

Where We're Going

"TAKE ME HOME," he demanded. "Right. Now."

I couldn't gauge his mood anymore. I had lost him and I wasn't sure why. But I knew that whatever grip I previously had on him was gone now. There would be no more from him today.

"OK. Fine." I was exasperated. "Where do you want me to drop you off?" He was changing his mind again.

"Let me think about it." A few hours ago he had wanted to be with me all night. He flirted with his hands, his words, and his mouth. I had just assumed he was waiting to get out of the public eye.

"In front of the grocery store. No. In front of my mom's house. Or my brother's. It doesn't matter. I'll walk from there." In one afternoon, his indecisiveness had led us to the park where we took a walk and watched the kids skateboard. We watched the kids for over an hour, never really talking about anything. I had thought people observing us might think it was creepy that two adults in their thirties were hanging around a kids skate park anyway. I didn't want to be there. I had no interest in watching punk 'tweeners with attitude fall off their skateboards and dare each other to drop in from the big rim. When he sensed my impatience, we drove a few miles south to the dam, where we dis-

cussed fishing bait. Did I know the difference between the bait needed for bass and the bait needed for wall-eye? Had I ever considered the drop from here? I wondered if he needed me more for a ride, because he sure didn't act like he needed me for the company. We had walked from the dam down to the marina. The boats had been stored for the winter and the spring thaw was just a teaser for now, so it was empty, muddy, and in a definite state of disrepair. Docks were missing wooden slats and railings had been knocked down by an earlier freeze and flood. He held my hand and we didn't talk anymore. He had seemed content not to and I was hesitant to break the silence. He had told me last week he would be at the lake fishing today, which is why I had been surprised to get the call from him earlier:

"I'm at The Tavern." The Tavern was a dive. It was one of those places that no one would ever think to look for you because they forgot it existed in the first place.

I teased, "Seriously? No way! You know I love that place and you went without me?" The music was loud, and I could just make out the crack of the pool tables in the background.

"That's why I'm calling you. Come and see me."

I loved to go there because he and I had made it our own special place. The rest of the world fell away there. Cell phones got turned off and there were no interruptions. Besides that,

the beer was always cold.

"It will take some maneuvering on my part, but I can probably manage it," I told him.

"Hurry," he said. There is always urgency with him. I made up some excuse to my mother, who had the children, about why I was leaving again that day. I told her I had to do something for school. I always have to do something for school. It's the one thing she never questions. Though lately, I'd always been running somewhere and she was growing weary of my excuses.

"Seriously? Again?" Mom looked at me incredulously. "I had stuff I needed to do today!" I felt guilty, only for a second, but not enough to stop me from leaving.

"I know, Mom. I'm sorry." But I wasn't. Not really.

I went off as fast as I could, checking my make-up in the mirror. I realized the effort was futile and he wouldn't care anyway. He rarely noticed those kinds of things. Time has been scarce for us lately, but I never asked to see him. It simply wasn't the way it worked. I waited for him, and when he called, I'd go. I had no other way to reach him. Even if I had, he would resent my intrusion. The last two times I'd seen him, he had asked me to come, but then he was distracted and I couldn't seem to get him to remember that our time was precious and wasting it was not on the top of my list. If I asked to see him, it was

a sure way of guaranteeing that I wouldn't, at least not for quite some time. So when he asked, I would always go. There would never be any notice. Just a phone call. I would stop whatever I was doing, wherever I was, and go to him. He always knew I would come.

I was anxious to reach him, as I always was. He doesn't like to wait. I know this is an irrational thought but I can't stop the nervousness from creeping in. It didn't seem to matter to me that I was flying down the highway with no regard for the speed limit, until I saw a highway patrolman and I realized that I was speeding to get to a man. A man I somehow have my heart all tangled up about.

The bar was busy for its usual pace. Every other time I'm there, the barmaid spends as much time sitting on one side of the bar drinking as she does on the other side of it serving. I found him at the pool tables and he looked up at me briefly.

"Hi!" I flashed a brilliant and relieved smile. I noticed he didn't smile back. I dismissed it because I was sure he was involved in his game. I loved the way he filled out a t-shirt. It fit tight across the arms and chest and I loved the way his waist narrowed and fit into his jeans. He never worked out, but his job was physical and it kept him very fit. I loved the way I felt when he put those arms around me. I felt safe and protected. I tried hard not to

Where We're Going (cont.)

think about those arms being around his wife.

"Wanna beer?" I asked him. He didn't answer me. Didn't even look up. I ordered my beer and one for him and sat at a table in the corner.

"Hey," I wiggled the bottle in my hand to indicate it was for him and sat it on the table. He glanced at me and nodded, his only acknowledgment so far. The tables were scarred with a million cigarette burns, and they were covered with acrylic and photos underneath of the bar in its heyday. It appeared to have been a popular biker bar at one point judging by the characters in these photographs. But I don't think I'd seen a biker in that place once since I started going there. Toby Keith's "I Love This Bar" was blaring out of the speakers above my head, and I thought that was rather ironic for the moment. I did love this bar. Smoke swirled in a haze around the pool tables and I could smell the staleness of grease, cigarettes, and old beer. The song stopped and I could hear Lisa and John fighting in the men's room again. Lisa and John were always either hugging or fighting. Mostly fighting. I'd never been at the bar without seeing them there. They were kind of a regular fixture. I could hear Lisa yelling at John over the intro to Led Zepplin's "Tangerine." I tried not to listen as I waited for him to finish his game.

"Hi," he finally said when the game was over. He leaned in to kiss

me, smelling like his two favorite vices, E & J brandy and cigarettes. I had grown used to this smell.

He finally smiled at me. "Glad you could make it."

I was glad too. He softened then, setting the pool stick aside, kissing me gently and pulling me closer by my belt loops. We were no secret at the Tavern. It was always the same, though. He played pool while I bought the beer. He gave me quarters to pop in the ancient jukebox that kept the classic rock and country blasting in through blown speakers. There wasn't much talking, but plenty of touching and smiling.

It was always this way, until he said, "C'mon. Let's get out of here."

We spent the whole summer together. I wasn't prepared for the heartache when he decided to get back together with his wife. He wasn't able to let the relationship with me just stop there, though. He had said he didn't mean to fall in love with me and that things with his wife were complicated, but he needed to stay married to her. We had carried on with our secret meetings, but things were growing ever more infrequent.

The last time I saw him, we had met there at the Tavern. He had asked me to dance and we danced, not caring that no one else was dancing. It seemed like we had the whole place to ourselves. It was always just the two of us, even when we were in a crowd.

He had said, "You are so beautiful. You smell fantastic." He was ridiculously romantic like that and while it made me blush, it had also touched my heart because I thought he meant it.

"You are one of the finest women I know," he told me. He liked to lay it on thick.

"Not fine enough, apparently." My words were sharp, but I kept my voice and face soft because I didn't want to lose the moment with him. I couldn't bear the thought of him withdrawing his arms from around my waist. That day was the last time I had seen him until now.

Here we were again, another moment lost. He was asking me to take him home, so I got on the highway and headed north. I remained silent now that we were headed home. I wasn't sure where I stood with him right now, and I wasn't taking any chances on his shifting mood. But I was sulking and I'm pretty sure he could read my mood just fine.

"I'm sorry I can't give you what you want," he finally told me. This was a common argument we shared.

"Don't worry about it," I said.

But he did worry, and I did my best not to let him hear the disappointment in my voice. But I was upset. He teases me with empty promises and then drinks too much and his moods changes rapidly. I can't keep up and I'm weary of trying to sense the change before it happens. It makes me tired. Maybe

his guilt got the better of him. I sense that sometimes he remembers I'm not the woman he's married to, and he realizes he should be with her instead of me, but I stopped trying to figure it out a long time ago. Today is particularly disappointing to me since I feel like nothing I can say or do is pleasing enough to him to make him stay, but pissing him off by saying something about it will assure that we do not see one another again, so I remain silent.

It bothered me that he spent all afternoon talking about my tits and my ass and pulling me towards him, then at the last moment of our time together, pushed me away. I wonder, again, if the guilt had gotten to him and he wanted me, but he didn't want to feel bad about wanting me because he knew I was the forbidden. Well, it wasn't my job to make him feel good about what he was doing. I just wanted to make him feel good, make him forget that there was anyone but me. Sometimes I could, but that day he hadn't let me too near and then we were headed for home. At a red light, he leaned in to kiss me. I turned my face away.

"You're angry. Alright." He set his jaw and looked out the window. I tried to recover because I felt bad for hurting him.

"No, no. Look at me, I'm not angry." I deliberately softened my voice and gave my most sincere smile, hoping that it worked. I put my hand on his leg and squeezed

gently. "It's ok. I understand you need to go home. It's been a fun day."

"I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do." I heard his guilt, lingering just under the surface. "You're mad. I can tell because your eyes change color when you're mad. I wish I had all kinds of time, but I don't." There was sadness in his voice. His speech slurred and I wondered how much he had to drink before I met him at the pub. His eyes drifted closed. They snapped open again when I spoke.

"Well, what is it you think you are supposed to be doing?" My voice came across loud and annoyed, but immediately I was sorry for its harshness. "And I'm not mad," I say, truthfully. I realized it really wasn't anger that gave me that feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was disappointment. While I waited for him to answer, I realized: He's going home. He will always go home. He will always love the bottle and his home more than he loves me, and today was no different. I have had this revelation before, but that day it stung, me and I felt like being mean. That day, I was tired of the game we played. I wanted to lash out at him, but I didn't. I couldn't. I was afraid.

"Don't play dumb with me. It doesn't suit you. You know why I called, and now I'm not doing what you expected." He thought I expected him to sleep with me. He seemed angry, though I wasn't sure why. To

counteract his tone, he snatched up my hand and squeezed it tight, raising it to his lips and brushing it with a kiss. We were getting close to the place where I would drop him off, in the alley near his house. I felt like a spy involved in some type of espionage when we did drop-offs and pick-ups.

"With you, nothing is ever expected," I said, deliberately, and meant it, with an involuntary harshness. "It's part of your charm," I added and smiled to soften the blow I just dealt. I knew why I was scared. I understood that the thought of being alone was more than I could bear. Being with him let me have the illusion of happiness sometimes. At least, that's what I keep telling myself. He finally looked me in the eye. He kissed me, and I let him that time.