

Periwinkle

~ early friendship ~

From its fixed point within the infinite, the Sun cast light and heat which touched each of them with the same particles it had put forth at a precise moment. As its rays illuminated their world and its energy warmed their skin, did the Sun have a part in their story? Did the Unseen order their positioning, just as it had situated the Sun, and had aligned the stars and all the other elements of the heavens?

I

The morning sun brought warmth the city had not felt in months. Liv contemplated nothing in particular while walking for many blocks. She delighted in the hint of warmer days to come and prolonged her time outdoors. Moving along streets not fully familiar to her, she was mildly bothered to be interrupted when she arrived at a corner where she needed to decide whether to turn right or left.

Glancing in both directions, she turned right without reason. Doing so reminded her of the instinct people have to turn right when offered the left/right option with no apparent gain in choosing one over the other. She'd read this in a tour-guide book for an amusement park. Of course, this information was offered as recommendation that the park visitor turn left in order to avoid the masses of impulse decision makers who stood in longer lines to the right. Now more conscious of the choice, she changed her mind and abruptly turned about-face, muttering apologies as she sidestepped the pedestrians with whom she found herself face-to-face.

She walked on through the streets of Boston's South End, and she once again entered a peaceful trance brought on by the drone of her simple thoughts, the predominant one being how

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good the heat of the sun felt on her cheeks and forearms. Her long stride had found its rhythm as it carried her slender figure along the red brick sidewalks.

Were her life on film, an overhead shot of the city neighborhood would reveal that in a short time her decision to change direction had set her on a path to an encounter with Orin as he made his way home. At this point, they were mere acquaintances – two people who had enjoyed meeting at gatherings hosted by friends they shared in common. Yet she felt an attraction to him – to his solid shoulders, to the depth of his dark eyes, to the way his black hair framed his face. Almost imperceptibly, she was drawn to the two bones that defined his hips, just where his belt sat. It was here that her hands instinctively rested when she first kissed the boyfriends of her youthful years.

Orin moved along the same street, unwittingly approaching her. His steps were determined, nearly hostile, as they struck the brick sidewalk. It was in frustration that he walked back to his apartment after wasting another morning in his studio in further, futile attempts at initiating even the slightest success with his painting. He felt as if his art were locked deeply within himself. His discomfort in not being able to access it manifested in a physical aching. Immersed in replaying in his mind the thwarted efforts of another day, he was hardly aware of the warmth or the brightness of the sun.

The immediate catalyst for their meeting was brought on by a pack of dogs, each on a leash, and each leash held at the opposite end by a professional dog-walker – a common sight in this dog-friendly neighborhood. Rounding a corner in earnest, the dogs were not directed out of Liv's way. In a moment, she found herself tangled in their leads while at the same time she tried to stifle an innate fear of the animals.

At this moment, Orin arrived at the scene of the commotion but did not immediately recognize her, nor she him. He offered assistance to the dog-walker by taking each lead near the dog's

neck. One by one the dogs were untangled in this manner, freeing Liv.

Pushing her hair from her face she saw him as he returned the dogs to their temporary master. She let go the tension of the past moments in a breath of pleasant surprise and warm greeting. He turned to the sound of her voice, saw her smile, and kept his eyes upon her as she regained her senses further and acknowledged the mortified apologies of the dog-walker, who then moved on with her charges.

Orin perceived Liv's anxiety about the canine encounter, and feigning chivalry he gave the slightest bow and offered her his hand. "Glad to be of assistance, madam," he said with a smile.

She laughed, took his hand, and with exaggeration she stepped out of the scene of her peril, while saying, "Your timing, sir, is superb."

And there they stood for the smallest measure of time, which seemed to stretch to eternity, while their hands were touching and their eyes reading nothing from the other, and neither quite sure what the instant intended for them – although each knowing that in this instant a change had occurred.

Her sense of courtesy awakened and she withdrew her hand while asking, with the awkwardness that accompanies a forced thought, "Um, where are you heading?"

He replied, "Home. I've been at my studio for the last three hours and have accomplished nothing. My creativity seems to be in hibernation!"

Then he asked, "Where are you going?"

Hesitantly, she glanced away from his eyes, and gazing just over his shoulder toward nothing in particular she replied with pauses between her words, "I'm just out to clear my head." She frowned a bit then looked again at him. He did not feel familiar enough to press her for any more information and she was grateful for his discretion.

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Instead he said, "Let's move out of the sun," and gestured toward the shade of a store awning.

"Thanks," she replied, as he let her step ahead of him.

As they caught up on the news of their friends, he tried to determine the exact color of her hair and her eyes. Her shoulder-length, straight hair was neither blond nor red, but perhaps it had strands of each color throughout. Her eyes this day were a soft gray though he was sure they had appeared green at other times.

Standing together, they tip-toed into each other's current state of affairs – their work, summer vacation plans, movies they'd recently seen – until they ran out of small talk and an awkwardness came between them. Each of them was certain that the other was not ready to say goodbye, but reluctantly, they did.

As Orin continued on his way home, he was intrigued to find his thoughts imagining the nuances of her expressive face, in particular her mouth. What he most remembered was her smile. In fact, in the times between their social encounters, he had often thought of it. From various vantage points at gatherings – on a deck, around a coffee table in a living room, in a small kitchen – he had enjoyed watching the fluid motion of her lips as she spoke, even when he was not a participant in the conversation nor near enough to hear her words.

At the homes of their friends, more than once, he had had the pleasure of talking with her and he knew that in her smile resided the essence of her being, her graciousness. Never did she try to outdo another in conversation. She generously encouraged the exchange of thoughts and ideas. He found her to be the most conversationally invigorating person he'd ever met. She had no point to make, no intellect to prove. Quite simply, she enjoyed discourse. Again his memory settled on her smile, generally the final gesture when she offered a thought for consideration. And as he thought of her smile, he couldn't help but think of kissing her.

For her part, as she walked home, Liv felt the flush of blushing when recalling the awkwardness she had stumbled into the day after meeting him for the first time at a friend's party. She thought of the comment she made to her friend as they reviewed the party over brunch the following morning. "Orin is really attractive, and interesting. Too bad he's married!" And there she had stopped.

Her friend delayed the bite she was about to take of her toast and responded, "Okay. Liv, first of all *he's not married*. And second, *you are*. But no preaching from me; I'll say no more!" But she did. She added, "The woman you saw him with is a long-time friend." And just before biting into her waiting toast she asked, "Do you know he's named for a river?"

Now, they each walked home – Liv to her husband and Orin to the endless activity of his mind in search of a better way to approach his work. As the distance between them grew, each found refuge in reviewing every detail of their encounter.

Candytuft

~ indifference ~

II

When she unlocked the door to her house, Liv noticed that her breath caught. She knew she often did this while she crossed the threshold into this world in which she never really felt at peace, nor loved. Here there was uncertainty, instability, and contrary emotions. These things were not obvious, yet they hung like a mist in and around the physical structures that occupied this space.

And as she walked in, she felt the familiar sensations – of relief that her husband was not yet home and disappointment at what their marriage had become. In this space two adults lived. They cared for the place. They put away groceries, they cooked, they folded laundry. They conversed. They were civil. Sometimes, one would amuse the other and ever so briefly their guard would drop and a glimmer of the couple they had once been would appear and then fade like a mirage.

Liv thought that their life now consisted only of routines that were not motivated by consideration for each other as they might have been in the earliest years of their marriage. It was a relationship that consisted of habits.

Even sexual intimacy had become a function. And it seemed to her each time to be a test of the existence of their marriage. It was the one and only thing that brought them fully together

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and she found great sorrow in that. Each coming together was a tragedy for her. It reminded her of their youthful excitement for each other's bodies. It reminded her of the moments their children were conceived and the years of parental joy and pain that resulted. And now that the children were moving on, and her childbearing years were over, it brought her face to face with mortality.

She wondered how different she and her husband were from their married friends. She wondered if her friends saw her marriage as she did – a pretense, and whether they felt their own marriages had also become nothing more than false images of their dreams.

Liv thought that perhaps in too many instances marriage was the great imperfection in life's journey – that as the tasks of family life superseded all else, some partners began to take each other for granted. And that those who were not very careful fell into resentment of each other as they realized the opportunity for their inner dreams was slipping away. For some, the most damaging came to be; they developed an indifference to each other. It frightened her to think that the final stage in this progression was in fact all that many marriages became. Rarely was she in the company of a husband and wife who truly cherished one another.

She thought of the generations that preceded her. Didn't her grandparents love each other into old age? Certainly they appeared to. Or was the happiness she saw in their homes a reflection of their love for the visiting grandchildren? In those years long gone, when she and her siblings were not there, perhaps her grandparents were no different than she was now with her husband. This was a heartbreaking thought.

She tried to determine what she imagined to be the critical flaw. What event or constant imperfection eroded their marriage? But each time she contemplated this, she could not find a single thing. Perhaps that was the key - that it took many little things, like pocks of corrosion that reduce metal to rust.

In her twenty-five years of marriage, she had never been attracted to another man. She could not understand, and was surprised by, this development of interest in Orin. In the weeks since she'd first met him she would, for hours on end, analyze her state of mind. Was she trying to capture another life? Was she filling a void left by the departure of her children? Or was her instinct for love so strong that it was seeking out its fulfillment? Then she'd shift gears and find herself wondering when she might be in his company again. And that inevitably led to her longing to see him.

As she went about the routines of her day, she would find herself at a halt, stunned by a daydream of a moment with him. While at first it was the recounting of actual moments, soon she found herself imagining moments of her making.

Mistletoe

~ surmount all obstacles ~

III

O rin walked home, his thoughts swirling and blending the work of his morning painting and her image. Struggling with what was missing in the balance (in color? in tone?) of the picture he was working on at the studio, his mind sidetracked to a place more interesting. In his imagination he brush-stroked her face, creating a Picasso-like portrait of her in the colors he had used all morning. A distortion of her smile dominated the picture on the canvas in his mind.

Arriving at his apartment building, he climbed the stone steps and was distracted from his thoughts of her as he wondered why he had stayed in this place for so long – nearly two years – when he had never really liked it. Reaching the second floor, he walked alongside the railing and down the hall to his door. He went through the customary multiple tries to get the key to catch just right in the worn lock. As the door opened, a subtle musty scent greeted him. The odor still bothered him, as it had when he first came through the door with a realtor.

He rinsed his morning coffee cup, which was sitting by the sink. He threw the covers up on the bed, more a gesture toward orderliness than actually making the bed. He walked to the living room and sat in the sunlight. He wondered if he had lost it, the “it” that all artists strive to capture and to

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keep, the “it” that defines their work, that makes them unique and recognizable to their audience. He had not produced one moderately satisfying painting in a year. He tried to pinpoint what might have caused him to wander off his course. But there was nothing obvious.

In his thoughts he could see the line of progression in his work - as the mind sees the stretch of a year, or the span of a day, or the length of an hour. But the line faded, having no clear direction. Like the tines of a rake, the path fanned into multiple dead ends, each another attempt at a painting that might recapture the thread of inspiration, which had become elusive.

He'd experienced spells like this before. But they had never lasted so long nor seemed so disturbingly final. He felt that he was on the edge of a cliff. Behind him lay a vast expanse - of ideas, of his creative work, of the essence of his talent. Before him there was nothing solid upon which to tread. He feared that his pathway intended for him to step into the air and to free-fall to another plane, where solid ground would catch him and present a new and boundless landscape for the continued evolution of his work. For barely a second, he transferred the imagery away from his work and into his personal life. Abruptly, he unfolded his long body from the chair and walked to his computer to check the news.

Gooseberry

~ anticipation ~

IV

Five weeks later they met again. What Liv had come to love about city living was the spontaneity of social gatherings. At four in the afternoon on a Saturday, her neighbor and she bumped into each other on the sidewalk. Motivated by the beautiful day, they decided to have an early summer cookout, at eight, on the roof-top deck of their building.

The winter had been cold and long and she recalled with excitement the parties of the previous warm seasons, her first seasons living in the city. Her mind's eye saw flashes of starlight and candlelight. She remembered the heady scents – the perfumes, colognes, and smoke – and the feeling of the wine-induced, dreamlike balmy nights with Eros hovering above the eager living.

Enthusiasm grew as they planned; who would supply the food, who would run to the wine shop, and whom should they call. As they divided the call list, and her neighbor said she'd call Orin, Liv felt nervous with anticipation that she might see him in just a few hours.

As she showered and planned what to wear, she acknowledged to herself that it was no longer clear if her anticipation was to be with the real him who, admittedly, she hardly knew, or the him she conjured in her mind.