

## REGULAR STRANGERS

It was April and the bright green of spring, along with the dust of yellow pollen, permeated the Texas air. The month of April marked two years since Hall's death. Brianne felt as if she hadn't seen or felt the season of spring in ages. Time and energy were hard to account for.

It was Sylvia's idea to go shopping and have lunch after. New clothes, new energy was her motto and Brianne agreed to go along. She climbed into Sylvia's car with both a smile and a light layer of exhaustion over her body. It had been months—she wasn't sure how many months—since she'd been out like this.

“You sure you up to it?” Sylvia asked as she reversed the car from Brianne's driveway. As Sylvia navigated the car, Brianne studied the deep brown profile that resembled Hall Chester

Colson—her deceased husband and Sylvia's deceased brother. She studied it the way she often did each time they got together, as if she was seeing Sylvia for the first time. Or for the last time. Her silky skin tone nearly matched his, her nose was broad and angular like Hall's nose, her large dark eyes and thick lashes were similar to his. Her hair this month (Sylvia had a different hairstyle every month) was in reddish brown box braids that hung midway down her back. The braids were pulled back and large silver earrings glimmered against her jawline.

“I haven't been out in a long time. If I get too tired, I'll let you know.” Even saying that, Brianne wasn't sure she meant what she said. She was accustomed to practicing a polite form of self-sacrifice to go along with whatever seemed to be expected, but she had little strength or energy to pretend she had strength or energy. At the very least, that should grant her permission to speak up and mean it.

During the ten years that Brianne and Hall were married, she and Sylvia had not been especially close. Sylvia offered slightly more than friendly small talk and benign chitchat and Brianne reciprocated, matched her word for word. Sylvia, an event planner, older than Hall by just 11 months, mainly hung out with her brother alone, often with a weekly lunch or dinner at their favorite soul food restaurant. On rare occasions they invited Brianne or their younger sister. Sylvia, happily divorced from the father of her two adult daughters, was curt, cordial and generally good-humored. As in-laws they were comfortably polite with each other. Or politely indifferent.

After Hall's death, Sylvia called and texted Brianne several times a week. Brianne expected that politeness to end, to fizzle out, but the new communication and all its awkwardness continued. Hall's death created some vacuum of space, a whirlpool of grief and broken

connection. Sylvia, plainly unashamed of her sorrow, reached for what she could and that included Brianne. She repeated often: “You'll always be my sister-in-law.” The clumsy adjustment to regular communication, to getting to know one another occurred by degrees. Brianne's response shifted from an inner voice that shouted “Seriously?!” to an outer voice that shared stories about Hall. The adjustment was no less bewildering than adjusting to widowhood or to cancer treatment.

The breast cancer came less than a year after Hall's death and further overwhelmed her sense of grounding. Brianne thought there would be more time. More space for reconciling the strangeness of life. For dwelling on what she'd hoped and expected. They were not successful in having children and settled into being and remaining a childless couple, but she always thought there would be more time. Hall died—one of three reported deaths—in a multiple car crash on I-35 on an April evening when she was waiting dinner for him. It was the kind of crash that was shown on multiple local evening newscasts, the kind of news story that evoked the usual distant morbid curiosity and sympathy. The kind of crash that happened to strangers. Until it happened to Hall. To all of them as Hall's family. *How could this be?*

She assumed there would be more time for family. More time with Hall. More time for growing old together. More time for grieving. But there was no more time. At the age of forty-six, Brianne bobbed in a swamp of loss and singular adjustment, weaving in and out of grief and shock.

Her parents came from Missouri for the memorial service, then again a year later during her cancer treatment, with a quick holiday visit in between. Sylvia insisted on being a support during treatment, though she was a bit aggressive—or perhaps more assertive than Brianne's

comfort level—with the nurses on duty when she accompanied her to the treatment facility. Sylvia shared another commonality that Brianne had not known—that she, too, had a bout with breast cancer when she was much younger and had been cancer free for over twenty years.

After the course of treatment was completed, Brianne's doctors were cautiously optimistic about remission. While she felt some relief with that news and the hope of normalcy, she still felt drained, depleted and depressed. Her brown skin had an ashen undertone of sickness. And she dreaded seeing the typical surprise and pity in peoples' eyes when they saw her—their initial lack of recognition, then the fast blinking, then their face registering shock at the changes in her appearance, her marital status—the diminished her. She saw it in her coworkers at the government contracting office when she returned after her leave of absence. She saw it in members from her church and in neighbors and acquaintances she'd run into at the pharmacy. It weighed her down even more, that sinking invisibility, and added to her weariness. Yet she stood her ground as well as she could with a practiced polite smile.

At the discount clothing store Brianne had an armful of items in her dressing room, while Sylvia was on her second round of trying on the maximum amount of clothing allowed.

Seated on the small seat facing the mirror inside her dressing room, Brianne decided to buy two midi-dresses, a pair of jeans and some leggings that fit her slimmer body, separating them from the other items. She was excited for a new look, a prettier replacement for her worn-out sweats and stained t-shirts. She sat back, sighed, and ran her hand over her tiny black afro, the hair soft as she fingered her scalp. She would get up in five minutes, she told herself.

Over the mirrored wall between them, Brianne said, “I think I'm done, Sylvia. I might pay and just wait for you up front.”

“All right, Bree. You know I got work to do here!!” She laughed.

“Take your time, girl. Take your time.” Brianne remained seated, still unaccustomed to her reflection in mirrors. *Five minutes*, she mouthed.

Standing in one of the cash register lines behind a white-haired woman, Brianne didn't notice Lloyd at first. Her glance washed over him perhaps twice with the casual notice of a stranger, a tall black male in another line. Then her eyes found him a third time with a blood-rushed recognition. She pushed her glasses up on her nose, against her flushed face and looked again. It was him. It was *him*. Lloyd Bernard Harrison was standing only two cash registers over from her near the exit.

Her knees trembled and she shifted her weight from her right leg to her left, then right again. How was she supposed to feel seeing an old married lover for the first time in thirteen years and he was with a woman assumed to be his wife? Assumed to be the same wife he had when they'd had their affair? Did words exist for an occasion like this? “*Shit*,” she whispered. She shook her head, a string of words at the ready. But none of her words, nothing she could grasp of language, seemed to help.

Brianne glanced at Lloyd again, blinking rapidly, a slight twitch in her upper right cheek. It was definitely him. Brianne turned away and squinted at the woman in front of her in line, to maintain focus on her and the bright aqua and red items draped over her arm. She inched toward her without seeming to have picked up either foot.

They were in their early thirties during their brief involvement, that tumbling tangle of passion and physicality. Time had passed. But at that moment their time seemed close—the memory of them seemed as nearby as the proximity of him two cash registers away. She was reminded of him on occasion throughout the years, because of his resemblance to a few TV actors. When they first met at the gym next door to the five-story office building they both worked in, he'd introduced himself as, "Lloyd Bernard—but they call me L.B." *Lover Boy* she remembered thinking back then. Even now, that thought seemed cute and clever.

Their first kiss, him lifting her slightly off her high heeled pumps, occurred in a cold private hallway in the building they worked in, just weeks after meeting and a day after they'd met for lunch at a restaurant several miles away from their office building. She remembered it well, how heat radiated through her body. "I can't stop thinking about you," he'd said and slid his arm around her lower back and pulled her in.

The sex was easy, like that first kiss, electric and secretive. And always at her apartment. She believed she could deal with being involved with a married man, since others seemed to do it all the time. Surely she was able to compartmentalize the relationship into something rational and sensible. But she found that while she could rationalize a lot...passion, attraction...she couldn't rationalize everything. By month two she was overly sensitive to every word he said or didn't say, every call he made or didn't make.

One night around midnight, he'd called her, whispering, slurred perhaps, saying that he'd gotten into a fight with his wife.

“It’s always the same things,” he mumbled, his voice low and unsteady through the phone. Brianne wasn't sure how to reply. She was confused that he felt he could talk to her about his wife. When he said his wife's name—Monique—in the familiar way a husband would say his wife's name, Brianne was clear. The picture was all wrong. That conversation, that phone call, them. It left her on the outside and out of sorts. She knew, without question, that she had to stop seeing him, that this had no good end.

And she did end things, though it wasn't with the sureness and certainty she'd imagined. In order to steel her resolve against any argument from him, she lied and told him that she was seeing someone else. He did argue, he did call, and each time she encountered his resistance, she thought about wavering, about giving in to his sex, about giving it one more try—or two or three more tries—getting as much of him as she could since it felt so easy, that breathless thrill of their bodies together. But with the wife's name in front of her and connected with his, Brianne continued to bluff her way through, giving credence to the fake new boyfriend by calling him by some fake name like Charles or Steven.

Now both of them were in their forties and her memory of their quick affair was a faded memorial to guilty passion.

Maybe it had been fifteen years. Lloyd’s face was still easily recognizable, even with a shaved head and a goatee splattered with gray. His smile flashed against his dark chocolate skin like Brianne remembered. He looked good. Still. Taller than the other customers in line. The short sleeves of his navy knit shirt stretched against his biceps. His wife, or the woman Brianne assumed was his wife, faced him. She was about Brianne's height, a head shorter than Lloyd, a dimpled smile on her round smooth peanut-colored face. When she put her phone against her ear,

Lloyd looked over her toward the exit. All Brianne had ever known of her—that her name was Monique—touched the tip of her tongue as she watched them together.

She tried to refrain from staring or repeatedly glancing over, but lacked restraint. Her eyes, her neck turned toward him, toward the two of them, against her will. She hoped she didn't seem too obvious, but she felt obvious. She felt ridiculous. It was best he didn't see her, wasn't it? To make eye contact or to nod in recognition or to say hello risked bad manners.

Compared to fifteen years ago, her appearance was completely different. Of course he wouldn't recognize her. Or even notice her. She was now thinner, with a frailness even she was startled to see. She pulled up the stretch jeans she had on, jeans that were snug a year earlier, but now hung loose and baggy around her thighs and knees, the waistband gaping. Her once shoulder length hair was gone. Her eyes were covered with wire-framed glasses because her contact lenses were too much trouble and too uncomfortable. She did not want to face, in him of all people, the initial non-recognition, the horrified pity that might cross his face when he calculated who she was and the change in her appearance. It was best he didn't see her.

She was next in line to make her purchase. For a moment, her chest constricted in a panic that she might get through the checkout line first and have to stall or hide in plain sight. That he might recognize her. Or that he wouldn't. Did he think of her? Ever? Did he remember her? Ever wonder what became of her? Intellectually, she knew she was probably just one of several of his extra-marital affairs, but maybe, just maybe...

What if she needed a story?...*we worked together years ago?* That wasn't exactly true. They worked in the same office building, but they worked for different companies on different

floors, companies that were not remotely connected. But if she had to, perhaps she could play it off.

As far as Brianne could tell, Lloyd did not once look in her general direction. She had no need for a story. No need to play anything off.

She was saved by the no-price-tag crisis of the woman in front of her. A sales manager had to be paged. The teenage girls behind her grumbled, but Brianne's heart rate slowed with relief. Without looking, she was certain that Lloyd Bernard Harrison and company had completed their purchase yet she was compelled to look toward the exit and watch them walk out of the store.

Her armpits were sticky and her shirt was damp, but her breathing almost returned to a regular rhythm. Was it possible he saw her and remembered her? Recognized something about her? No. No. That was not what happened. He hadn't even noticed her. He likely had completely forgotten her and didn't remember anything about her. She was a complete stranger to him, dead to him. Nothing.

The salesclerk rang her up and Brianne couldn't find her wallet. Her eyes watered as she frantically searched in her purse for what seemed like an endless moment. When she found it and fumbled through payment, she blew out a breath of relief, blinking back emotion she couldn't name. She was relieved Sylvia was still in the dressing room. It was best that they would not be crossing the parking lot as Lloyd's truck was pulling out. But after she gathered her bags, she walked directly out the door after them, as if a final view of them leaving would make a

difference or as if she would have the courage to wave at him, to make herself visible so he'd wonder, just wonder...

Outside she didn't see them in any direction she searched. A white SUV and a blue truck drove out of the far end of the parking lot, but she had no idea if either of those vehicles belonged to them. She stood on the sidewalk, looked around the parking lot then down at her bags before returning to the store with receipt in hand to wait at the exit for Sylvia.

Sylvia emerged from the checkout line, smiling, her large dangling silver earrings bouncing light around her like a halo. They walked together through the automatic glass exit door, their reflections faint, ghostlike, transparent. In spite of her certainty that he was long gone, Brianne automatically scanned the lot again for Lloyd's old black truck, the same way years ago she would scan roads and parking lots for that same model of truck. She almost laughed aloud realizing that there was no way he'd be driving the same vehicle he had fifteen years ago.

The corner restaurant was filled with the smell of baking bread. Brianne felt her energy rise. She ate spoonful after spoonful of her hot vegetable soup while Sylvia managed her sandwich and fries. She thought of Hall, how different he was from Lloyd. Different from the excited, heart pinging sexual pull of Lloyd. But relaxed. Easy. How he had not wanted to know deep details—or give deep details—about past lovers except for basic information. Their marriage was based on the laughing friendship they'd developed after they first met when his 8-year-old dog, Denver—who became their dog—greeted her by sniffing her shoes as she'd paused on a walk at a park.

“Denver don't like everybody,” Hall had said. “We'll have to be friends now.”

During their marriage, more than once Hall had asked her if she was happy. She'd respond: "Are *you* happy?" They'd smile or laugh, but neither of them would answer with a yes or no. It was a joke between them, she thought. Of course they were happy. But with him gone, it wasn't such a great joke. She wished she'd just said yes and been clear about it. She desperately wished she'd said yes to the question—now that she understood that the ordinary ups and downs, the everyday annoyances over his beard trimmings in the sink or her running late, the knowing looks, the laughter, the nagging, the teasing, the arguments, the lovemaking, the routine, the unexpected, was all there was. There wasn't any more. That was all there was and it was good. She hoped he'd known that. And that she'd remember.

She was afraid of forgetting him, of him slowly disappearing from her mind, the way his scent was fading from one of his old sweaters she'd kept in a drawer. While she couldn't always conjure up his exact image, scent, voice, often something instead of—or in addition to—memory came her. That something was like a presence or a longing, that brought tears or a ticklish laughter of remembrance. But she was really afraid of losing herself, not being able to connect again.

Sylvia, across from her, wiped her mouth after a large bite of her club sandwich.

"Hey, why are you smiling?" Sylvia said, mouth full.

"What?"

She swallowed. "You're smiling. Did I miss something?"

Brianne stared for a moment. She'd never told anyone about Lloyd. At the time it was a secret, short-lived relationship that she kept to herself, then over the years it became too embarrassing to mention.

“Hmm. Well.” She paused, then breathed. “Listen. I saw someone. At the last store. Someone I used to be...um...sexually involved with.”

“What?”

“Yeah. He was married at the time.”

“What?! Shut the front door!”

“This was way before Hall. Before.”

Sylvia nodded, took another big bite and chewed. “And?”

“And nothing. He didn't notice me at all. Think he was with his wife. I recognized him, but...nothing.”

“And yet, you're smiling...”

“Long time ago. Young and horny as hell back then.” They laughed. “Fond memories, I guess. But regular strangers now. And, well, you know, really missing Hall, too.”

They stared past each other, then down at their food. Memories and images tumbled across Brianne, like a wind stinging her eyes. A passionate kiss. Hall's coarse beard against her cheek. A hand on her once longer hair. A nurse's cool hand over her bald head.

“Glad you came out.” Sylvia said. Her eyes were so much like Hall's eyes that Brianne turned away for a moment to glance at the waitress at a nearby table.

Staring at her sandwich with focus, Sylvia took another big bite, chewed for a moment, then grinned a wide grin, mayonnaise at the corner of her mouth.

“Hey,” she said, wiping her mouth, “maybe we need to get you back in the dating game, on eHarmony or something.”

They stared at one another for a moment, then laughed.

“Stop. Please. Just stop.”