

No Obligation

Steve walked on the bike trail along the river bank until he was past most of the noise and movement of the city. He was feeling thirsty, dehydrated from too much late summer heat. Turning up and away from the glare of the river into a tree-shadowed residential neighborhood, he passed through several blocks of large, well-tended houses that sat closed and drowsing in the August haze. In the absence of other walkers and moving vehicles, the rigorously groomed lawns and lack of any type of litter or movement made the area seem slightly unreal, as if he had walked onto the set of a TV program about an upper middle-class family and their faintly comic adventures. The area changed slightly as he walked on. There were fewer one family houses. Small, but still well-kept, apartment buildings began to appear, and finally a street of larger apartment blocks. One structure, an ornately faced edifice in a style popular at the beginning of the last century, caught his eye. It sat solidly on its corner and he tried to imagine the size of its apartments from the impressive banks of shaded windows that fronted its two stories, the rooms stretching deep into the center of the building. The blinds were all drawn against the sun and he thought the darkened rooms would remain cool on even the hottest days.

Obligation 2.

Wouldn't my life at last be more ordered in such a place? Then he wondered if there wouldn't be too much space to fill, that even with all his possessions, the rooms would echo. His thoughts turned to Hector, the slight Latino man, who had cancelled on him earlier that afternoon. Steve had tried to bring Hector into a more steady, closer, arrangement but, after several cancelled dates that would have taken place outside of a bedroom, he felt at the edge of ending it with him. The sex, repetitive, passionless, was no longer enough and while the original attraction had been flattering given the twenty-year difference in their ages, he didn't feel like he could waste time and admittedly flagging energies on a relationship that wasn't going to develop.

He crossed the street into a small, manicured city park and his peripheral vision picked up an unusually bright light coming from the rear of the building he had just been musing over. He stopped, puzzled, and looking at the structure from the side, he realized that it had a basement apartment not visible from the front. A strong, yellow, porch light beamed from above the apartment's door. It suddenly came to him that he knew this place, and had, in fact, been in that apartment, maybe twenty, no, at least thirty years ago. The man who had lived there, he realized, must be long dead.

They had met he recalled, as he had met everyone in those days, in a bar. Grant was tall, which Steve liked, and had slightly washed out, brown eyes and straight brown hair that he continuously brushed from his brow. His long, thin arms (monkey arms, Steve had thought), swooped through the air as he spoke; almost every utterance was accompanied by a gesture. For all his sometimes graceless movements, he didn't spill a drop of the luminous green cocktails he downed, one after the other. Steve seemed to recall that they talked about Scorsese's films, and about old camp classics from the 40's they had seen on TV or in repertory movie houses. The other man's slightly horsey face and physical awkwardness reminded Steve of a dark-haired boy he had known in seventh grade, who would stand at the edge of the playing field, plainly yearning to be picked for the ball game in which the other boys

were enthusiastically engrossed. Steve hadn't liked games, but not liking the ball games and not being picked were just other, rather minor factors contributing to the unsettling, unfolding, awareness with which he was more and more struggling. That particular boy and Steve eventually found themselves at the edge of the school yard, in the shade of a peeling eucalyptus, holding hands. It was an unexpected act that was both necessary and comforting, but not one they dared talk about with each other or, at least on Steve's part, with anyone else. They sought each other out for that silent hand holding until the end of the semester and then, at the beginning of the summer, Steve's father announced another abrupt move. His unending search for a better job landed his family in a distant, small city in the Rockies.

"I'm an astrologer," Grant, the man in the bar, said. "I've got a storefront place in Revere with three other people."

"What?" Steve drew away from him, eyes blinking, suddenly wary. The man was either a fraud or delusional, but he continued to stand next to the psychic, listening, and he remained there for another, and then several more beers, because Grant was obviously interested in him and the more he talked and swooped those long arms around, the stronger Steve's conviction that the man wasn't crazy.

A fraud; I can deal with that. So he allowed loneliness, desire and alcohol carry him back to the soothsayer's apartment.

Afterwards, after the tussle, after the release, Steve stood in the bathroom wiping sweat and semen off of various parts of his body. Glancing at his reflection in a black-bordered, full length mirror that reminded him of one in a house he had lived in while growing up, he recalled standing in front of that other mirror, watching the red welts from his father's hand gradually leave his chest and face. He pushed the thought away and stumbled back from the bathroom to the small bed, where Grant seemed eager to chat.

"I can tell your future," he said.

"No, that's ok," Steve replied, without thinking, and then Grant was quiet, and Steve realized how patronizing he must sound.

"Ok, what's in store for me?" he asked, but soon became impatient as Grant reeled off a version of a tale of requited love and wealth that he must have poured into the ears of his paying customers day after day. Steve listened silently, exhausted, wanting to do nothing more than sleep off the too many beers he wasn't used to drinking, but Grant continued, his conversation returning to himself.

"I believe in past lives, that I have lived past lives," he told his nodding companion.

Oh no, here we go. Steve thought wearily.

"I think that in my last life, I was a Nazi."

Steve was suddenly completely alert and pulled himself to the edge of the bed as far from Grant as he could manage. His dismay turned quickly to anger; once again he had misjudged a man and chosen badly. He urgently needed to leave, but couldn't think of how to without offending the host who had just offered him his body.

Grant, not receiving a verbal response, fell silent and was soon asleep. Steve waited until he heard a faint, rhythmic, wheeze from behind him before sitting up to look around the small dark room. As his eyes adjusted, he could just make out the hands of wall clock through the open bedroom door. 1:45. It was too late for the train and he knew he didn't have enough money for a cab. It would take hours to walk home and he was tired and his stomach queasy. He was also concerned about the other man's reaction if he woke while Steve tried to leave. He didn't want a scene and he wasn't sure he could mask his loathing while making up an explanation for leaving. There might be a scene, but Steve, who

had been trundled about the country in his early years by his erratic and explosively tempered father, was trained in the virtues of patience and silent acquiescence in the face of objectionable behavior. He spent a restless night on the narrow bed berating himself for letting a self-styled Nazi, past life or no, pick him up. He finally slept and when he awakened to daylight, Grant had disappeared into the bathroom, so he slipped into his clothes, stiff with the odor of cigarettes and beer, and was out the door.

The sound of wheels rolling over cracked pavement brought him back to the present moment, to the sidewalk in the park. A young woman gave him a curious look and pushed her baby carriage past him on the way to the street. He caught a glimpse of the baby, its eyes closed, on its back, damp hair pushed up from the flushed face. He was aware of his left eye stinging, and he drew the back of his hand against the curve of his cheek, brushing away the sweat that was now trailing down his face.

Where the hell has all this been? He tried to recall an earlier time when he had considered these events and came up blank. It came back to him that he had been relieved not to have heard from Grant after their encounter.

He had met other men in bars, dated, moved to a different part of the city, changed jobs and then... everything changed. The newspapers gradually filled their headlines and pages with a new horror. Steve and the people he knew were now seldom having sex, some stopped altogether. At times, the body's insistence became overwhelming, and some men sought each other out, but it was a tentative undertaking, fearful, wary, the thought of death in the room. Steve stopped going to the bars, he stopped dating, he dropped most of his old friends and acquaintances.

Several years into the plague, on a summer weekend, Grant called him and suggested meeting at a bar they both knew. Steve, perplexed, (he couldn't remember giving out his number) and dismayed,

didn't want to see the fortune-teller. He wouldn't have agreed to, except that perhaps hearing the reluctance in the other man's voice, Grant told him that he was positive and had been ill. Steve's initial irritation and surprise at being contacted gave way to fear, curiosity and maybe even compassion – no one should have to suffer such a horrendous illness and death. He felt he couldn't say no.

The walls, ceiling and floors were painted black; the only light in the place came from a backlit liquor display behind the bartender and small green, red and white signs hawking different brands of beer. Occasionally, the front door would open and half the room would be flooded by July's white glare and the establishment's patched black walls and makeshift qualities would be exposed. Steve sat with his elbow in a puddle of beer at the counter, sipping a much needed drink that had been brought by an unsmiling bartender sporting a straw cowboy hat. Grant arrived, a little late, dressed for the heat in shorts and an untucked short sleeve shirt. He looked much the same to Steve, as he approached him, flicking the hair from his eyes with a swoop of his hand. Maybe his skull and collarbone seemed more distinct through his flesh, but he appeared otherwise unblemished and healthy in this dark place.

"You look well," Steve said, his tone almost a question. Grant told him that he had pneumonia two months previously.

"I am sorry," Steve said. He didn't know what else to say; anything more would feel like acknowledging a death sentence – the understanding of the disease was still so incomplete; as far as anybody seemed to know, everyone infected with the plague died. In the city's streets you could see young men whose flesh had been completely sucked away leaving raw, blotched skin wrapped over bone, being pushed in wheelchairs or weakly tottering from medical office to home, from hospital to hospice. Sitting next to him at the bar, Steve was relieved that Grant at least appeared well, but their initial conversation was stilted and odd.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Grant asked.

What a strange question, Steve thought.

“Well, no,” he said.

“Maybe we should date,” said Grant.

Steve was stunned. He could barely see the other man’s face in the dark room. With the lights from the bar display behind him, Grant appeared as only an outline.

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice as neutral sounding as he could make it. But he did know and Grant, the outline, the shadow was silent for a minute.

“You probably have it too,” he said flatly.

“I don’t think so, I’ve not been sick.” He forced the words out, struggling with anger and fear. What if his precautions had come too late? A diagnostic test had recently come out and he hadn’t taken it. He was afraid of his response to a positive result. Better for now to be careful and maybe when he was not so scared...

“You might have got it from me,” Grant said.

Steve felt himself flush, he didn’t know if he could control his words.

“But you didn’t...” Steve lowered his voice, the words came from deep in his chest. The bartender had disappeared and they were alone in the room. He moved close to the equine head, and like they were in a church or in room filled with children and old women, he said softly,

“But you didn’t fuck me, I fucked you.”

He stepped back from Grant, his anger giving way to appalled remorse. Grant was silent for a moment.

“You could have still gotten it,” he said.

What he didn’t say was that Steve could have given it to him, or even that he knew who had given it to him. Maybe Grant knew the source; maybe he didn’t care at this point. Steve wondered how many other men Grant had called to have this conversation, to ask this question.

He sat at the bar, scraping the label of the beer bottle with his thumbnails until he could trust himself to speak again. Even though he was still angry he was able to choke out an excuse to leave, but didn’t, couldn’t. He waited, thinking Grant would soon be leaving and they could, at least, walk out together. They sat quietly while a soccer game from a distant part of the planet played noiselessly on the bar’s TV above them. Grant didn’t look at him.

“Are you going to stay here?” Steve finally asked, trying to not sound impatient. Grant had turned completely away from him and sat hunched over his bottle.

“For a little while,” he said.

“I’ve got to go,” Steve said. He pushed his chair away from the bar and took heavy, tentative steps towards the black door that he slowly pushed open.

Semi-blinded by the late afternoon noon sun, Steve turned back to look at Grant, but with his dazzled vision, could only see the long pale legs stretched out in the intruding daylight, the upper body lost in the shadow. He hated him leaving there alone but what could he do? He knew he was doing the right thing; he couldn’t help Grant, he didn’t even like him. But guilt, and the fear that he had seen his future, ripped at his gut.

And then what had happened? He was sure Grant had died, but had he actually seen the notice or heard about it from some third party? He didn't think so. The memories of what happened after he left the bar were dimmer, just tendrils at the edge of thought. He knew he returned to his apartment that day upset, he was almost sure he had called someone; he wasn't sure who. Now, almost as agitated as he had been on that day, he left the park and crossed the street. He stopped in the shade of a gnarled maple that had thrown up a monstrous root, fracturing the pavement.

I paced the apartment with the A/C on high, and finally when I had convinced myself there was nothing different I could have done, I lie down on my bed and pulled the sheets up over my eyes, because that was what I did in those days, when I was stressed or unhappy. Then I would have told my body to relax, first told my feet and then my ankles and shins and knees, up my body, through my hips and chest and arms and somewhere in the midst of talking to my different parts, I would have fallen asleep.

End