

The Queen of Horse Cave

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At first she had been the woman in creme, dubbed thus for the outfit she was wearing, a tasteful off-white wool suit.

Had she been less statuesque, less startlingly attractive, her clothing might've seemed old-fashioned or out of season—it was September, after all, a bit early for wool—but it fit so well and she carried it so wonderfully, it was perfectly suitable. Her hair was more white than gray, her makeup understated but elegant: a bit of powder, pink lipstick and just a trace of a lavender eyeliner. A dab of rouge on each cheekbone. Subtle, but powerfully attractive.

She wore just the faintest hint of a wry smile as she paraded.

She knew that she was being stared at.

And oh, Dak Stazyk *did* stare. He tried to not be obvious, but he couldn't help himself. Never mind that she was probably twice his age: she was magnificent. *Magnificent*. He might have gone so far as to say arrestingly beautiful. In fact, he did...in his mind at least. He sincerely hoped that he wouldn't be arrested for staring, so he tried to restrain himself.

Of course she wasn't alone. She couldn't possibly be alone. She ended up at a table with someone, a man at least her age, perhaps a little older. Significantly shorter than her, portly but very solid. The typical fireplug sort, the kind that looked like he could take a punch or two. Or three or more. He was wearing a suit himself, not quite ice cream man white, but not far from it; lighter than that of his companion. Despite his bulky frame and craggy face, he wore a pleasant, wide smile, as if he were very, very happy to be in his position.

But why shouldn't he be? He was with *her*.

To a casual observer they might've been any couple having lunch after, oh, perhaps a late afternoon worship. Perhaps that was exactly what they were. It was Saturday, sure, but some folk did go to church on Saturday. Or maybe they were on a date, a night on the town in Horse Cave, Kentucky. Dak had passed a theater on his way to the diner, so that was at least a possibility. Whatever they were doing, they both looked content, as one might expect on such a lovely afternoon, though the expression on the woman's powdered face was perhaps somewhat distant. Maybe preoccupied was a better word, as if she was considering something important that she didn't care to share with anyone, even her companion. But, yes, they looked happy enough.

And then, for perhaps the first time in his life, Dak Stazyk spoke his mind.

Up to that instant Dak Stazyk was not happy. Relieved was as much as he could admit.

His relationship of the past several months—which had never become a marriage, thank God, or sired children thank God thank God thank God—had abruptly ended only yesterday. Another week without work had ended, and he was asked, if politely, to vacate the trailer he'd

shared with his former girlfriend Brigid (aka Brigid the Frigid) for the past six and a half months. Of course, she'd asked him to move out of her bedroom back in June, into a bedroom which was maybe the size of a decent walk-in closet.

Then he'd thought of it a transition to homelessness. Now he'd been asked to leave entirely. Surprise, surprise. Or not.

"And don't even think about taking the car," she'd said. "It's in my name and I'm the one that's been paying for it since March." That was true enough. Fortunately he did have a bicycle, well-cared for and even bearing fresh tires. Which that was a good thing, as Dak Stazyk would certainly be putting some miles on them, and right soon at that.

He could have resisted. He'd lived there long enough to establish residency and he could easily insist that she evict him through proper channels. But what would that accomplish, besides spending money he didn't really have to continue to reside in a trailer he hadn't wanted to move into in the first place?

Her trailer, her car, and her decision.

He left her to it. The savings account, however, was another matter. That was in his name, and mostly contained what remained of the estate of his mother plus dribs and drabs he'd accumulated from the various odd tech jobs he'd been able to get since the advent of the 'Rona. It totaled a little over two thousand dollars, more than enough to give him a head start on a second (or was it third?) reboot of his life.

The bank, then, was his first stop. He'd written the withdrawal slip, started for the teller window, then stopped, looked at the small piece of paper, then went back to the table and wrote it again. Then he threw *that* one away and wrote a third. Only on the fourth try did he decide what he was leaving behind was equitable. Which was 516.32, exactly twenty-five percent of what had been there when he arrived.

So he left home, such as it was, with a backpack carrying not quite 1550 dollars, a change of clothes and a couple of pairs of skivvies, the book he'd been reading ("Queen Of Bedlam" by Robert R. McCammon, he was 330 pages in and just couldn't see walking away in the middle of it) and his Kindle, needing a charge, but hopefully he could secure some lodging down the road and take care of that problem. There was also a pocket radio and the usual toiletries; sooner or later he would have to apply for a job somewhere, after all. It amounted to well under ten pounds to carry on his back; not much to show for 28 years on the planet, but there you go. That accomplished, he climbed onto his trusty Trek, and he was on his way.

He'd debated overnight (spent mostly awake on the sofa) exactly where to go. Winter was coming, so north was pretty much out. There was nothing to the east he particularly cared to see, and he'd already tried living out west several years before and hadn't cared for it. That left south among the cardinal directions. At least the climate should get warmer as he proceeded, and eventually he'd run into water. There was something to be said for that.

Brigid had insisted Dak be gone by the time she got home from work, so he'd left at about the same time she had, about 6:30 AM. He was now over seventy miles down the road.

The ride wasn't exactly an easy one. There were plenty of hilly areas in central Kentucky, and it seemed a lot of them were located on or near Dixie Highway, his route of choice. Fifteen speeds notwithstanding, he'd had to walk the bike up a lot of the more obnoxious hills, which meant for a long day. He'd finally called it a day in Horse Cave, partly because of the quaint name, but mostly because he was tired and hungry.

He assessed his finances and decided that he had enough money that he could afford to splurge on a motel room for a night, maybe two, to recover. Perhaps something with a pool, maybe even a jacuzzi? He was leg-worn and certainly could use a good soak. Besides, it had been months since he'd been able to take a bath. The tub in Brigid's trailer was maybe five feet long and a foot deep; not exactly suitable for the long-legged Dak.

With Interstate 65 running just to the north of town and a tourist destination—Mammoth Cave National Park—just up the road, lodging was not hard to find. Being *sans* credit card Dak necessarily avoided the chains, figuring it would be more likely an independent inn would take cash. That taker turned out to be the Caverna Motor Lodge, just west of downtown. The room he'd secured wasn't large or fancy, but it was clean, and had the added bonus of a in-room fridge and microwave. He paid for three days in advance, took enough of a shower to rinse off the road grime, then set out on foot to find some dinner.

The woman in the motel office had suggested a restaurant called 5 Broke Girls. The name alone sold it to him. It was about a mile away, but what was one more after he'd just ridden 73 miles? The walk would allow him to stretch his legs, as well get familiar with the town where he'd paused.

He'd really wanted a tomato and cheese omelette, but he didn't see it on the diner's menu. Instead he opted for a "breakfast skillet", which turned out to be a skillet filled with a biscuit, sausage, sausage gravy on top of that, and cheese crowning it all. Served in—what else?—a skillet. Not Jerry's by any means—Dak missed Jerry's—but excellent, and filling. And the fried potatoes were perfect. In all, it was more breakfast than he was accustomed...never mind that it had been served at 6:30 PM. That just made it that much more delightful.

He'd just switched from coffee to tea (Earl Grey, also excellent) when he spotted her.

It was only out of the corner of his eye, but it was enough. A flash of color. No, no, it had to be more than color. Perhaps a feeling of warmth on his cheek, he'd always been sensitive to that sort of thing. Brigid had always been able to wake him in the middle of the night by just holding her hand over his cheek, not even touching him. The warmth alone was enough to rouse him. And *arouse*, but that was a different matter entirely.

Whatever it was, that singular glance, the curious feeling of warmth, perhaps some instinct...it had been enough to secure his full attention.

She was walking between the tables, apparently returning from the powder room. She was...radiant would be a good word, illuminated, perhaps, possessing not so much a halo as an aura, as though there were a spotlight trained on her, and *only* her. He wasn't the only one to notice either; from tables across the dining room, eyes were fixed on her. None as firmly as his

own, maybe, more surreptitiously, but *on* her nonetheless.

And oh, she knew. There was a hint of a blush on her cheeks that hadn't come from a makeup brush, he knew. A faint smile played on her lips. And as she walked, she would nod to various people, as if she knew them. Perhaps she did.

Then she passed Dak, and for just an instant, their eyes met, that mysterious smile was directed at him. And—maybe it was his imagination or just wishful thinking—the smile broadened, just enough to indicate that his presence had been acknowledged.

It was his good fortune that he was sitting.

He could feel his knees go weak. Even seated, he grew lightheaded and felt himself sway. Just a little.

He watched her as she returned to the table where she joined the white-suited fire hydrant, who nodded up at her, then rose. They were about to leave.

The tea was good, certainly, but that look she'd given him could not go unacknowledged. He quickly dropped a tip on the table and headed for the register, hoping to beat them there.

Now, there he was, standing directly ahead of the couple; not so close as to be uncomfortable, but close enough that he could smell the woman's perfume. It was nothing that he recognized—not that he was an expert on women's scents, but still—it was subtle but powerfully attractive, and very suited for her outfit and demeanor. Powder, lavender, and a hint of something else he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He found himself trembling.

He paid his bill, then pivoted. The cherubic fireplug was directly in front of him. And behind and to the right of *him*...

For just an instant, Dak and the woman were eye to eye.

And for perhaps the first time in his life, Dak Stazyk spoke his mind, without thought to whom he might offend.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, "but I feel led to say this." He stared at the woman, trying to maintain his composure. "You are the most startlingly beautiful lady I have ever seen. Ever, in my entire life. I use the word 'Lady' deliberately. Because everything about you speaks dignity and class. You are radiant." He took a breath, tried to keep his voice on an even tone. "Radiant. If I stare, it's only because I have to, to pay tribute to you the only way I know how." He motioned around the room. "They may not say it out loud, but every other person in this room feels the same, and they'd say so if they had the nerve." He smiled awkwardly. "Now, before I lose my own, I'll leave you."

Her expression never changed. It was impassive, but with that so-faint smile.

Dak nodded to her companion. "I envy you, sir."

It was probably the single most articulate and honest statement he had ever made.

Then he walked out of the place, legs wobbly.

Pivotal Moments In One's Life, Part 2

It was all he could do to not look behind him. But he recognized the state he was in, and didn't want to be forced to confront her certainly annoyed husband.

He walked out, took a deep breath, found he was a still a little unsteady. He supposed it could be from the long ride, but it was more likely from the short confrontation. Either way, he needed to get off of his feet. He located a convenient bench along the sidewalk a few doors down and sat.

Deep breaths then. It wasn't a long walk back to the motel, but it wouldn't do to pass out on the side of the street in an unfamiliar town. He was liable to wake up in a jail cell. He was pondering the possibilities when someone sat beside him on the bench.

Not just any someone. Of course, it would be the beefy husband of the woman in the diner...which, needless to say, gave Dak a bit of a start. Understandable perhaps considering his condition, but still.

The man, to his credit, did his best to allay his distress. "She is quite a stunner, isn't she?" he said politely.

Dak took a breath before answering. "She is that," he finally replied with a nod. "All of that. Listen, I'm sorry if..."

"Oh, no, no, no," the man chuckled. This close he resembled a refrigerator with a head. "I get it, believe me. I'm not gonna say it happens every time we go out, but she does tend to attract attention." He held out a hand like a cinder block. "Name's Fred, by the way," adding needlessly, "me, I mean. The *lady's* name is...well, maybe better I don't tell you. Just in case things get confused." He smiled again understandingly. "Things tend to get that way around her. People become tongue-tied and all. I know I do. After being around her for nearly thirty years you'd think I'd be used to it." He smiled. "I'm not. You, you did pretty well, actually."

Dak felt himself relax...a little. "She really is amazing," he said appreciatively. "I've never seen anyone quite like her."

"You're right. You're not liable to meet another like her again, either."

"I'm glad I got the chance this once. Thanks for not being upset."

Fred squinted. "Oh, don't get me wrong. I *am* upset. But like I said, lots of people give her the eye. You just happen to be the first who ever had the nerve to say anything cogent to her, see?" He patted Dak on the shoulder. "That took some nerve. I'm impressed."

"Thanks." Dak felt inclined to add, *I guess*, but decided not to push his luck.

"Now, are you all right? You look like you're about to pass out."

"It's been a long day," Dak said. "But I'm grateful I'm not going to end it by being beaten."

Fred laughed. "Haven't hit anyone in years. Last time I did, I broke my hand."

"But I'll guess you probably put the other guy in the hospital."

"Nah," Fred said, with just a trace of gravity. "The morgue. Best of luck to you, friend. It's been good to meet you. What was your name, by the way?"

“Dak,” he replied. “And the pleasure’s mine.”

“That remains to be seen. Sometimes a passing fancy pays, sometimes it doesn’t. Reckon we’ll just have to see this through, won’t we?”

And with that, Fred stood and walked away, leaving Dak sitting there in surprise, shaking his head.

Well, that was...surreal, he thought.

After the Fact, But Before The Event

It was several minutes before he felt composed enough to walk back to his motel room. He staggered in and lay down on the bed. He was leg-weary and still unsettled by the day’s events; it wasn’t every day that he was forced to leave his home, ride seventy-plus miles, and then be exposed to the most beautiful woman he’d ever met. Not to mention her linebacker husband. But now he was here, he was safe, and he could rest. Perhaps tomorrow he would ride over to the cave museum and take a tour, then maybe...

...there was a knock at the door. A firm, urgent kind of knock.

“Aw geez,” he sighed. At least a nap would’ve been nice, if not a full night of sleep. And who would be knocking on his door? No one knew he was here. Except maybe the motel office, but surely they’d call...?

Ah well. Nothing for it but to check. But be safe.

He peered through the space in the drapes and saw Fred peering right back in at him.

They made eye contact. Fred motioned to him. *Come to the door.*

Time for another deep breath.

What had he done but give a beautiful woman a harmless compliment? Was it worth the stress he was experiencing now?

Sometimes a passing fancy pays, sometimes it doesn’t.

He went to the door. Leaving the safety bar engaged, he opened it carefully. “Listen,” he started, “if you’re angry...”

Fred gave a sideways smile. “Nobody’s angry, Dak. But she wants to see you. Right away. I’ve been sent to collect you.”

“Collect me?”

“What part of that don’t you understand? *She. Sent. Me. To. Collect. You.* But there’s a time limit, see? She gave me thirty minutes, and it’s about a ten minute drive to the house. Meaning, you have about a minute to get in the car so I can drive you out. Savvy?” He looked at his watch. “More like thirty seconds now. You coming?”

“Okay. Let me grab my things. What about my bike?”

Fred shook his head. “I wasn’t sent to get your things or your bike, just you. Now let’s go. She’s not someone you want to keep waiting, trust me. Remember what I said about passing fancies? You’ll never know if you don’t come along.”

So, despite his better judgement, Dak did.

Pivotal Moments In One's Life, Part 3

Now he stood in the foyer of a sprawling stone home a few circuitous minutes' drive from his motel. "Press the button and wait," Fred had told him, giving his watch another look. "I'm not sure what she's going to want to do. We're a little bit late, and she values punctuality. But it can't hurt to try."

"What if she decides not to see me?" Dak asked.

"Then you call an Uber and head back to your room. Or walk; it doesn't matter to me either way."

"I'm not sure I could find my way."

"Your problem. Good luck." And the solid little man as much as disappeared; he left Dak in the foyer, and by the time he looked out the peephole to where the car had been parked, it was gone. There wasn't even a cloud of dust remaining in the gravel drive.

Well. What to do?

He sighed. What *was* there to do? He could walk out and head back to the motel, but now that would be a very long walk indeed. And while he did have cash, he didn't have a mobile phone to call a rideshare. So that was probably out.

A long walk, then...or, *push the button, Dak.*

Ah, hell. He sighed again and pushed the button.

There was a delay, longer than what he was comfortable with, but clearly his comfort wasn't at issue here, and hadn't been since he'd spoken to the woman in the first place. In fact, he'd turned and was about to open the door and walk out when a voice came from a hidden speaker: "Yes?"

"Ummm, it's me. Dak Stazyk. I spoke to you in the restaurant."

"You're late," her voice came back. Presumably her voice, anyway.

"I'm sorry."

"Almost three minutes late now."

All he could do was repeat, "I'm sorry."

There was a long pause, then there was a buzz at the stout wooden door leading onward toward...whatever. "Come in," the voice said. "Have a seat. I'll be out in a moment."

The sofa was comfortable. And huge; it was L-shaped and took up a good portion of an equally large sitting room. A very large, very full bookcase dominated one wall, with a flat screen television on another. A well-used wing chair sat beneath a gooseneck lamp. The hardwood floor was covered with an enormous and plush Berber; the same off-white eggshell color as the walls. He was certainly not an expert, but it looked handmade. As a whole the room spoke comfort.

A clacking sound of heels on hardwood announced the arrival of the woman, Deirdre.

Dak stood and tuned toward her. She was still in the same outfit she had worn at the

restaurant, and still looked completely radiant. There was just the hint of a smile on her face, and a blush on her cheeks that wasn't from makeup.

She didn't waste a moment. "First of all, I want to know to whom I'm speaking."

"Dak," he replied. "Dak Stazyk."

"Dak," she murmured. "I don't believe you. No one is actually named 'Dak'. It's got to be short for something, or it's a nickname. What's your *real* name?"

"Ummm..." He blushed. "Well, it's short for Sendak."

She looked at him curiously. "Sendak? Like the author?"

He nodded and smiled sheepishly. "Mom was a fan."

She suddenly smiled and clapped her hands. "Sendak! Why, that's marvelous! I'm a fan too. 'In The Night Kitchen' is one of my all time favorites." She looked contemplatively at him. "Sendak Stazyk. Any middle name?"

"Are you planning on doing a background check on me?"

She laughed. "Perhaps. Or perhaps I'm just interested in the person who bestowed upon me the most wonderfully literate compliment I've ever been given. Which do you think it could be?"

He shrugged and looked down. "I just spoke the truth." He looked back up at her. "Would it be too much of an imposition to ask your name?"

She as much as ignored him. "And then...then, you just left. Fred told me that when he found you, you were sitting on a bench on Main Street. He sat and talked with you for a few minutes, and afterward you walked north."

"He was watching me?"

"Well, of course he was watching you. I told him to. You see, I'm not accustomed to attractive young men approaching me thus, and I was curious about you."

He looked up at her—which was difficult, as she was staring very intently at him.

"Then I'll save you some investigative time," he said after a moment's pause. "I don't want you to waste any time thinking I'm something other than exactly what I am. What you're looking at...is, essentially, a homeless guy with enough cash to be spending a couple of days in a motel room. It just happened that while out for dinner I happened to see an amazing lady—you—and I spoke to her."

"And then?"

"And then I walked back to my motel room, and somehow your husband tracked me down and brought me here." He looked back down at the rug. "In a day or two I'll probably get back on my bike and ride south. You'll never see me again, and I still won't know your name. End of story."

"As simple as all that?"

"As simple as all that."

"Well," she said softly. A beat, then, "Well. We'll just see about that, Sendak Stazyk. No one speaks to me as you did, and then just rides off into the sunset." She cocked her head.

“Motorcycle? Or...”

“Bicycle. People with real money have motorcycles.” He smiled grimly. “It’s in my motel room. I hope it’s still there when I get back.”

“And you rode here from...?”

“Louisville.”

“That’s a very long way.”

“It did take a while.”

“How long?”

“About six and a half hours.”

There was a moment of silence. Then she walked over and stood beside him and motioned to the sofa. “Do sit down, Sendak.”

He stood there, looking at her.

“Really. Do sit down. You rode a long way to be here. I imagine you’re very tired.”

Dak sat there for just a moment, trying to decide what to say next. He couldn’t look directly at her; that imperious gaze was unsupportable.

“Well?”

“I’m sorry. I guess I’m not exactly sure what’s expected of me here.”

She nodded. “I understand your confusion. Please sit down. Or are you waiting for me to sit first? A gentleman would do that, wouldn’t he?”

“I was raised right,” he replied.

She smiled. “That’s good breeding.” She sat and patted the cushion next to her. “Now. I’m comfortable. I would like you to be too.”

“Ummm...I’m kind of smelly,” he said. “The long ride, you know. I didn’t really have time for a shower before dinner, so I cleaned up just enough to be presentable.”

“You’re stalling. Why? Are you frightened?”

He promptly sat down. “I’m not scared of much of anything.”

“I am,” she said quietly. “Of many things. But perhaps we can talk about that later. For now...would it make you feel more at ease to learn that Fred isn’t my husband?”

“He isn’t?”

“Why, no! He’s my Properties Manager.” She winked at him. “Though I can understand your concern. He’s a dear, and very protective. We usually have dinner together every few weeks and discuss issues with my ventures.” She smiled. “Which includes the Caverna Motor Lodge. You see, he gets a call whenever someone checks in using cash. We have to be careful about things like that. I hope you don’t mind. He wasn’t investigating you, as it were.” Another smile. “Or maybe he was. As I said, he’s very protective. But you should know, he has a wife of nearly thirty years whom he adores. They have a son who is your age.” She squinted a bit. “Or perhaps Peyton is just a little younger. I can only guess.” Now she grinned. “As I said, we weren’t investigating you. Does that make you feel better?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Wonderful! And if it would make you feel better—and I reckon it would, after such a long ride—I would be happy to run you a bath.”

“Well. That’s not...”

“Yes. Yes, it is.” She rose gracefully and walked out of the room, returning a few minutes later. “Now,” she said, “I’m going to assume you have no change of clothes with you?”

“Ummm...you would be correct. Fred told me that he’d been sent for me, not for my things.”

She smiled widely. “Yes, he’s prone to that sort of melodrama. Now, you get yourself into the bath. Take as much time as you like. I’ll send Fred for your things. Your bike too. You’ll stay here tonight, of course.” It was not a question. “Make yourself at home. Would you drink a glass or two of wine with me?”

He tried hard to keep the shock off of his face.

“Of course you will.” She pointed. “The bath is through there. On your way.”

That was not a request. And he still didn’t know her name.

Now Dak (or should he call himself Sendak now?) Stazyk found himself lying in a bathtub far bigger than anything he’d ever been able to enjoy before. To his amazement, a foot-wide waterfall of sorts on its side served as the faucet. A *waterfall*, of all things! And whirlpool jets besides! It was...outrageous. Just as extravagant was a set of LED lights mounted above and behind his head, perfect for someone who liked to spend a lot of time reading in the tub. He could see her doing just that.

He liked it. A lot. It was certainly an upgrade from the motel room, which in itself would’ve been a significant upgrade to what he’d experienced throughout his life thus far. Oh, he was still mystified by this strange turn of events, but he decided that maybe it was best to just follow along and see where things went. Go with the flow, and in this case the flow came from whirlpool jets in the tub. The first time he’d ever experienced *that*, as well. And yes, he liked that too. He could almost feel all of the heartbreak and worry sloughing off of him like so many layers of dermis. It felt nice.

The wine helped. Yes, she’d brought him a glass of wine. Of course he’d hidden himself behind the shower curtain, an act of modesty which elicited a chuckle, but yes, she’d left the wine behind. “Just relax, Sendak. No one is going to bite you,” although he could swear, as she began to turn, she added the word, “...yet.” She walked off down the hall, calling behind her, “Relax and enjoy yourself. Take a nap if you like. But if you’ll be wanting a second glass of wine, you’ll have to get out for it.”

The wine was excellent, a very robust blackberry; unusual, but tasty. And very heady as well. He found himself wondering what the alcohol content of that particular vintage might be. There would be no more riding for him today. Probably no walking either. He’d never been a drinker, and this went to his head very quickly.

She’d left his clothes on the marble-topped vanity. A pair of light warmup pants, a t-shirt

from a race track he'd been working at before his forced departure from Louisville, underwear and socks...but it was clean and dry. Certainly not the sort of outfit one might wear to a meeting with woman of such distinction. But, circumstances. He finally climbed with great reluctance from the tub, drained it, and dressed, then padded out into the sitting room, where he found her on the sofa. Two glasses of wine rested on the table in front of her, and what sounded like Bach played from hidden speakers.

"Brandenburg Concertos?" he ventured.

"Oh my," she exclaimed. "But I'll really be impressed if you can tell me which one."

He smiled. "Believe me, I'm not that educated. I just enjoy classical music."

"You don't have to be educated to enjoy fine music," she replied, picking up her glass. "I don't think I need to ask if you enjoyed your bath, do I?"

"No, you don't" he said with a little sigh. "It was wonderful. Thank you for allowing me to experience it."

"I'm glad." She scooted closer to him. "I haven't had a man in this house—well, aside from Fred—in many moons, Sendak. I hope you can appreciate that. And perhaps you can share some of yourself with me."

He nodded. "If by that you mean, will I tell you about myself, I will. But it'll probably put you to sleep."

"Then I will fall asleep happy."

"But first, can I please know your name?"

She smiled and held out a well-manicured hand. "My name is Deirdre Astin. Now, make with the story. Then afterward perhaps we can discuss your penchant for speaking to accompanied women."

The Event

So he told her his story. And not just what he was comfortable telling, but all of it. Condensed, to be sure, but honest. He told her details he hadn't felt comfortable relating to his psychiatrist or members of his family, let alone a perfect stranger. But she listened to it all without judgement, something even his doctors hadn't done. Stories of despair and near suicide. Of relationships lost and discarded, of love left behind because of fear. Of living in the rough and what he'd had to do to survive. None of it was pretty, except perhaps for the years as a child. Then, then he knew happiness and love, things he'd yet to find as an adult.

He wasn't sure why he felt so comfortable with her; perhaps it was the afterglow of the bath, or the growing buzz he was receiving from the wine, or the nearness of her, but something loosened his tongue and allowed him to go on and on. And before he knew, an hour had passed.

And *still* she prodded for more. But, "There's not much else to tell," he said softly, staring at his again-drained glass. "You know where I am, and where I'm going...at least as well as I

do.”

She never took her eyes off of his face. And that was something else...those eyes. Large and brown, eyes like he'd seen once on a deer at a petting zoo.

That was a story he hadn't told. It was a memory from his childhood that remained so vivid. It was on a rare trip on which the family had been more or less intact. They'd gone to Florida, as all families seemed to do back then. To Disney, when it was still a fun place to go. Along the way they'd stopped at a wildlife park. Among the exhibits was a petting zoo with goats, sheep, and, of course, deer. One particular fawn had attached itself to him as they passed through, even after he'd run out of kibble to feed it, and he'd exhausted his supply of change to buy more. It kept nuzzling him, staring at him with eyes that seemed impossibly large and insistent. *Look at me. Feed me. Pet me.* And, of course, *Stay with me.*

And he hadn't wanted to leave. When he finally had no choice, that deer followed him all the way to the gate, and after he stepped through, it had made noises he could never forget. He kept looking back, seeing those eyes. Wide, brown, vulnerable but expressive. You just knew there had to be a soul in there.

He was seeing those eyes again.

“And...that's me,” he finally concluded.

She sat motionless for almost a minute, those eyes still focused on his.

“If you want...want me to leave...”

Her head cocked sideways. “Sendak, why would you think that?” She edged closer. “We all have pasts, you know. Some are at least as...unpleasant, let's say, as yours. Some are more so. But that doesn't *yours* any less real, or touching. The fact is, you're here now, and you've been open and honest with me. Except for one thing.” She smiled that gentle smile again. Beguiling, but without pretense. “One little thing, perhaps the most important thing to me.”

“Which is...?”

“Why you did it. Why you opened yourself so readily to me. Not just here, but back at the restaurant.” She reached out, took the glass from him, set it on the table. Then she took his hand. “You could have seen me, admired me, as men have done and still do.” She smiled. “Perhaps not so often these days, but they still do. Some women see it as imposing or even harassing. I've always found it delightful. A tribute, of sorts. Undeserved, perhaps, but...”

“But it *is* deserved,” he interrupted, that same sense of need taking hold as it had hours ago in the restaurant. “It is. Because you're not just any woman. You're a Lady.” The upper case intended, and very much intoned. “That sets you apart. Apart, and above.” He looked down at his hand in hers. It was trembling. Not much, but enough to be detectable.

She laid her other hand atop his.

“I maybe can explain that,” he said, nervously now.

“Expound then,” she said. “Do elucidate.”

“It's just my opinion. I'm probably wrong, what do I know. You know my past now, and maybe I'm no proper judge. But to me, a girl is a woman in training. Some girls never become

women, just like some boys never become men. But a Lady!"

"That's different?"

"*Different.* That's a woman of distinction. Someone who's meant to be looked up to and respected. It's not a title you grown into, it's one you've earned."

She looked at him gravely. "And you believe that's me."

He nodded deferentially toward her. "I do."

"Well." She was silent for a moment, then she said, "I'm not certain exactly how to respond to that."

"That's why...why I'm trembling. Because you're so far above my station." Now he looked directly into her eyes. "Like I said, if you want me to..."

"Actually, what I want you to do is stand." She rose and again offered him her hand. "Please, Sendak, do stand up." He did. "May I continue to call you Sendak? It is such a lyrical name. I will call you Dak if you like, but...Dak is so...abrupt." She smiled at him. "And you are anything but abrupt. If anything, you are deliberate."

"I...I think that's the first time anybody's ever called me that."

"It can be a curse. Overthinking can do that. But on you, it works. So. May I call you by your proper name?"

"If you prefer."

"Good. Now put your arms around me, like the gentleman you are."

He blushed furiously. "I'm no gentleman."

"Well, you're not a doorknob either."

Now Sendak—finally, Sendak—grinned. "That's wonderful."

"Good. Then you'll take me in your arms...?"

He did. Tentatively, but he did.

She gently leaned into him. "Don't be frightened, Sendak. There's nothing wrong with sharing affection. Especially with the person upon whom you just bestowed the most wonderful compliment. No one has ever spoken to me thus, and so frankly. It means so much."

That was when she kissed him. Not a peck, certainly not a full-on passionate lip-smacker, but simultaneously gentle and insistent. And lingering.

When she finally did lean away, they both were beaming.

"How on earth did we get here?" he murmured.

"Fate?" she chuckled. "I don't know. Sometimes things just happen, Sendak. Look at everything that had to happen—or not happen—to get you here. You rode a bicycle all the way from Louisville, for heaven's sake. You got here, checked into the motel I just happen to co-own, and went to eat at the same diner I did." She gently laid a warm hand on his cheek. "You had the nerve to speak your mind to me."

"What about you?"

"Tonight I was going to retire early. Drink that bottle of wine by myself, read a while, sit out on the veranda and watch the birds and bats." She smiled. "There's a cave just down the

hollow from the house—they're everywhere around here—and in the evening I can watch them go out to feed. It's wonderful. But...it's lonely, Sendak, so lonely." She sighed. "That was what I'd intended to do, anyway. And when Fred called, I was this close to telling him no. But something made me go anyway. Call it fate, call it instinct. Call it God's will, I don't know. Whatever it was, I believe it was the same thing that put you here in town, in that restaurant, at the exact same time I was there." Another sigh. "And here we are, Sendak. Now, what do you propose we do about it?"

They stared at each other for two solid minutes.

Oh, those eyes.

His mind made the anti-arguments. And there plenty of them: *You don't know her. She knows nothing about you. She's twice your age. What do you have in common? You're not good enough for her.*

His heart had the other side, of course. It had made its case.

"I don't want to leave," he murmured.

"Then *don't*."

He didn't.

Ever.

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