

A Whiff of Whiskey

by Jan Brown

It took Tom a moment to recognize her. She was waiting in line at the deli counter along with a dozen other hungry people. She looked hungrier than most, gaunt and dressed completely in black, with a silver-gray scarf that matched her hair. She wore dark sunglasses and carried a white cane, but Tom still recognized the curve of Tasha's face, the straight ballerina posture of her lengthy spine, the slight Mona Lisa smile of her pale lips.

He wondered when, and why, Tasha became blind. Would she be startled if he approached her? He thought back to the one and only high school reunion that he had attended, and savored the memory of their encounter. He remembered how much she enjoyed seeing him then. At the time, Tom was twenty-eight, a ruggedly attractive blond hunk, sound of mind and body. Especially body. He took her home on his motorcycle and proved, in one searingly hot night, that he was so much more than the skinny geek she knew in high school.

They lost touch shortly thereafter, as Tom became obsessed with money and career. After a couple of months, he failed to return her increasingly desperate and numerous calls. She soon moved to New York, and some of his friends blamed him for the move. They thought she was trying to get as far away from Tom as possible.

Now Tom was well past fifty, trapped in addiction, alcohol oozing from his pores and his breath, waiting for his meager salami sandwich, holding a paper bag with a pint of whisky poorly hidden inside. He wondered if blind people really had a heightened sense of smell. One whiff of his boozy breath would be enough to repel her. He didn't stand a chance.

A chance of what? A chance to reconnect, to once again enjoy the warmth of a woman's touch, the feeling of skin on skin, the sense of desire and being desired, the idea that he had something to offer, the ego boost inherent in meeting someone else's needs. He longed for a chance to experience all of these sensations, sensations he had all but forgotten until the moment he saw her.

He remembered Tasha's excitement when she rode on the back of his bike. She was thrilled when he offered to take her home that night. But where could he take Tasha now? He had lost his driver's license after his third DUI. He continued to drive illegally until he lost his high-paying job and the bank repo'd both his BMW and his Harley. When his condo was foreclosed, he moved back with his aging parents. No privacy there.

He had heard rumors that she was retired. Well, not really retired, but laid off or fired with hundreds of other mid-level investment bankers, both a perpetrator and a victim of the financial crisis of 2008-9. He hadn't heard that she was blind or otherwise physically challenged, so her appearance was something of a shock, albeit a pleasant one.

In Tom's mind, her sightlessness added a touch of vulnerability, making her even more appealing. It increased the likelihood that even an alcohol-addled, broken-down, middle-aged fool such as himself might be of some comfort to her, might fulfill some unmet need.

The counter man knew her, addressing her by name and making friendly small talk. She ordered "the usual," which turned out to be a turkey and avocado wrap with sides of sweet potato chips and other hip, healthy veggies. Tom felt distinctly unhip and unhealthy.

He ditched his whiskey in the trash as he followed her out the door into the afternoon breeze. September in San Francisco was temperate, but summer was clearly over. Tasha wrapped her silver scarf around her silver hair and walked confidently down the street, staying close to the side of buildings with a rhythmic, side-to-side tapping of her cane. She ducked into a fashionable high-rise and was greeted with a smile by the doorman as she passed inside. Tom stood outside the glass door, watching with longing and trepidation as she chatted with a buff young man carrying a huge book bag on his shoulder. The bag was emblazoned with a caduceus and a university logo. A local med student? Perhaps a neighbor? Tom felt a pang of envy as he stood outside, watching the handsome young man with his long, sandy hair streaked blond by the California sun. He engaged Tasha in animated conversation punctuated with smiles and laughter. Tasha opened her deli bag and gave him the little package of chips, kissing him on the cheek as he exited the building. Tom thought: not a neighbor, a son. He walked back to the deli, retrieved his bottle from the trash can and got back in line to order his salami sub with a side of dill pickles.

He consumed his cholesterol-laced lunch on a cold bench outside the library. Unexpectedly, he was joined by a Benny, a drinking buddy from his recent past. "How do you stay so skinny when you eat like that?" Ben asked.

"Dunno. Just naturally handsome, I guess."

Ben laughed, but he looked at Tom with a serious expression. "So when is your handsome face going to show up at a meeting? There's one tonight."

"God, Ben, you're like a broken record. Anyway, I'm doing fine."

"The hell you are." Ben picked up the now-empty whiskey bottle and shook it lightly. "Not a drop left in here. Not that I need any more evidence than your own boozy scent. You know you need help."

"Drop it, Ben. And if you're going to get all preachy, get off my fucking bench."

"Fine." Ben got off the bench and stood directly in front of Tom, glowering at him from above. "Tom, if you can't take care of yourself, you're going to be in real trouble. Your liver is shot, and your brains are as pickled as that dill slice you're eating."

Tom stood, eye-to-eye with his former friend, half a pickle hanging out of the corner of his mouth. He balled up his fists and shouted, "I told you, get the fuck out of my sight!"

Ben turned on his heel and started to walk away. He quickly changed his mind, returning to the bench as Tom sat down to finish his lunch. He handed Tom a slip of paper with a phone number on it. "I know you're mad, but I want you to have my phone number in case you need anything. I don't have a land line anymore, so you'll have to call my cell. Don't call me if all you want is bail money; I'm done bailing you out. I'm done driving you home from jail, and I'm not going to help you escape from rehab again. That's over. But if you want to go to a meeting, or you just want to talk or play cards or watch TV, let me know. Call me anytime." Ben waited a few seconds, but got no response. As he walked away, he noticed that Tom crumpled the paper and placed it in the empty deli bag along with his sandwich wrapper.

Tom knew Ben was right. But he also knew he would never be able to prevent his brain from being fried or his liver from being destroyed. He would never reconnect with the beautiful Tasha, nor meet the sandy-haired medical student who was almost surely his son.