

Life Style

PRELUDE - 1996

She looked like hell. But it was her. If you looked hard enough you could still see that under the long, tangled, dirty blonde hair and poorly repaired makeup was a very pretty woman. But tonight she looked like an off limits construction site. She looked hardened and gaunt and her pained expression appeared to have found a permanent home. She had what looked to be a fresh cut on her left cheek. No doubt it had happened not long before she walked into Ortlieb's Jazz Haus, here in Northern Liberties, to order what appeared **not** to be her first gin and tonic. The empty glass on the bar in front of her matching that of the half filled drink in her hand attested to that.

Bootsy Barnes was wailing away on the tenor sax when we walked in. As I was sitting down with Susan, who I had been seeing for a couple of months, I glimpsed over at the bar and, without doubt, it was her.

At Ortlieb's, all movement took place down a five foot wide aisle that ran between the men's room and the stage; from kitchen in the back to bar in the front. Young, tattooed servers jockeyed food and drinks, through the smoky haze, down the one lane highway, around to the tables while trying to be mindful and respectful of the band.

I couldn't stop glancing over at her. After we ordered drinks Susan picked up on my roving eye. She asked me, "Do you have eyes for the bartender or something?" The bartender was a tall, very attractive, woman with piercing blue eyes and long, long brown hair, wrapped in a braid that rested on her chest, lest it sway back and forth as she attended her duties at the bar.

"Nope."

"You're not looking at that skanky blonde at the bar, are you?" I was. "Please don't tell me you find her attractive,"

"I did at one time, but I haven't seen her for like fifteen years."

"So I guess you are dying to go over there and reintroduce yourself,"

"Maybe I will say hello to her on our way out after dinner, or after this set."

"I think that as soon as we order dinner you should go over to her and reminisce, and then let's see how the rest of the night goes." Susan had no idea what door she had just opened.

"I will introduce you to her at the end of this set."

"Sorry, dude, I have no desire to meet your old girl friend. Especially a scuz bucket like that." I told her she wasn't my girlfriend and that the operative word was "old."

Susan persisted, "Fine, then don't acknowledge her at all." That was just not going to happen.

We ordered dinner and as soon as the set ended I excused myself and walked to the bar. I sat down to her right and noticed that her drink was almost finished. I asked if she would like another and she looked at me straight in the eyes and said,

"Man, I ain't lookin' for no date."

I looked into those eyes that had once been bright blue and they looked almost gray, and without the light that once shone from them. "Alice, it's Billy, Billy Moss."

"Billy?" She looked like she wanted to jump over the bar and hide. Even in the subdued lighting I could see her face flush red. As red as her nose. Red like her bloodshot eyes.

She took my hands in hers. "Oh Billy, please don't look at me, and please don't look at me like that. Things are fine. I'm just having a bad day."

This was more than just a bad day. She was working hard to keep her left cheek from my view so that I would not see the fresh scar that was apparently cleaned but not dressed. Although she tried, she couldn't hide the fairly fresh tattoo on her right forearm that simply said, "Owned" in blue script across a large letter 'B' in red script.

This was not the Alice I remembered. This was not the spark plug that made every experience more vibrant. She seemed uncomfortable speaking at any length and I didn't push it. I could feel my heart sink when she said that her life was different now and that it would be a bad idea, especially for me, if we took the conversation any further. She seemed so alone but refused my invitation to join Susan and I.

I slid my card across the bar to her and asked her to call me if I could do anything for her. I let her know that in my heart she would always be my dear friend, and that I would be there for her. We hugged, but did not kiss. She shuddered when I put my arms around her, as if I had touched an open wound. As we parted she looked me in the eyes and said, "After all this time, Billy Moss, you're still the best guy I know."

Susan gave me an icy glance as I walked back to the table. It was going to be a quiet dinner. Thank goodness for Bootsy and the boys.

I tried to tell her that Alice and I were friends for a short time when we were teenagers and that the relationship evolved into a close friendship that eventually faded after college. I was not ready to tell her that Alice was my first crush, a girl too pretty for me and certainly one who blossomed too early for me. She was also the one who relieved me of my virginity. There is no way I could ever tell Susan about the two girls in my life

I could never forget. Nor should I. They were my first crush and my first love. And Alice was one of them.

By the time the second set started Alice had evaporated into the night, without so much as a wave goodbye.

My relationship with Susan wasn't really going anywhere. We remained together mostly out of habit and the need to not be alone.

It was obvious that she liked that I was a decent, respectful guy even though I lacked the bad boy that she desired in the bedroom. I thought, but was unsure, that she was out having sex with another man while we dated. I had no doubt she was looking. Susan was an attractive woman and it was only a matter of time before someone new would walk into her life.

That night I knew it was time to move on. I took her home right after we finished dinner. I gave her a warm kiss and dropped her at her door.

The next day she called me and invited me to her place for dinner. She wanted to play this out on her home court. I knew what was coming. I was prepared.

When I got to Susan's the wine was already uncorked and two glasses were on the coffee table. We gently kissed. Friendly but dispassionate. She took my hand and said that the beef stroganoff was in the slow cooker and would be done in half an hour and that we should talk.

I told her that I knew why I was here and wanted to let her know that she's right. Sometimes it's just time and, for us, it was time. She looked at me astonished but with relief. Before she could say a word to state her case I said, "Suze, it's been a blast but I know I am not doing it for you. It's pretty obvious that you're really not into me." Tears started to well up in her eyes. I put my arms around her and held her close.

"It's not the end of the world," for either of us. We each have a life ahead of us and we'll both be fine." She looked at me with a pained expression as a single blackened tear ran down her cheek.

"Is there anybody in particular?" I asked.

"No," she said, "but there's a guy at the gym and we have been making eyes at each other. But with you in my life, Billy, I didn't want to just sleep around, ya know. And if he doesn't make a move I think I might."

"Do it, Suze. Not sleep around, but go after this guy."

"And you," she asked me, are you gonna go after that skanky blonde at the bar?

"Nooooooo. I told you, she is an old friend. I offered to help her and I will if she asks. She was an important part of my young years, but I have no romantic interest in her. Period. Maybe it's just time to give the ladies a break."

I stayed for dinner and we chatted, but I left right after dessert. When I left her apartment we told each other to keep in touch and we kissed each other on the cheek and I left. I had no regrets and felt no sense of loss. Have I grown this cold after so many hit or miss romances? And then there was fucking Mahovina. But now is not the time to think about the Serbian spy slut.

Susan's departure from my life was not a great loss. Since college, attracting members of the opposite sex has never been a chore. Being almost tall and not too unattractive and with a good temperament and sense of humor I pursued the fairer sex with a charm offensive rather than the macho approach, for which I am ill equipped.

Growing up I learned to fear and respect the opposite sex. My insecurity about my perceived physical shortcomings was always a stumbling block. I truly believe that the reason some men are desirous of sex with a virgin is the fear of being found to be inadequate by a woman of some experience. Till the age of seventeen, even in the era of free love, my fear of inadequacy kept me from taking any relationship with a girl to the logical, desirable conclusion. Until Alice.