



REMEMBER ME

in Istanbul

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He lay on his back and shimmied his head and shoulders under the nose of the car, his boots finding little purchase. Sand layered the asphalt, an offering of winter traction to wayward motorists. The snow was mostly gone now, turned into puddles by day only to freeze again overnight. His heel crunched the icy leavings as he gave one last kick.

Above him, she opened the passenger door a crack. “Well?”

“Still looking. Hold on a sec.”

Damn her anyway, he thought. This is her fault, all that yammering all the time.

He sucked in air and tried to pull his right hand free to get a tactile sense of things. The streetlight he’d parked under offered slanted shadows, but there was no clarity, not at this time of night, not at this time of year. The crosswinds barreled down off the mountains and ripped through Livingston, same as ever, finding him there under the car. The trailings of hot oil and grease and gasoline filled his nostrils as he reached for the bottom of the radiator. Warm water slipped between his fingers and forged tiny rivers toward his elbow.

Well, shit. That’s that.

He wormed out from under the car as if he were playing limbo. His head clear of the front end, he flopped over onto his front side and did a pushup to get off the street. She sat inside in the half-light, looking at him, and she shrugged. He gave a thumbs-down, and she lurched violently in her seat.

He dipped his head, again checking the exterior damage, and he smiled. The front fender and the grille—all that fine plastic American craftsmanship—split and buckled when the car collided with the hindquarters of the buck out on Interstate 90. She could be as mad as she wished, but this was good news on the balance. By pure serendipity, it had happened just a mile from the Livingston turnoff, and he’d been able to coax the car into town for a look. A few miles more, and they’d have been in the mountain pass, as good as stranded at this hour.

She was out of the car now. Another blast of wind billowed her T-shirt. “Can you call someone?” she said.

“No point until morning. It’ll keep.”

“Motel?”

“No,” he said, and she looked away.

Surely he didn’t have to remind her of their cash position, of the \$287 in his wallet that was everything liquid, of the reason they were out here at all. He hadn’t wanted to make the trip, right up to the moment when no more alternatives were available. Drive to Missoula, tell her folks that the yarn store—her yarn store, seeded by her father’s money—had gone belly-up. Beg for a bailout. Try to resume some semblance of life before the failure, without continually divvying up the blame for it.

“So what, then?” she asked. She pinched the hem of her shirt against her flannel-clad hips. Still the wind found its way in.

He pressed a button on his keychain, and the lid to the trunk opened before being slammed back down by a gust. He walked past her, engaged the button again, and caught it this time. “Get what you’ll need for tonight,” he said. “I know somebody here who’ll put us up.”

“Who?”

“An old friend.” He dug into the trunk and extracted a small duffel bag, which he opened and showed to her. She joined him and opened a larger suitcase, took out a shirt and jeans for the next day, and shoved them into the bag.

“Do I know this friend?”

“No. I knew her in college.”

“Oh, her.”

“Enough.” He slung the bag over his shoulder and headed up the street. She fell in behind him, sneakers crunching sand.

“What you mean,” she said, “is you fucked her.”

A rather artless way of putting it, but yes, I fucked her, he thought. And it was fucking great.

“I’m not sleeping in a house with one of your old girlfriends,” she said. She stopped under the streetlight, giving punctuation to her resolve. He could see the place from where they stood, two houses down from the intersection and across the street. He considered just pushing on, letting her stew over...over what? Over nothing, and none of her business. It was a senseless stand she was making, and there’d been enough of that already on any number of counts.

He turned to face her. “Fine. Go sleep in the car. I’ll wake you up in the morning. Meantime, I’m going to be warm.”

He made a diagonal crossing and moved along the sidewalk, closing in on the house. He was nearly to the empty driveway now, the front gate next, and through that the trellis Veronica had put there during the April they spent together, so tiny that even then, as now, he had to turn sideways and duck to get through it. After he knocked on the door, he heard the footfalls coming up behind him, signaling a rare victory for pragmatism.

“What if she’s not here?” she said.

“She isn’t.” No light came on inside. No barking dogs. The house was empty.

“So what now?”

He gripped the door handle and turned it.

That the door would be unlocked was a certainty. She’d made that clear all those years ago, after his first overnight stay and his subsequent and obvious interest in a second. “Come over whenever,” she’d said. “If I’m not there, the house will be unlocked. It always is.”

The funny thing is that it hadn’t seemed strange. Not if you knew Veronica.

She collected people, friends, strays, itinerants, lovers, and her little house served as the gathering place for the motley lot of them. Her heart, she kept locked. But not her door.

He flicked on a light in the entryway. “Come on,” he said.

“I’m not going in there.”

“It’s OK.”

“What if she comes home?”

“It won’t be a problem.”

He held out a hand to her, inviting.

She motioned him toward the interior door. “You go first.”

He found the place as he’d left it eleven years earlier, a little cracker box of a house, a small main room with two bedrooms shooting off west and southwest. Beyond the hanging glass beads in a doorway, a design flourish straight out of 1973, sat a kitchen draped in blue, her favorite color. Gas burners. Side-by-side refrigerator/freezer, Veronica’s one nod to modernity and one rooted in her role as the nurturer of friends casual and closely held. He opened the fridge (“Don’t,” she said, still not getting it) and stared in. Jarred stuff—olives, capers, homemade jam—was all he found. Stuff that would keep.

“She won’t be here,” he said.

“Where is she?”

“How should I know?”

“Well, you fucked her, so I thought you’d have some insight.”

“Stop it.”

She moved away from him, into the dining room, her finger skirting the top of the table. He fell back to the kitchen counter, hands on the Formica, watching.

She pointed at the wall, painted a sort of aqua to leaven the baby blues proliferate in the room. “She sure takes a lot of pictures.”

Black-and-whites, some familiar to him and some not, festooned the century-old plaster. Women, mostly. Some men. None of him, and for that he was thankful.

“Which one is she?”

“She’s not there,” he said.

“No?”

“No. She stays on the other side of the camera.” It struck him now that all these years later, with no tangible record of her face, he couldn’t remember exactly how she looked. The fuzziness of memory could be attributed, in part, to the fact that she was remarkable only in totality, not in her individual qualities. She wore her hair short when he knew her, a dirty blonde that he now pondered, wondering if it had yet been dusted in gray like his own. A round face, plump but not chubby. Mirthful. He never saw her wear makeup, not even an

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accent to bring up her eyes or sharpen her nose. She didn't need to. He remembered a soft neck, endlessly welcoming to a troubled head.

"Are you listening?"

He looked up. "What?"

"I said, I'm tired."

He moved toward the living room. "Spare bedroom's in here. I'll rustle up some blankets."

In the night, she nudged him with her foot.

"Wake up."

"I am," he said.

"Have you slept?"

"A little," and that was a little lie. He pushed himself off the floor by his elbows, bringing his head even with hers on the bed. He leaned in. "You OK?"

"Yes. I guess I am. I'm sorry I was a bitch."

"It's OK."

"I'm sorry you're on the floor."

"Don't be." It was a practical consideration. Veronica's day bed wouldn't have held the two of them.

"Can I tell you something?" she said.

"Yes." He watched her, the shape of her. The blackness of the room allowed him no glimpse of nuance.

She breathed in, expelled it, then drew breath again. "I'm mad."

"At me?"

"Yes," she said.

"For tonight?"

"Yes. That tonight was even necessary."

He slumped back down to his makeshift bed on the hardwood. “We’ve been over this and over this. You still blame me.”

“No.”

“It sounds like you do.”

“No, it was my failure. I’ll tell daddy that.”

“Ours. I’ll own half of it,” he said. He reached up, tried to find her hand. She moved it away.

“I don’t know how to fix this,” she said.

He retracted his own hand. “We’re not the first people to lose a business, hon.”

“And I can’t believe we’re in this house,” she said. “How did we come to this?”

When she finally found sleep, he left her there and wandered back into the main part of the house. He pulled a blanket from the couch and wrapped himself in it, and he remembered how close to the edge Veronica played everything. The thermostat kept low, even here in the last howls of winter. The food dollar she could stretch beyond any reasonable breaking point. The freecycled small appliances and the freezer full of game meat given to her by hunters clearing out space for the new season’s haul and the late-’70s Honda that she nursed through several hundred thousand miles, that for all he knew she still had, wherever she was now. Waste not, want not, and she never did. She took what she needed, used what she took, and squeezed her nickels until they carried her to the places she wished to see.

He stood on the kitchen linoleum in his bare feet and he looked at the photos on the wall that had drawn interest earlier. He remembered some of them, the prints she had shown him on her many returns. Young women laughing in a West Bank coffee shop. A forlorn young man, head down, alone at a London Tube stop. *Tegucigalpa. La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción.*

And there, bottom right, obscured by the kitchen table where he almost missed it, the Walls of Constantinople, the ancient precision of brickwork evident among the ruins. He hadn’t wanted her to go. He worried about her, a single woman in a Muslim city, but no man yet had managed to put a fence around her. It wasn’t just that. He’d wanted more than a concession on travel plans. He’d wanted her in a way that he hadn’t before, permanently and exclusively. And her answer had been a flight to Istanbul and a postcard to tell him that she could never want what he wanted. If he really needed monogamy, she said, he should find a girl who would give it to him.

He moved closer. He knelt before the photo, and he reached for it, brushing fingers against the pane, and then he stood and returned to the bedroom. She was breathing in deep now, lost to sleep. He gathered the blanket about himself and took his place on the floor, and he smiled as he nestled his nose into the fabric and the whiffs of lavender, of Veronica, pulled him in again.

Come morning, he counted the bills as they left his wallet. The tow came to fifty dollars for a two-block ride. At the service station, the proprietor laid out the news, and it could have been a lot worse. “The front end is bashed all to hell but it’s mostly cosmetic,” he said. He could drain the remainder from the radiator, spray in some sealant and fill it up again. “That’ll get you where you’re going, and probably back again. Not a permanent fix, but it’ll do for now.” That came to eighty-seven fifty and an *av-shucks* apology from the service-station guy, who said he knew how things could be tough these days. Two candy bars from the vending machine left them \$147.50 to get where they were headed. Without some help, there would be no getting back.

He settled matters, and then they buckled in. The car started on the first turn, and he watched the temperature gauge slowly climb to midrange. The car warmed, and the reading held steady. He pulled onto the main drag and headed for the interstate.

“I’m going to sleep,” she said.

“Good. I can’t be distracted again.”

“Don’t be mean.”

“I’m not. I’m just saying.”

She sat up. “What did you say in the note to her?”

“I said, ‘Thank you.’”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“Did you love her?”

He fastened his grip on the wheel. “I thought so once. But that was a long time ago.”

On the outskirts, he bore right onto the ramp and fought the cross-winds for speed. She reached for his hand as it found the gearshift. She laced her fingers in his.

“Can we be friends again?” she asked.

“Yes. Of course. I’d like that.”

Cruising speed now, and with it came a change in elevation as they threaded the mountain pass. She leaned in and nuzzled him under the chin, and then she fell back into her seat.

“What?” he said. He reached for her. She withered against the passenger door.

“What’s wrong?”

He cast a glance at her, and she stared back at him, through him, as if she wished him gone.

“You,” she said. “You smell like her.”