to tell me that the friendship was turning into something more? Was Tomas the man who would be more than a friend?

I finished with my work and sat down to hear what he had to say.

"Want some Moo Goo?" was what he said.

"No thanks." He chewed and drank his green tea, holding the little cup with his pinky extended. He chewed some more. "Uh," I said finally, tired of waiting, "What are you doing here? You never come here. And how'd you get here anyway?"

"Oh, my roommate dropped me off." He lifted the silver lid that warmed his food. "You sure you don't want some of this?"

"I'm sure. What do you want, Tomas?"

He finally looked at me and stopped eating. "I need to ask you a question." He looked a bit nervous.

"Yes," I said, "What is it?"

He grabbed my hand then. He reached out and covered my warm hand with his cold one. "Mary, I know this is going to seem weird but hear me out."

"I'm listening."

He waited, holding my hand. "I need you to." He closed his eyes. "I want you to...I would like you to..."

Something made me take my hand away. "You'd like me to do what?"

"Marry me?"

"Marry you?" I really didn't want to marry him. I had dreamed of somebody asking me. But not somebody like Tomas and not like this, not now. I looked at him, afraid to ask. "Why? Why do you want me to marry you?"

He lifted another lid and spooned out a little more of the fluffy white rice. It steamed on his plate. "I need a green card." He continued spooning out the rice.

"Let me get this straight." I said grabbing a napkin and beginning to crumple it in my hand. "You, a theology student, want me to perform the holy sacrament of marriage, to bind myself to you in holy matrimony...so you can get a fucking green card?"

At least he had the decency to stop eating. "I never heard you use that kind of language before, Mary. I'm shocked."

"It seems appropriate under the circumstances."

"I don't know why you're so upset. Really I don't."

"You don't?"

“It’s just a formality because your country makes it so difficult for people like me to work.”

I looked at him then, chewing his Moo Goo. He had no clue. “I don’t suppose we’d have to consummate the marriage.”

He looked at me then. “Of course not. I know you’re ‘saving...’” He crooked his two index fingers in the air, “yourself for the right man or something. Besides there’s no need for that. Like I said, it’s merely a formality.”

“Yes, a formality.” I was quiet then. He must have taken my silence as acceptance.

“So, you’ll do it?”

“Why do you even need a green card?”

“I told you. So I can work.”

“But you have a student visa. As long as you’re in school, you can...”

He looked up at me as I leaned back in my seat. I stared at him until he finished chewing his Moo Goo. “What?” he asked, shrugging his shoulders.

“You want to drop out of school, don’t you?” He didn’t say anything. “Tomas, your church back home is paying for you to get a degree and come back and pastor their church. They sacrificed to pay your way to this country and pay for your tuition and books. They’re counting on you. You can’t quit.”

“I’ve got to do what’s right for me.”

“You’ve got to do what pleases you, you mean.”

“Same thing.” He poured himself more tea.

I didn’t say anything.

“Look,” he said, straightening himself as best he could. “You can’t judge me.”

“I’m not. If I were judging you, I’d say to hell with you. I’m not saying that. I’m just offering my opinion as the woman you’ve chosen to make your bride.”

“Then you’ll do it?”

Oh, God.

Tomas eventually accepted that marriage was out of the question, although he never understood my refusal. I suppose he still needed a ride. For my part, I upheld the friendship for lack of anything better to do, lack of any other men around, so I don’t get any points for being noble. I was a user too.

Besides, I didn’t really have any women friends. See, the thing is, I really liked men more than women, at least most of the women I was around then, anyway. They were nice enough, I suppose, but they wanted to talk about men most of the time, but I didn’t like talking about them. I liked talking with them.

So for a while Tomas was it. Then, he got a car. He talked someone back home into sending him \$400 dollars for a little Ford Fiesta that he found used. It was a putrid orange color and ran like it had a squirrel under the hood, but I owned a powder blue Chevette, so I couldn’t talk much. At least I got mine honest. My dad gave it to me when he replaced his car.

For a while after that I didn’t see Tomas much. I even tried calling him once or twice, but his roommate always said he was out. I started having to admit to myself that I missed him, that I wanted his friendship, anyway.

Then one day, he called me, not because his car was in the shop, not to ask for a favor, just to talk, he said. I let him talk and waited for the usual to happen. It didn't. I guess it threw me.

"Do you want to meet this really nice guy I know in Tulsa?" he asked.

"Tulsa?"

"Yeah, he lives in that big round apartment building, you know?"

"I know it. I guess I'm driving."

"No," he insisted, "I'll drive."

"Okay." It was like we were going on a real date.

"He's really a nice guy."

"You said that."

"And there's supposed to be kind of a party there."

"What kind of party?"

"What do you mean what kind of party? A party, I don't know."

"Who is this guy?"

"Michael is his name for God's sake," he said. "Do you want to go or not?"

Lord, I should have said, no. But I didn't.

Tomas came to my dorm lobby to pick me up. That's right, to the dorm lobby. Granted, he was fifteen minutes late, but he'd never picked me up before. He looked odd, as usual, dressed in a neon green oversized cotton shirt and skinny psychedelic tie, but he looked neatly dressed and shaven, and he smelled like musk. Things were improving on the whole. He even charmed Maureen at the front desk. She told me later that my boyfriend was cute as a button.

When we got to the car, he opened the door for me, and I wondered if he was working up for another proposal when he said, “You’ll like Michael.”

“I’m sure I will. How did you meet him?”

“Oh, we just go to the same clubs sometimes.”

“I didn’t know you went to clubs.”

“You know, since I got the car. I’m not tied down like I used to be.”

“Is he a student?”

“God, no,” he said. “He wouldn’t step foot on this campus or any other for that matter.” Tomas started the car up. “Michael’s a businessman.”

“Oh,” I said, settling into the lumpy seat. “And he wants to meet me?” I tried to get a glimpse of myself in the side mirror. I had tried to dress older. Did I look older?

“Of course, he wants to meet you.” He started the car, after the third try. “That’s why I asked you to come with me, silly.”

“Why me?”

“Because I told him how adorable your little southern accent is. I told him you were from Georgia.” Tomas drove down the avenue of flags and out onto 71<sup>st</sup> Street.

“Alabama.”

“What?”

“I’m from Alabama, not Georgia.”

“Oh.”

“Why the interest in my accent? Hasn’t he ever heard Okies talk? They’re not Southern enough for him?”

“Michael’s from New York and your accent is way different from a Oklahoma accent. Even I know that.”

I was quiet then, thinking about meeting Michael, the business man from New York who wanted to meet a “real” southerner, a man who wanted to meet me.

Tomas turned onto Riverside Drive, and we rode in silence for a while. I glanced over at the Pedestrian Bridge that spanned the Arkansas River. I shivered. “Can I turn on the heat?” I asked, hoping against hope.

“Doesn’t work.” Naturally.

I pulled my coat closer and crossed my arms, looking out the window. Without thinking, I fogged the glass with my breath and drew a heart, then quickly wiped it away with my sleeve, glancing over at Tomas. His lower lip was poking out. “What are you thinking about?” I asked.

“Why do women always ask that?”

“Do they?”

“Yes, they always want to know what you’re thinking. I’m allowed to have my own thoughts, aren’t I?”

“Sorry.” I lapsed again into silence, looking once more out the window as we moved into the outskirts of the city. I loved the old Tudor and Georgian houses in this old neighborhood and dreamed of what it might be like to live in one of them or in one of the old brick apartment buildings.

*In the old Tudor, half timbered house, I’m a wife and a professional woman, a lawyer. My husband, he’s a businessman, a successful businessman. We have two*

*children, a boy and a girl, but we're wealthy enough to have a housekeeper come in once or twice a week. My schedule allows me to be the kind of wife and mother I want to be.*

*In the apartment building, I'm single, still a lawyer. I enjoy my work and the company of men, but I'm in no hurry to settle down. I don't need a man. Sometimes I walk down the street to Philpot, the art museum, and wander through the exhibits alone. Sometimes I go to the theater or a concert or even a fine restaurant by myself. It doesn't bother me. I am independent.*

Tomas punched me lightly on the arm. "So what are you thinking?" he asked, his voice unusually deep. I smiled and so did he. Then, I told him about my fantasy lives in Tulsa's historic homes, and we laughed together.

Finally, the skyline came into view. Soon we could see the strange round building where Michael lived.

"Here we are," said Tomas as he turned the Fiesta up to the parking lot gate. "We'll park in the garage." He punched in several numbers. "Michael gave me the password."

"Oh," I said biting my lip. "Michael must make pretty good money," I said, trying to keep my voice light.

"He does all right."

"What kind of business is he in anyway?" I asked as we got out of the car.

"Import and export. He speaks German."

"Hum, sounds interesting." We made our way to the garage level elevator and Tomas pushed 14. "He lives up pretty high." I said. "I guess he's got a good view."

“Yes, he does.” Tomas leaned against the brass rail of the elevator and looked up at the numbers moving up. He tapped his fingers against the paneled wall. We waited and soon the doors opened.

I looked around and saw only one door ahead of me. “He lives in the penthouse?”

Tomas nodded and rang the doorbell, and a man I thought was Michael answered the door. He was tall with dark hair, bronze skin and green eyes. His loosely fitting chocolate brown shirt accentuated his broad shoulder and wide chest. The shirt was tucked into a pair of tight-fitting black jeans revealing a slim waist and muscular legs.

He smiled when he saw Tomas, gripping his hand with a firm grasp. “Hey, man, glad you could make it! Come on in.”

No one spoke to me.

Michael ushered us into the room, and even I, who wasn't the most fashion-conscious person around, could tell I was in a classy joint. A leather sofa and chair with an ottoman formed the sitting area around a large entertainment center with a state of the art black TV and Pioneer stereo system with turn table, tape deck and graphic equalizer, its red lights pulsing with the soft jazz music emitting from the four large speakers placed around the room.

The large picture window to the left of me was the center piece of the room, however. The round shape of the building caused the glass to curve around like a bay window, creating a panoramic view of Tulsa, its night lights shining. I was drawn to the window and walked toward it with my mouth open.

This close to the window, I realized how high up we were. I looked down and the steps leading up to the building seemed flat, the other buildings dwarfed from this height.

I felt like a bird, like I was flying.

“You must be Mary,” a soft, husky voice said behind me. I turned to see a short, stocky man, not much taller than me. He too had dark hair but his skin was pale and his eyes a piercing blue. He held out a wine glass. “You are Mary, aren’t you?”

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry,” I said, taking the glass. “I’m just enjoying Michael’s view.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said.

I realized my mistake and blushed. “Oh, you’re Michael. I thought the man that answered the door...”

“That’s my younger brother, Sebastian.”

“Oh,” I said, looking down at the glass. “I’m afraid I don’t drink alcohol. Not supposed to anyway.” I handed him the glass.

“Not supposed to, huh?” He took the glass and set it on the glass covered coffee table. “Do you always do what you’re supposed to? Tomas doesn’t.”

I didn’t answer him. “Tomas said he was bringing me to a party. We’re the only ones here.”

“Tomas always likes to come early. Didn’t he tell you?”

“No. He didn’t.” I turned to the window, feeling nervous, wanting to leave. “I really do like this view.” I turned to him again to see a half smile on his face. I was his entertainment for the evening, I supposed. “Tomas says you like Southern accents.”

“He did?”

“Yes, he did.” I laid it on thick. “Is it everything you expected?”

“It’s wonderful. Say something really southern.”

“Really southern?” I paused. “How about this? You wanna go possum huntin’ tonight? Or frog giggin’?”

Michael laughed. “Possum huntin’? My god, that is too much.” He turned to where Tomas and Sebastian were standing at the bar. “Sebastian, you’ve got to listen to Mary.” The two turned. Tomas was smiling, laughing at me already. I felt stupid. “Go ahead, Mary. Say it again.”

I didn’t want to.

“Go ahead, say it.”

“You wanna go possum huntin’ tonight?” I said and wanted to crawl under the fancy leather sofa. That’s why he wanted to meet me.

“But you’re putting us on. You’re accent wasn’t that pronounced when you first talked. It was like Rosalyn Carter’s, soft and lilting.”

“You think?”

“Oh, yes, it’s beautiful, just like you.” He came close to me when he said that and brushed my hand.

“Michael,” Sebastian said, “Tomas is ready.”

“All right, I’ll be right there.” He turned back to me. “You really don’t know why Tomas comes early to my parties, do you?”

I shook my head and sat down on the ottoman, suddenly feeling very tired.

Michael put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, Mary. Tomas is a little shit. He thought he’d bring me a little business that’s all. I’ll have a talk with him. I’ve got all the clients I can handle now.”

Oh, ha, import and export business.

“Why don’t you make yourself comfortable? Change the music if you like. I’ve got lots to choose from. There’s some pop and ice over on the bar.” He walked away.

I made myself a drink, Coca-Cola and sauntered over to the stereo system. I flipped through the albums half-heartedly. There was no way I was going touch that complicated system. The jazz would be fine. I wandered around the room, trying to act like I belonged there.

I made my way back over near the window, trading my Coke for the wine glass on the way. I sipped tentatively. It tasted bitter. Gazing out the window, holding the wine glass with the stem between my fingers and trying to be someone Michael would expect in his round room, I continued to sip and wait. I saw the blue and white lights of a police car and heard the wailing of a siren. Soon more lights flickered in the distance and more sirens wailed. They were coming closer.

I heard the three men come back into the room. Sebastian came up beside me and looked out the window. He walked over to the other two and began whispering. Tomas rubbed his sleeve against his nose.

“Tomas,” I said, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” he said, wiping his nose yet again.

“Okay,” I said, “I’m slow, but I’m not that slow.” I walked over to Tomas. “I think we should get out of here now.”

“No, there couldn’t be anything to it,” Michael was saying to Sebastian. “Lights flashing, sirens wailing. It couldn’t be us.” With that, we watched as four police cars pulled into the parking lot.

I could see the headlines, Student at Christian University Caught in Drug Bust. “Get me out of here now, Tomas,” I said, trying to keep the panic out of my voice.

“Sure,” he sniffed.

Michael nodded to Sebastian. “See them out.” He looked at me, his breath rapid. “I hope to see you again.” I looked at him, not angry, a little frightened is all. He smiled then, that half smile from before. “Or at least hear you again.”

“Maybe,” I said.

Michael nodded at Sebastian and closed the apartment door.

Sebastian, without a word, bounded down the stairs, the sleeves of his silky shirt billowing in the air. He kept looking back at us and gesturing. “Hurry,” he said once, his breath coming quickly. Flight after flight, fifteen to be exact, we flew. In the basement, Sebastian opened a heavy steel door, and we found ourselves in the apartment building’s laundry room. We made our way past the machines, one or two busily agitating their clothes, past the dryers, all silent, and out a back door.

Sebastian stood there for a moment, looking around, gasping. We could see blue light pulsating in the night, leaking out from the round building, but we were in the dark and safe. Sebastian finally spoke. “You know what to do, man.” He grabbed Tomas’s arm and elbow as he had earlier in greeting. “You might stay away for awhile, you know.”

Tomas nodded. Then Sebastian left, without a word to me.

Tomas and I were silent on the way to the car. We were able to drive out through the back without anyone knowing. Down Riverside Drive I looked out the window. I looked at the houses and apartment buildings. I looked at Tomas, who stared straight ahead.

Finally, I said, “I know what you’re thinking.”

He straightened up in his seat. “Huh?”

“I know what you’re thinking this time. I don’t have to ask.”

He glanced over at me and then back to the road. “What am I thinking?”

“You’re thinking how sorry you are that you took me to Michael’s. You’re thinking how you’ll never do anything like this again because...”

“Because?”

“Because we’re friends.” I looked over at Tomas. He stared straight ahead and never said a word. I looked at my hands—and felt strong.