

A Pale Grey Dawn

My mind is mostly a dark night in the woods. The scary part isn't that it's full of wild animals with sharp teeth, it's that I just can't see anything clearly. Ideas, thoughts, and desires, are to me, just a dense black tree line that I can barely distinguish against a less black sky. Romantic love was like the dawn. While Christie might not have been the bright and glowing sun from a cereal commercial, to me at least, she was the pale grey dawn. For the first time in my life I could see a little clearer. I knew what I wanted, and what I wanted was her.

That first night we went to the movies together, and I fell in love completely. She made me laugh the whole night. At the movies she kept commenting on the realism of the film in a deadpan voice that had me in hysterics. After the film we went back to her place in the grove. We drank black coffee, and smoked a thousand cigarettes.

We filled each other in on the details of our lives. Close to dawn, she took me to her bedroom to show me some childhood photos. As I was lying on her bed, flipping through one of her photo albums, she asked about my scar. As I looked up to answer her, our lips met for the first time, as if by accident. We made out for hours. I never did tell her about the scar, but as I entered her for the first time that night, I felt like I had come home.

I've spent most of my life waiting; on the curb, on a bus bench, on the front stoop, just sitting there, just waiting. I felt perpetually locked out. I always had no keys, or the wrong keys. I was always waiting for hours for someone to come along and invite me in. I spent years gazing into peoples living rooms, and imagining how nice it would be to go inside with them. When I did get inside though, it was always through the back door, and in the dark. It was always a secret, and always for just a fleeting moment. And then I would find myself waiting once again.

That night, when I entered Christie for the first time, I felt like I had just walked through the front door and sat down in a comfy little living room. For the first time in my life, I felt like an invited guest. It was the first time I had ever really been with a woman.

That morning she woke up with a start at eleven. "Oh shit," she said, "I'm late for work!" As she was getting dressed, she told me I was welcome to hang out at her place if I wanted. Then she added a little more subdued, "or you can split, it's up to you." She didn't kiss me goodbye, or anything like that. Looking back now, I think she was resigned to never seeing me again.

"Wait," I called as she was hurrying out the door. "Where do you work?"

"Betsy Johnson," she replied, and that's when I remembered...
Hang Tags!

I've always had a thing for older women, and I used to have the hugest crush on Betsy Johnson. There was this one hang tag she used, that was a picture of her looking all haggard and smoking a cigarette. I went into the store a few times, but I couldn't afford any of the clothes, and besides, what would I do with it right? So one day I went into the store, and when I thought nobody was looking, I snatched a hang tag off a coat. Then I browsed around the store for a few minutes and made for the door. As I was leaving this cute pink haired girl called to me loudly, "If you want more hang tags you can just ask for them next time!"

I was so embarrassed. I just kept on walking, but not before I noticed how cute the pink haired girl's coworker was. As Christie walked out the door to work that morning, I finally put two and two together. Christie was the cute coworker, only she had brown hair that day. The pink haired girl was her best friend Isabel. That's correct; the same Isabel whose boyfriend Jasper worked as a bartender at Club Beirut. See how it's all coming together now? Maybe that's why she and Carlos didn't know if I was gay or straight. I mean what kind of straight guy would steal hang tags from Betsy Johnson?

A tiny candlelight flickered in my otherwise dark mind, and then I went back to sleep. When I woke up, it was close to two already. I took a shower, dressed, and then took a look around her place in the daylight. If I had been a bit more discerning then I might have noticed the complete chaos of her apartment. In fact, I did notice the mess, but in an endearing sort of way. If I had had more experience with women, I might have noticed a lot of signs that Christie wasn't exactly a stable person. But up until then, the closest thing I'd had to a girlfriend was Toni.

Toni was about fifteen years older than me, and still lived with her parents. She was pregnant with someone else's baby when I met her, and she wanted to move in with me. How I got out of that one, is a long and complicated story. We only dated for a few weeks before it started looking like a life long commitment, and I ran for cover. Besides Toni, my only other female experience was women from the AA and NA meetings who were old enough to be my mother, and in at least one case old enough to be my grandmother. They mostly just wanted a fuck or three at most, so there was no danger of entrapment there. I was completely naive to the ways of women.

I was also pretty romantic, and still had hopelessly low self-

esteem. The way Christie held my face and stared at me when she came, sparked something deep inside me. Here was a beautiful, smart, and funny girl, who appeared to be in love with me. Well, at least last night she was. Waking up with her head on my chest, and my arms around her, was like the warmest thing that I had ever felt. I wasn't busy looking for warning signs. I was all full speed ahead.

She lived just outside of downtown Coconut Grove so I walked over to a cafe and grabbed some coffee. The somewhat goth waiter was listening to The Cure. I drank coffee, smoked cigarettes, and "dreamed of all the different ways I had to make her glow." Amorous feeling had found a comfortable place in me, and they were making themselves at home. I'd been waiting a lifetime for a girl like Christie.

After my tenth cup of coffee, I took a stroll around the Grove. I walked down Main Highway to Plymouth Church, which was my favorite place to hang out in the area. The Church was built in eighteen ninety-seven and I guess it was beautiful, but I never spent too much time inside the actual church. I would just wonder around the hundred or so acres of flower gardens and shady banyan trees. So I jumped the old stone wall, and wondered around the grounds for an hour or so dreaming of my new life with a girlfriend. By four o'clock, I was dying to see her again.

I stole some flowers from the garden and tied them into a bouquet using an old piece of newspaper and some copper wire I found by the side of the road. When I got to the Betsy Johnson store and walked in the door the same pink haired girl from before was standing behind the register.

"Back for more hang tags," she asked.

"Is Christie here," I replied.

Christie stuck her head out of the back room, and a look of complete shock took over her face. That was before she even saw the flowers. Another sign I missed. She came out, I handed her the flowers, and Isabel said "Aye que lindo."

Christie was speechless for a minute, and then she made some self-effacing joke, like she always did when she was embarrassed or overwhelmed. So my flowers and I were a hit. Even Isabel loved the punk rockness of the electrical cord and the newspaper. A sense of relief flooded over me. My scheming and planning had paid off. I'm sure that Christie saw the same look of shock on my face when I discovered I wasn't getting rejected. I guess she wasn't too good at noticing the signs either.

For the next two weeks we were inseparable. I quit my job, well sort of. For the last six months I had this great job as a fabric librarian in the design district. I loved that job, and I loved my boss, but it was just too far from Coconut Grove; just too far from Christie. I was too afraid to call in sick or anything, so I just stopped showing up.

It turned out that Don, who owned Christie's apartment building, was also Don, my boss. That was pretty embarrassing, but he was a classy guy, and never made a big deal out of it. He knew she was my first real girlfriend, so after a few cautionary words, he let it drop, and said they'd miss me at work.

I also hadn't been back to my room in the halfway house for more than fourteen days. I guess I was afraid that if I left her, I would lose her. Eventually though, common sense took hold, and one day I told her I had to go back to my room at the halfway house to sort my shit out. This led to the bathroom incident.