

## The Church of Happiness

I was invited to attend a gathering of The Church of Happiness by a very handsome and perhaps too young for me guy that I met at an Upper West Side sidewalk cafe one April morning. Actually, he was beyond handsome: square jaw line; clean shaven, perfect complexion; dark, thick hair; twinkling brown eyes; and suspiciously white teeth (I'm a bit wary of people with extremely white teeth; back when I was this guy's age, people just didn't have teeth that white).

Eye contact turned to overt flirting and rather quickly he joined my table and introduced himself as Trent. There was a slight chill in the New York spring breeze that we braved for the sake of conquest. Before very long, we hit it off, as far as casual cappuccino encounters go.

My initial reaction to the invitation was trepidation, but as Trent described the looseness of the gathering, my caution waned. The name The Church of Happiness sounded as secular as you could get, even a bit goofy. My attraction to Trent coupled with an overwhelming sense of loneliness in the big city were the tipping points.

I corralled my cantering heart, shrugged, and said yes. Trent gave me the address and time. After watching me jot it all down, he rose from the table we shared, winked, and disappeared down the street, immediately blending in with the growing morning throng.

You can imagine my surprise at being stood up at The Church of Happiness. Surprised, annoyed, indignant, with an extra added touch of despair. I was already inside the Tribeca venue, which was once a bagel factory—all brick and cement—when I accepted the burning truth that Trent wasn't coming. That my so-much-younger object of desire was never going to arrive, that I'd never see him again.

But something in this place intrigued me. True, at the outset, it appeared to be some sort of Indonesian religious cult with all the trappings of Christianity. Parishioners were lighting tall, white, immaculate tapers and there was the obvious priest, or preacher, or whatever you call him—an attractive, young Asian man, dressed in a red robe, holding a large book, which I supposed he would read his sermon from. Then I noticed that he had a bunch of Mardi Gras beads draped around his neck. Things here were most definitely unconventional; and there was something more to this place than what met the eye.

It was the music, piped in through mounted speakers. The volume seemed to be much higher in the main auditorium, just behind double doors someone was propping open. It was dance club music. Disco-House music. The place began thumping as the bass was cranked up several levels. This just did not have the shadowy feeling of cult coercion. And I was having strong doubts anyone would be delivering sermons from any big book.

There were close to fifty attendees, casually dressed. They were conversing, laughing, gesturing, hugging, and generally acting like a normal group of men and women. Actually, there were a lot more men than women. The majority of them seemed to be in their 20s and 30s. Many were in couples and the rest seemed to be flirting in that direction. I thought of Trent and found myself feeling a bit sorry for myself and somewhat obsolete in this youth-palace. Then I noticed a few older guys and saw that some of the women looked above the age of 40 as well. Still, a pang deep in my chest would not let me forget I was well past 50 years old and still single.

I realized the term ‘church’ had been used quite loosely here. But what was a church anyway? A place where people celebrated the same ideas. The music infused the place

with a buoyancy that felt a bit contagious and I could see myself dancing. But with whom? I felt so apart from everyone. Like I'd wandered into a stranger's birthday party. I thought of leaving, but something intangible bade me to stay. So I lingered and observed. Who knows? Maybe I might meet someone.

To my far right there was a long counter that one could approach from either side, upon which were platters of what looked to be Oriental cuisine—vegetables, tofu, and other colorful yet unidentifiable foods. People were taking plates and filling them from the heaping platters. I decided that a free lunch was the very least I could get from this date gone awry. So I headed to the buffet and took a plate.

And then I saw Dan.

He was directly across the counter from me, helping himself to the very same platter as I. Our eyes met at exactly the same instant, locked into each other, both of us caught off-guard and for an instant, bleeding vulnerability. And I fleetingly wondered why my lifelong best friend, who had lain to waste our close friendship nearly twenty years ago, was here in New York City at The Church of Happiness?

I took a perverse pleasure in noting how he had aged; his hair had receded far more than mine had, though his had grayed less. He was still tall and thin, and though his complexion was still fine, it was weathered with lines much deeper than my own wrinkles. His eyes, deepest dark brown and scrutinizing all they surveyed, were now just like his voice was on that final phone call when he shattered my heart and destroyed my faith in friendships—full of disgust and pent-up hostility from God-knows-what or why—the question that has plagued and haunted me for nearly two decades. His eyes seemed to sneer at me.

Before I could verbally acknowledge my surprise at our chance meeting, this opportunity for reconciliation, or at the very least, amicable closure—he shook his head dismissively, as if to say, "It figures."

This against-all-odds meeting had happened a multitude of times in dreams over the past eighteen years. The dreams had so many variations of the inevitable outcome, fueled only by what I knew and what he'd left me with—which was certainly a baffling, complicated mystery.

There was the dream where we stumbled onto each other on Market Street in San Francisco and tears of forgiveness were met with warmth and compassion. There were multiple dreams where we conversed as if nothing had ever crippled our friendship. And then all those other dreams where Dan glared at me, still not eluding to exactly what it was I ever did to him to make him spurn me so savagely. In each dream, Dan's appearance would vary in his age and look, as if my dreams had rummaged through old photo albums and randomly chose an era from our lives together. Sometimes he was youthful, his hair longer and his smile untainted by life. Other times, he was a bit older, with his black hair cropped in a near crew cut, but still that mischievous smirk that beheld our inside jokes and made-up slang that only we could understand.

Then there was that recent dream I'd had, where upon seeing him, I wrapped my arms around him, sobbing, and his younger self was pushing me away, awkwardly telling me he didn't want me *that* way anymore. My dream-self was desperately explaining that I no longer did, that I only sought his friendship now (upon waking, I'd had the aching realization that he never really *wanted* me that way, even though we had a sexual past

that dated back to the brink of puberty). In all of those dreams, never, ever was he older, such as I saw him now.

There was so much I wanted to ask him, so much I needed to say. Why didn't he ever respond to the two letters I had left at his work, seven and twelve years after that final phone call? But more so, why did he so suddenly decide that we never had anything in common? Didn't he grasp the absolute mindfuck it would give me when he negated forty years of friendship? Didn't he even suspect that for the rest of my life I would not be ok with his choice, his asinine judgment of our relationship? Didn't I have any say in the matter?

As he shook his head and started down the buffet line, his eyes now intent on a curried casserole, bright yellow with turmeric, I found the strength to move beyond my despair and I followed him like a mirror image. As I took hold of the tongs on my side of the counter, I flung my determined stare at his darting irises. Then he stopped and set his plate down on the counter, faced me and thrust back a look of both indignation and utter exhaustion, as if I'd been stalking him relentlessly since that final phone call. He nearly repressed a smirk, but it showed on his face just the same. He kept silent, as if he was granting me permission to state my case.

Then I found the courage to open my mouth and form words, but not any of the words my bruised psyche had composed into so many questions and demands pent up for what has felt like centuries. Instead, I surprised myself by smiling as I told him, unflinchingly:

"I'm so sorry you've chosen to use me as a facet for your anger and disgust with life's disappointments. As crazy as it sounds, I owe what I am to you. And what I am is maybe

haunted and scarred by you, but it is also strong and resilient and unscathed by your hatred as well. I had a great friendship with you for forty years, whether or not you had one with me. In a way I feel sorry for you, that you never grew past that moment eighteen years ago. Now, I agree, we have nothing in common but this curry casserole between us."

I really wish I had said that.

Instead, there was a deafening silence that only I felt. He picked up his plate and disappeared into the congregation and out of my life. Again. I'd come so close to some sort of emotional exorcism but instead was left in the same limbo as I'd been eighteen years before. I supposed that I'd keep dreaming about Dan until the day I died. It was like I was infected with a virus or cancer that would slowly eat away at me until there was nothing left.

I'd done everything I could to stop feeling that way but nothing I tried ever stopped the pain. I stood staring blankly into the congregation, all of them laughs and smiles, and I realized that I'd grown somewhat accustomed to having Dan's ghost reside in my head. I wondered if I'd become so habituated to it and, like a persistent ringing in the ears, I'd gradually stop hearing it.

As I stood there contemplating the food again, I suddenly lost my appetite and set my plate back down. It was now *my* face that unleashed a smirk. Here I was in The Church of Happiness and it was just a bagel factory that didn't even make bagels anymore. I'd been looking for a church of happiness for so many years and I ended up in a bagel factory.

As I moved away from the buffet of unnaturally colored foods, and through the cavernous room toward the front doors, a warmth fell over me like a cozy blanket of fleece. The disco music and its thumping beat, the laughter and the cacophony of overlapping conversations—all of it became a faint buzz in my ears. I looked back at this supposed church and saw a dance club full of Trents and Dans, looking for some mirror image of perfection they could feel confident calling their dream. It occurred to me right then and there that I didn't need to be someone else's dream; I was good enough just as I was. I felt lighter now. Butterflies that had been eating away at my heart now tickled me gently and fluttered lightly from my breast, out into the room. I allowed myself to laugh out loud, noticed smiling faces responding to me, and felt something akin to true happiness for the first time in nearly twenty years. It was almost like a lamp had been switched on and the dark room I'd been living in, lit only by a dying torch, was suddenly bathed in a harsh light. The brilliance felt both daunting and exhilarating. And now I knew that I didn't need a church of happiness because I carried it with me. I carried it outside to the street and noticed the cool arrogance of a New York early spring had blossomed into an attentive hot summer lover. The sun was high and out in full force, making shadows much shorter.

I left the bagel factory, no longer caring that I'd been stood up by someone named Trent.

And I finally left Dan.

I flew high into the air. Soaring above Tribeca, I looked down and watched in amazement as all the people grew smaller and insignificant and the tops of buildings were beneath me.