

Chance Encounter

Greg walked along Third Street dodging the smartphone zombies on the sidewalk. Sometimes he amused himself by imagining the effect a six foot bowling ball would have on these sleepwalkers, but today he was preoccupied with a personnel problem in the division he ran. A female coder had complained to HR that one of the middle management guys was harassing her: the guy had missed the memo that said 'no' actually meant 'No!'. Probably thought 'Me too' was something you said when a bottle was opened. He was a self-important jerk but always made his targets and Greg was debating whether to fire him outright or send him to corporate Siberia where he could still be useful and maybe learn a lesson.

"Greg? Is it you?" He stopped and turned toward the voice. A tall woman was standing and staring at him. She was almost as tall as he, with long, straight brunette hair, and wore a dress with outlined shapes in different bright colors, almost like a Calder mobile, that struck him as more statement than stylish. Her expression changed from open-mouthed surprise to a warm, friendly, smile in the second or two it took him to recognize her.

"Marian!" Beyond that he was momentarily speechless. In the more than ten years since they had last seen each other he had not so much forgotten her as he had

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let the memory of her drift. Now she was here and the first clear thing that came into his mind was, “You look fabulous! This is such a surprise. How are you?”

“I’m good. Here for a few days with MoMA for their new exhibit. Opens tonight. You look good yourself, preoccupied maybe. I saw you coming but you must have been somewhere else since you didn’t even glance my way. Still in medical devices? Nice suit.” The last comment about his suit was on the very edge of sarcastic: she hadn’t liked his corporate work life even though it had made their affair easier to carry on.

He grinned. “How I could have missed you I don’t know,” he replied, looking once again at her almost garish outfit and now thinking about her body inside it. She might be ten pounds heavier or he might not be remembering exactly. “I’m still in the towers of Montgomery Street, but it’s been electronic medical records for a few years. My meeting ran overtime so I’m out for a late lunch – join me?”

She looked at him for several long seconds. “Sure, I can do that,” she replied slowly, then added, “It’s a few hours before I have to help prep for the opening. What did you have in mind?”

“There’s a place on the corner of Mission, M3. Nothing elaborate, lots of variety, but it’s good. You must have passed it walking up from the museum. I’ll buy.”

“No, no, no, Greg. Even art museums have expense accounts. We’ll go Dutch.” She smiled but he sensed caution. They walked the short half block side by side to the restaurant. Greg called his office and told Diane to clear his schedule and block his calls for the next couple of hours. Marian effused about the sunny, temperate, spring weather and San Francisco in general, comparing it favorably to her current home near Chicago, as they entered the restaurant.

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“I was at the De Young, remember?” Marian answered in response to Greg’s question about her work. He nodded, recalling one time when she had let him into the museum after hours, shown him through a couple of her favorite galleries, then taken him down to her intimate cubicle in the conservation department. “A year after we broke up I got an offer from the A.I. and took it. I was down in the dumps and needed to get out of town.” Her look when she said ‘*down in the dumps*’ was reproachful and he wondered how the way he had broken off their affair had hurt her. He knew it must have hurt her, but how much he didn’t know.

“And now, after almost ten years, I’m the chief curator of sculpture, specializing in 20th century. So I’m here handholding a David Smith piece for the opening. Home tomorrow.”

“That’s great, I’m happy for you,” he replied, smiling. They ordered, then he asked, “I’ve always heard that real estate everywhere is cheaper than here – d’you have a bigger place? I remember your tiny studio out in the Richmond.” A few times when Geena, his wife, had been really sick, in and out of hospitals, his parents had been taking care of the kids and he had told them he had late meetings when actually he had gone to Marian’s apartment and the two of them had screwed themselves to exhaustion. Now he saw a wistful look in her eyes.

“Yeah, my first place was probably three times bigger. Now we live west of the city in an old house with a yard. It’s good for the kids and on a summer evening nothing could be better.”

“Children? Tell me.” That’s good he thought. She moved on, like I did.

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“I met Scotty a year after I moved to Chicago and a year later we got married. He’s a doctor, hematology. And we have two, Scotty junior is three and Marla’s six. They’re great, the lights of my life. Wanna see?”

She was smiling, excited, and as she pulled her phone out of her purse her expression was just like he remembered when she had been pleased or intrigued by something new. She had been bubbly, naïve he thought, dating a married man, but the pleasure of her lighthearted company had been such a relief from the weight of his home life that he had never discouraged her. Until the end.

He couldn’t really see her in Marla on the smartphone screen so the girl must take after her father. Scotty junior, however, had the shape of Marian’s face and her eyes. He was a cute kid and Greg smiled as he wondered for the briefest moment whether the two of them could have made something like that.

“They’re wonderful,” he told her as he passed the phone back. “You’re a lucky woman. If you can survive them being teenagers you’ll be a happy woman, too.”

“Is it that bad?” she asked with a raised eyebrow. “Marky-Mark must be what, sixteen, and Maddie fourteen?” Their food arrived, interrupting the conversation, and she went on for a couple of minutes about how in her neighborhood there was no decent Japanese or Mexican, just pizza and burgers. She emphasized her frustration by waving her chopsticks at him over her plate of uramaki, saying, “No way I can find decent sushi in the burbs, and here it’s just one more menu item.” He gave her what he thought was a sympathetic look as he took the first bite of his sandwich.

“He’s just Mark now,” Greg said after a couple of minutes. They were both enjoying their food and she had complimented him on his suggestion of a local beer for

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her. “Too grown up for Marky-Mark. That’s got to be five or six years ago he told me it was a baby name. Seventeen now. A senior next fall. It all seems to’ve gone so fast. Maddie’s fourteen, trying out for cheerleaders. She’s always seemed so reserved and I’m having a tough time visualizing her with pom-poms and short-shorts.” Marian laughed.

“I was a cheerleader. I never told you? We were nice girls. There were even a few of us who weren’t trying to hump the entire football team.”

He was surprised and it must have shown. She laughed again.

“No, really, it was work, we practiced hard, and I liked the dance routine part.” He imagined teenage Marian – she must have been a stunner. “Nowadays I think the dance part is pushed even more so it’s as much a performance sport in its own right as actually whipping up the crowd. And they have guys.”

“I’ve heard.”

“Are you an overprotective Dad?” she asked, grinning. “Do you live with them? No. No, that’s the wrong question. Are you still with Geena?” She was casual but he sensed this was something she really wanted to know and had been holding the question back but couldn’t any longer. He took a breath as he looked into her eyes and thought about how to respond.

“No.” That was the short and correct answer but he knew it wasn’t what she was asking, not really. She wanted to know what happened after he had abruptly ended their affair. It was all over her face, she was waiting, she had waited for ten years. “I tried to make it work again but I couldn’t. I felt I owed it to her and to the kids, but after

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a year I saw there wasn't any hope so I filed and asked for full custody. She wasn't fit to raise them. I know that sounds harsh, but at the time that was what I thought."

Marian's eyes were wide as she listened. "I was wiped out," he went on, "exhausted. It took another year to sort it all out but I ended up with the kids and the house. She went over to the East Bay to live near her parents. Hardly fought me at all, which was a surprise. They go to stay with her a couple of weekends a month and with her parents a few weeks in the summer. She's okay now, stable. They've been old enough for a few years to go on BART." Just thinking about that time was tiring.

"So you're Mister Mom? Mister single Mom?"

"Sort of," he replied, chuckling at the thought. "I got this kid through City College to help out. A gay kid whose family didn't have much use for him. Dion. He was good with Mark and Maddie, conscientious, reliable. He became our nanny and lived in the guest room for five years. He was at SF State during that time, too. When Jill moved in her daughter was a few years older than Maddie and the two girls shared a room for a while. When Dion left Jill's girl got his room."

"Wow, Greg. A male nanny would scandalize my neighborhood."

"I'd heard enough stories of foreign nannies and au-pairs at work and from people. I thought someone local who spoke tolerable English would be better. Dion turned out to be a star. After he graduated I got him a job at the company and if he's not running some big division in ten years, he'll be running some other company. We see him every month or two, he's got a partner now, the kids love him, and I think he's a good role model for them." He was proud of Dion's success. Hiring him and helping him was one of the few things Greg felt good about from that time.

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Marian finished her beer while Greg was talking, but had her eyes on him the whole time. She held her glass up to get the waiter's attention.

"Greg?" she asked when the waiter came.

"No, I have to go back to the office."

"Too bad. I'll just suck a few mints so the donors don't smell it on my breath tonight." Her mood had changed, he thought. She wasn't drunk but she seemed saddened, or surly. He couldn't tell. Marian looked at him for a few moments, her expression at first sour, then she straightened up in her chair, leaned forward and seemed to focus on him. She spoke quietly but her tone was hard:

"You never called."

It was a statement. It was a question. It was the landscape of failure through which the road he had taken wound. He let out a long breath and slumped back in his chair. He stared at remnants of salad and sandwich on his plate and thought about that time and what he had done.

"I called your work number and the guy who answered said you'd moved to Chicago a couple of months before. He didn't have your number but told me where you were working. He was very impressed that you were moving so far up in the world. I could have called but my life was completely upside down with separating from Geena, trying to create a stable home life for the kids, and go to work, too. I was exhausted and celibacy seemed a better choice than trying to rebuild at a long distance. So I didn't call."

"Rebuild?" she asked as if it had never occurred to her. "You used me like a rental car you could take for joyrides. Bastard. And when you were done you just

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tossed the keys on the counter and walked away. You weren't invested so what was there to *rebuild*?" She glared at him, steely-eyed.

"When I think about us it's not a part of my life I'm proud of. You were wonderful, generous, better than I deserved. I know I broke it off badly. I still cringe when I think about that. I am sorry."

Her expression didn't change. "I felt like I'd been shot. I was in love, I was a fool, I was blindsided. Friends had warned me about married men, but when you said 'no more' it crushed me. I was in a pitch black cavern with nothing to do but trip over rocks in the dark. You blocked my calls and my emails so I couldn't talk to you. I couldn't get out of bed for days and hardly functioned at all for weeks." Tears were running down her cheeks as she spoke and Greg was knotted-up inside. He could feel his own tears and a lump in his throat. She picked up her napkin and put her face in her hands. The table shifted with her sobs. After a minute or two she stopped and dried her face, then looked at him again, her eyes reddened.

"You really were a piece of shit," she told him with a flat directness.

"I'm not going to argue. I know I behaved badly and you were right to be angry at me."

"I'm still angry. Not so much, but every time I come back here it flares up."

"By the time I was done settling with Geena I was empty, I had nothing to offer anyone. The way I ended our relationship was part of that. I didn't know if you'd even talk to me and when I found out you had moved away I thought I should just let you go. I'd been unfaithful to my wife, my family, and to you too in the way I broke it off. If

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nothing else that regret and guilt remind me how important it is to be honest with people. I try to teach my kids that.”

They were silent for a few moments. He remembered how he had told her that he had to fix or resolve or do something about his marriage and family before they could go any further. The shock on her face. In his own emotional turmoil he had cut their meeting short, walked away and left her sitting on the park bench. He had been cruel, it was the only way he could do it.

Marian’s face was composed again. “Sorry, I didn’t intend to make a scene,” she said.

“That’s okay. I can understand.”

“Can you?” she asked, her eyes narrowing. “You guys always get to walk away unscathed.”

“Hardly,” he came back at her. “It was a grind. Every day waiting for something to go wrong. Every day dreading what I might come home to. Then I had to learn how to be a single parent and make a new life. All the time hoping Geena wouldn’t go over the edge again. Even after the divorce I would’ve had to pick up the pieces.” He felt like his struggles had been dismissed.

“I may not have been thinking clearly about us,” he went on, “but don’t you try to moralize. You never held back, never questioned what we were doing. You were all in.”

They stared at each other silently for what seemed to Greg like a long time. Marian looked down at her empty plate.

“I was,” she said quietly.

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“We’re all damaged,” he answered. “Don’t feel special about that. Think about your family, your beautiful children. You’re a lucky woman, scars and all.”

She looked at him again, her features softening, and nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Have you told Jill, that’s her name, isn’t it, about me?”

“From the start,” Greg said. “When I did begin dating I went with complete transparency. It backfired a few times. Jill gave me some slack so I was able to bring the somewhat ragged remnants of my charm to bear, not that she didn’t have her own to use on me.”

“I remember that charm,” Marian said with a faint smile. “You were dangerous.”

“I’ll take that as the only compliment I get from this lunch,” he replied. She chuckled softly. He felt the tension relaxing, as though she had said things that had been inside her for years. His own feelings were less easy to put into words. A mix of regret, nostalgia, and shame that lodged in his stomach like a stone. But pleasure, too, at this chance encounter which reminded him of how much he had liked her. Even through the haze of marital and emotional stress of that time he had genuinely liked her. Never loved her, he hadn’t had the capacity, but whenever afterwards she came to mind his feelings were warm.

At some point the waiter had brought their separate bills. Marian opened her purse and withdrew a thick envelope. When she opened it Greg saw it contained what appeared to be theater tickets.

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“I have a bunch of tickets for the opening tonight,” she said. “I have to leave them at will-call for my friends at the De Young and others here in town. I have extras. Would you like a couple? I promise I won’t tell your Jill anything bad about you.”

“Thank you,” he said and chuckled as he took them. “I don’t have anything planned tonight but I’ll have to ask her. We haven’t been there for a year or two and we’re not members.”

She handed him two tickets and as she dug out her wallet said, “That’s fine. It’s a good exhibition. I’ll be pleased to see you if you decide to come.”

They paid their bills and walked out to the sidewalk and just as they were parting, he going north to his office and she south to the museum, she took him in a fierce, silent embrace. He returned her embrace and had a fleeting impression of their long ago intimacy, he inhaled her scent and remembered how her long hair would brush across his face. Bittersweet.