

After Her

by

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1

Every man meets a woman who will scar him for life. She'll contaminate everything he's ever done and everything he'll ever do. He will credit her for his success and curse her for his failure. But he will not have lived without her. And he will not have been a man without her.

I had followed her down to Bermuda to the White Horse Tavern, a popular restaurant by the water in St. George's Parish, close to where the cruise ships docked. She had apparently taken up singing and liked to display her talent there. It was getting close to her set, and I sat in the darkest corner of the dining room, my back against the wall, to minimize the chances of her seeing me first. An old piano occupied the bare stage across the room, a solitary microphone on a stand nearby awaiting its first performer.

Then I saw her. She was dressed in a beige sweater and dark blue jeans, with straight blond hair streaming down practically to her ass. Two long earrings framed her face, which was punctuated by glistening red lips and brilliant white teeth. It was a little-girl's face, with big blue eyes and a straight, chiseled nose that any plastic surgeon would have given a year's wages to take credit for, and maybe some had. Her normally pale skin was tanned to almost a bronze: unusual, because Kerry never liked to expose her body. At least not in public. And then that impossibly slim body, with an ass that stuck out in a lewd sort of way. In the right clothing – or rather, the wrong clothing – she could have been a porn star. Yet, I still couldn't be sure about her breasts. She told me one time that a boyfriend had paid fifteen thousand dollars to a Hollywood plastic surgeon to enhance them. She had the receipt to prove it, but I could never actually confirm that she was telling the truth. They felt exceedingly real. She fancied herself a comedienne, sometimes.

Now as I watched her, I wondered if maybe the breasts were real after all. They had just the right bounce to them as she paraded herself across the floor. They served her like a magician's sleight-of-hand trick: They kept one's eyes away from her calculating mind. You didn't see all

the mental gears in motion, getting your number, figuring you out. If a man ever took the time to pull his gaze away from that chest, he might be frightened by what he'd see in her eyes. Hers was a cold, callous mind that had no goal but its own gratification; a mind that had no consideration for others or any desire to improve anyone else's lot but its own. She was a gold digger for the new millennium. A pussy with an attitude.

Goddamn it, I thought to myself. I've been using violent, sexist words since she left me. She was evil incarnate. Pure, unrelenting, unsympathetic. She was a bitch and a half.

Kerry consulted her watch as the emcee leaped onto the stage and announced the official start of her set. "Tonight," said the emcee, "we have a special treat for you. Bermuda's most famous celebrity: the Temptress of Treasury Bonds, the Fugitive from Finance, Kerry Daniels."

I watched as she retreated from view. It took all of my strength not to jump up and chase after her – I was afraid she would give me the slip again. She reappeared soon enough, however, with a young man in tow. He clutched an acoustic guitar as they ascended the stage to deafening applause. Kerry had the kind of walk that always seemed to take her through a sea of deafening applause.

She wasted no time plunging into her song, "Vincent," by Don MacLean, cooing the opening lyrics in a soft, but clear voice. "Starry, starry night, paint your palette blue and grey."

I didn't even know she could sing, and she was actually pretty good. But that's how she surprised me. She dragged me to opening night art exhibitions at MOMA and classical concerts at the Met, when you'd expect her to be spoiled and to fawn instead over the latest collections from Gucci and Prada. She scanned through *The New Yorker* for film festivals of Norwegian actress Liv Ullmann, when other women her age couldn't get enough of Julia Roberts and Renée Zellweger. At the same time, she could run through a spread sheet with a hundred calculations, work out the trajectory of thirty stocks on the New York Stock Exchange and tell you which ones were good investments, and she was usually right.

Her sweater was showing just a little cleavage tonight, but it was enough to suggest ample and well-formed breasts, and it was tight enough to frame a neat little stomach. She shook back her long blond hair. My God, she was so beautiful. I was ready to forgive her all her treachery. In fact, I was ready to let her keep all my money – well, at least share it with only minor conditions – just so that she would smile at me one more time, just me and not the entire Goddamn world.

The crowd ate it up. Rather, they ate her up. They applauded continuously, called out, “Kerry. Kerry.” Maybe I was mistaken. Maybe they were simply chanting, “Starry, starry night...” along with her. In any event, she held out her hands, waved them at the crowd. I thought at first that she was shyly begging them not to adore her so much, but I realized that she was simply digging deeper into the song, waving her hands emotionally.

In the next instant, I found myself weaving through the tables, bumping into people who were passing through the aisles, and heading straight for her. I pushed a waitress aside too roughly and she let out a small scream. Several patrons turned toward the sound. Kerry kept on singing, but her eyes wandered lazily toward the disturbance too, and she watched dispassionately as a shadowy, familiar figure made its way to her.

Someone called out, “Hey, it’s him!” and now people began to notice. Heads turned in my direction and then quickly rotated toward the stage, then back to me again, as if they were watching a tennis match. I was ten feet from the stage and she had not yet moved. I could smell her perfume – or at least I thought I could. She kept on singing, but she was staring straight at me now. Maybe she was frozen with fear, or maybe she was simply blinded by the bright lights, figuratively and literally, and couldn’t tell who I was.

Suddenly, she grabbed the young guitarist and shoved him roughly off the stage. I should have simply stepped aside; instead, I instinctively reached out to catch him. We fell in a heap on the floor, the guitar making a loud, sickening sound as the wood cracked and the strings snapped off. The startled young man scrambled to his feet and, in the process, knocked me back to the ground. I quickly recovered and jumped onto the stage, but by then she was gone.

The audience stared at me, bewildered, expectantly. A small laugh emanated from the crowd. It grew louder, joined by a few “Ooh’s.” Then the entire room was laughing. I slunk off the stage, crimson with embarrassment. The crowd began to chant “Kerry! Kerry!” again.

Throwing pride to the cool Bermuda wind, I circled the building several times, searching for her. Finally, realizing that my actions were ridiculous and nonsensical, I yielded to the sickening reality that she had gotten away from me – again. There was no point in asking anyone if they knew where she had gone. They would say they didn’t know, and they wouldn’t necessarily be lying.

I pulled out my phone to call a cab, but as I did so, I noticed that the driver who had originally brought me here was standing nearby, apparently waiting for a fare. Had he also enjoyed

tonight's entertainment? It did not matter. I needed to put distance between me and my latest social gaffe.

"Hey, it's my friend!" exclaimed the driver, catching sight of my skulking figure.

"Take me back," I said, jumping into the back seat.

We cruised down North Shore Road toward Paget Parish, swerving through the narrow roads of the island, navigating a gentle terrain that plunged into dark patches of woods one moment and then suddenly broke free into views of a shimmering ocean. The windows of the taxi were shut tight, the heater holding back the cool night air. Even so, it could not shut out completely the brisk, salty smell of the tropical sea.

After a while, my heartbeat began returning to normal. The driver had tuned the radio to a mellow Jazz station. The music blended perfectly with the night – the starry, starry night! I could not help being impressed by the explosion of stars in the black Bermuda sky. It was a perfect place for Kerry, I grudgingly admitted.

I asked the driver the obvious question.

"Kerry Daniels?" he replied. "She's a beautiful girl, isn't she?"

"Do you know where I can find her?"

"Do you know where the wind begins? Because if you do, that's where you'll find her."

"Seems like she turns everyone she meets into a poet."

"She has that effect on people, doesn't she? But why are you looking for her? Did she break your heart, too?"

"No, not my heart. Just my pride."

"Ah, you got let off easy. You could have been that Cain Kahn guy back in the States. He was taken for eight million dollars, eh? That was a piece of art."

"That was a masterpiece. But the figure was closer to \$8.3 million."

The driver regarded me in the rear-view mirror with renewed interest. "All that noise at the White Horse Tavern – were you the one running around the building that everyone was laughing at?"

"Yes," I said, and felt my cheeks burning hot.

He turned around for a moment and stared at me. "Missed her again, didn't you?"

"Watch the road."

"You keep escaping with your life, man," he said. "Count your blessings and move on."

“What do you mean?”

“You’re still young, right? There are plenty of other fish in the sea. What more do you need out of life?”

My money. I suddenly realized that I had forgotten my jacket back at the restaurant and it contained my wallet. I was about to ask him to take me back, but didn’t see the point in subjecting myself to further humiliation. I had not left much cash behind and just some miscellaneous credit cards. No big loss. All my cards were maxed out anyway.

“Life’s a beach, eh?” he said.

“And then you freaking die,” I responded.

“No, no,” he corrected me, “Life’s a beach. You know, sand, surf...”

“Well, then you fucking drown.”

We arrived at the parking lot of the Elbow Beach resort, where he made a point of coming out and holding the door open for me. To get a better look at the legendary Victim. He was dark-skinned and in his mid-forties, with a muscular bulk filling out a floral print shirt. A thick growth of gray-streaked beard framed his wide, smiling mouth. He easily dwarfed those around him, but at six-foot-two, I managed to hold my own next to him, in length and bulk. Lately, I had been taking out my anger in the gym.

He clamped onto my hand and shook it firmly. I gave him a \$100 bill on a \$40 fare and told him to keep the change. I wasn’t feeling generous. I simply had no other denomination. I was in a hurry to hide away and die in some little dark hole away from prying eyes. “By the way, what’s your name?” I asked him.

“Troy. Troy Wesley.”

“Yeah, Troy Wesley, can you pick me up early tomorrow? Say, six in the morning? I’m catching the first flight off this island.”

“That’s more like it. Let her go.”

“No, I’m not going to let her go. I’m going to get her.”

“Bitterness is a poison, my friend.”

“It’s my fucking money,” I said. “The whole frigging world seems to think this is all a joke. But I worked hard for that money.”

“So, make yourself some more. It’s replaceable.”

“You know what? Your car’s replaceable, too. Why don’t I push it off a cliff and then you go and buy yourself another one?”

“Well, now, that’s different. This car’s my baby. She’s been with me a long time. She’s not replaceable.”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s all very funny.”

I walked into the hotel and, after several wrong turns, I found my room. I tried to slam the door shut, but the hard springs prevented me from doing so. Irritably, pushing as hard as I could, I finally shut away the world.

A wild and disoriented face stared back at me in the bathroom mirror. My blond hair was spiky with sweat. Traces of a five-o’clock shadow stained my tightly clenched jaw, giving my otherwise smooth face a haggard, homeless look. Angry crimson veins ringed my eyes. My God! Tears! No wonder the driver had been amused. There was no bigger joke in the world than a man leaking tears over a woman.

I threw myself under the hot shower, letting it boil my skin to a bright pink. I welcomed the pain. It was the only way I could convince myself that I was still alive. It was the only way I could burn away the continuing stench of humiliation that welled up in my throat like vomit.

Presently, I padded out to the porch, a towel around my waist. My room was ground level to the beach. A few more steps took me to the cool Bermuda sand. The sky was encrusted with thousands of glittering stars, the ocean dark and featureless, marked off from the beach by the white, foamy waves that tumbled upon the shore. I was looking out at a little cove, where it was said that pirates used to hide from the law. I thought of walking out for a swim. How could one come to Bermuda and not go for a swim? But I decided against it. It was foolish to swim at night. Hidden undertows were always ready to suck you away. I was crazy mad with anger over what Kerry had done to me. But I was not foolishly mad. Not yet, anyway.

I didn’t believe in dreams, but tonight I wanted desperately to dream about her. I wanted desperately to hold her tightly against me to feel her warmth – or was it to squeeze the life out of her? And finally, I let myself cry again. I could do it safely here, away from prying eyes.