

THE GREAT AMERICAN SONGBOOK

What's new? How is the world treating you?

For the third morning in a row, Tim found the woman on a stool at the end of the counter, sipping coffee and apparently doing a crossword puzzle. From his table across the way, and since she was wearing the required mask, it was difficult to know if she was Jane or not. A decade ago, when both were members of the band Innocence Abroad, Tim had been in an intense on-again, off-again relationship with her. She had gone to Seattle after their final breakup, he had heard. Was she back in Portland? He was tempted to approach her,, but social distancing was as good an excuse as any to stay put, drinking coffee and staring at her, hoping she might turn his way and give him a better view. She never did. However, such concentration over a crossword was a trait of Jane's Tim remembered well. He would be sitting across the breakfast table from her, watching her, marveling that chins and cheekbones could be so sexy.

On the fourth day, she was not at the counter when he took his coffee to the table. Would the unknown woman ever return, he wondered, or would she forever be a nagging mystery? Thinking she might be Jane, he realized that he had missed her, and not a little bit. He didn't miss their fights; he missed their making up.

Ready to leave, Tim put his empty cup in the busing bin and turned to see the woman coming in the front door. He met her halfway to the counter, and they stood face to face, masked and silent.

“Jane?” he finally asked.

The woman pulled down her mask and said, "Hello, Tim," then pulled it up again.

"Are you back in Portland?"

"Just for a while. I'm taking care of my sister. She had a mastectomy."

Tim realized they were in the way of customer traffic to the front counter.

"I'm so sorry. Can we talk?" he asked. "We can sit at the same table on the patio."

"That would be good. Let me get a refill."

Waiting for her outside, Tim had second thoughts about his offer to talk. What if he discovered he was still attracted to her? After years of feeling unfocused, he had created a life with Kathy that made sense to him after so many rootless years in a rock band, a life that felt stable and sane. He didn't want to jeopardize it. Years ago a band member, who considered Jane neurotic and unstable, had asked Tim what he saw in her. "She has my number," he had replied. Now, waiting for her, Tim hoped this wasn't still true.

Jane sat down and said, "Do you mind if I take off my mask? I've been vaccinated."

"I don't mind but the cafe will."

Tim pointed to a sign at the edge of the patio: Masks Required.

"Oh well."

"Are you a nurse or something?" he asked.

"I worked in the ER at Seattle General."

"Wow. A front line hero."

"My sister's cancer gave me an excuse to take a leave of absence. I don't know if I'll go back."

"I can imagine it's pretty grueling work."

"No, you can't imagine at all. There's no experience like it. It's so spiritually draining. So many dying and so alone when they do die. It's hard to take day after day, almost hour after hour."

“How long have you been doing it?”

“Since the pandemic began.”

“Well, you're still a hero in my book.”

“Thank you.”

There was a silence. Jane had brought a blueberry muffin with her coffee.

“Want half?” she offered.

“No thanks. I was vaccinated last week myself. The governor moved teachers to the front of the line.”

“Get out of here. You're a teacher?”

“Music. At Franklin High.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Have you forgotten? The band was your wife and mistress. What happened?”

“I turned thirty.”

Tim had played keyboard and did backup vocals. Jane was the lead vocalist, already established when Tim joined the band. Their attraction was immediate and within a few months they were sharing an apartment in Portland, though by and large the band was living out of suitcases on the road. From the beginning their relationship was volatile, and it didn't take long for their public shouting matches to become legendary in local rock music circles. The passion of their private reconciliations apparently made the fights worth it.

“Aging didn't stop the Stones,” said Jane.

“I guess I'm not Mick Jagger.”

“A music teacher.”

She shook her head.

“What?”

“Doesn't that strike you as a little ironic, Tim?”

He didn't reply.

“I begged you to quit the band, remember? I suggested maybe you could become a music teacher.”

He remembered but he didn't say so. The band, which had brought them together, in the end drove them apart. Jane had become pregnant, some four years into their relationship, an accident that became an issue when she told him she was keeping the baby. And she quit the band to emphasize the point. She wanted him to quit the band as well.

“You laughed at me,” Jane reminded him. “You said I had delusions of being a normal housewife. I was too neurotic to ever be one. And here we are.”

He thought she was enjoying the irony too much.

Tim said, “The band imploded after Andy and Carl got arrested for drugs. Everyone went their own way after that.”

Jane just smiled at him. He had explained nothing.

Why was he getting angry? And why at the same time did he feel like jumping her bones? Yes, she still had his number, bringing out lust and desire in him like no other woman could. He felt electrically charged, a significant change from the quiet neutrality of his recent experience living with Kathy, a comfortable life on automatic pilot. He felt dangerous, and danger had not been attractive to him for a long time.

But was Jane still attracted to him? Tim couldn't tell.

“Are you married?” he asked.

“Not the marrying kind, I guess. You?”

“Not the marrying kind.”

He didn't add that he'd been living with Kathy for over a year now.

Their conversation moved to less personal, more general things, like the pandemic and the Trump presidency. Then Jane finished her coffee and stood up.

“I don't like leaving my sister alone too long. It's really good seeing you, Tim.”

“You, too. You seem to come here often.”

“She lives close, and I do need my mid-morning break. Are you off for the summer?”

“Which I'd hoped to spend camping. Instead I feel like I'm under house arrest.”

“At least you're safe. And vaccinated.”

“You, too.”

“Until next time,” said Jane.

He thought she might kiss him but she didn't even offer her hand. She just walked away.

I get along without you very well

It was several days before he saw her again, at the cafe's counter doing her crossword. She looked over to his corner table and waved, then returned to the newspaper. And it continued this way through the next week as well, acknowledging seeing one another each morning but no one suggesting they share a table outside. And when Jane waved, she didn't offer a smile with it, which he did.

The situation was driving Tim crazy. He knew he was still attracted to her but did she feel the same way? He couldn't read her. He wondered if she still blamed him for her miscarriage, which had become the final issue between them, the one with no resolution for Jane but to escape, the event that led to her leaving Portland and disappearing. Her sister, mutual friends, no one knew where she had

gone. It was months before Jane reappeared in Seattle, contacting her sister after graduating from an in-house treatment program for alcohol abuse.

After leaving the band, but before her miscarriage, Jane had argued that they could build a wonderful life together full of love and music. They should get married and prepare for raising their child. They should get straight and live more like normal people.

--What kind of life is being on the road all the time? We can't raise our baby out of suitcases and in hotels. We still can make music locally, we can go back to school and get degrees to teach music, we both want music in our lives, but at what cost, Tim? Good lives and lives full of music are not contradictory.

--Our family is the band. I thought you knew this.

--The band didn't get me pregnant.

--We're too young to quit. We've barely begun.

--Begun what? I don't see the band going anywhere.

--You know it takes time to build an audience.

--Tim, you're never going to be a rock star. Face it.

--Thanks for the support.

--I'm just being realistic. We've been doing this five years. For what? A garage album nobody listens to?

--Since when have you become such a cynic?

--I want this child, Tim. I want to raise our child in a normal life. I'm going to get straight so I can do it.

--What does normal life mean? A white picket fence? Give me a break. You'd end up bored and going crazy.

--We don't have to be in the band to have music in our lives. You love the standards. You could sing Frank Sinatra songs at karaoke.

--Jesus, Jane, are you listening to yourself?

The miscarriage came early, almost abnormally so, and Jane wasn't shy about placing blame.

--You've given me no support, Tim. All you gave me is stress and more stress. You made everything a hundred times harder than it should have been.

--I'm not responsible for your miscarriage.

--Like hell you aren't.

And poof, Jane disappeared shortly thereafter. Later her sister brought him up to date about Jane's new life in Seattle. She was sober and going to school. She didn't want Tim to contact her, the sister emphasized. So he didn't, and in time he stopped thinking about her.

He started dating again. He had several relationships that lasted weeks or months before he met Kathy on a blind date. She was different from the artists and singers and dancers he usually dated, a professional woman, some kind of bookkeeper or accountant, he never really understood exactly what she did. Her profession kept her busy and she made good money at it. Above all, she had a positive attitude and was easy to get along with. They enjoyed going to concerts and films and dining out. Kathy dragged him to karaoke, and Tim discovered he enjoyed pretending he was a crooner. Their sex life was satisfactory and somehow less important than in his other relationships. Kathy never drove him crazy.

They eventually moved in together to save rent since most nights they were together at one apartment or the other. If there was little passion in the relationship, there also were no shouting matches and few fights. If he wouldn't call himself happy exactly, he certainly could settle for being content. He found many attractions in a life quieter than the rock scene, a new life that he came to think

of as living on automatic pilot.

Then Jane appeared at the cafe and he felt a rush of memories reminding him of the ecstatic highs of his past. He felt younger and reckless again, a man willing to take chances, to go for it. What if he formed a new band? Or what if he became the vocalist of a jazz ensemble, singing the standards? He knew them all, the influence of his mother. The standards told the truth about life.

Don't blame me

One morning Jane arrived late and came directly to his table.

“Let's sit outside,” she said.

Arriving with coffee and a muffin, she got right to the point.

“I'm returning to Seattle tomorrow. My sister should be fine on her own now.”

“Back to the ER?”

“I'm giving it a try.”

Tim was upset by the news. She was leaving before the many questions he had about her got resolved. He wanted to remain in contact with her. Would she object to this?

Before he broached the subject, Jane said, “I owe you an apology.”

“For what?”

“For blaming you for my miscarriage. I came down pretty hard on you, I know. It's how I felt at the time.”

“I got over it.”

“But I was completely unfair to you. It ends up, I have a rare condition that caused it. I can't spell it or pronounce it but the bottom line is I can get pregnant but I can't nurture a fetus. So it just dies

off. I can never have children.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“That leaves me with finding a man who's a single parent or adopting. No luck with either option so far.”

Tim saw an opening.

“Jane, seeing you again, I realize how much I miss you. I don't deserve forgiveness because I was an immature asshole about the importance of the band. If I'd had my shit together, and we got married to go through this together, maybe we'd have adopted and--”

“Stop it, Tim. Please stop.”

There was a long silence.

“We did the best we could at the time,” she said. “We both were immature. We also were high and out of our minds most of the time.”

“I still feel attracted to you.”

He wanted a mutual response but got none.

He said, “If you don't feel anything--”

“Of course I feel something. I'm human, Tim. I'd better be going.”

She stood up.

“Can we stay in touch?” he asked.

Suddenly she bent down and kissed him, on the lips, a long soft kiss filled with possibilities.

“Let me think about it,” she whispered.

And she walked off into the overcast grayness of the mid-morning.

You go to my head

Later that same afternoon, the sun peeked through the overcast. Tim parked in the driveway of the house he rented with Kathy. He got out and headed for the porch when his cell phone rang. He wasn't wearing his mask.

“Hello?”

“I'm at the Pioneer Motel on Belmont, near the cafe. Room six. I'll wait for you for an hour.”

“Jane?”

“Pioneer Motel, Room Six.”

She hung up.

Tim saw Kathy watching him out the front window. He pretended he was still on the phone.

“Johnny, long time no see! This is incredible.... Yes, I think I can do that. Let me do one thing and I'll be on my way....Sounds good to me. See you soon.”

“Is anything wrong?” Kathy asked as he entered. “You look worried.”

“Not at all. That was my old roommate from college. He wanted to know if I was free for dinner.”

It was the third Wednesday of the month,when Kathy had a women's group meeting, which meant an early dinner at home. The pandemic had broken the large group into subgroups of four so they could keep meeting.

Tim said, “Would you mind if I stand you up tonight? You have your meeting, right?”

“Not at all. Go enjoy yourself.”

Did she have to be so nice about it? It made him feel a little guilty but not enough to stop him, nor to calm the rush of anxiety as he drove closer and closer to the motel where Jane was waiting for

him. He took deep breaths and concentrated on driving safely.

Two hours later Tim lay on his side, staring out across the edge of the mattress. Apparently he had dozed off. He was physically and emotionally drained. Their lovemaking had been driven by mutual intensity, a constant dance of clinging and touching and kissing and fondling until they seemed to be appendages of a single being, in accelerated movement until collapse.

Tim said, "That was incredible. On a scale of one to ten, I'd give it five hundred. I think this is why Cole Porter wrote love songs. You want to immortalize something like this."

And he began singing, "All of me. Why not take all of me? Don't you see, I'm no good without you."

"Take these lips," he continued, rolling over.

And Jane was not beside him. He stopped singing. The bathroom door was open but the light was out.

"Jane?"

He got out of bed, naked.

"Jane?"

He walked to the table, where he found a note: *Tim, I'm so sorry, this will not work. I had to find out. DO NOT contact me. I'm so sorry. Jane.* "Do not" was capitalized and underlined.

No, this was not happening. He had just experienced the most intense, the most connected, lovemaking of his life and she had been there with him, moment by moment, kiss and touch by kiss and touch, and twice in the hour they had reached ecstasy together. What had happened was too rare, too full of shared vulnerability, to end with a glib goodbye note. This was not possible.

He poured himself a drink at the small bar. Then another. She was scared, he decided. That was the only thing that made any sense. Her intensity had matched his own but instead of celebrating it,

instead of regarding it with wonder as an almost cosmic blessing, she had been frightened by it. Maybe she remembered how he had behaved years ago, selfish and unsupportive during her pregnancy, and perhaps she did not trust him and feared being hurt even worse than before. He had to talk to her, he had to assure her that he was with her now, as reliable as a character in a Cole Porter love song.

The trouble was, Tim had no idea how to contact her. Through her sister, if he knew how to contact her, but he didn't even know Jane's sister's last name. But she had an unusual first name, Cheyenne, and he remembered she ran a small flower shop. He got home before Kathy returned from her meeting and began looking at local flower shops on the Internet. He found a small shop in a Portland community called Multnomah Village with an owner named Cheyenne Gaston. They were closed but he phoned anyway. He hesitated at the voice mail message, recognizing Cheyenne's voice, then hung up.

He was at the flower shop first thing in the morning. Jane's sister unlocked the door, and Tim stepped inside.

“You shouldn't be here, Tim.”

“Where is Jane? I need to speak to her.”

“She said you might show up.”

“Where is she?”

“She left for Seattle last night. Under no circumstances was I to give you information to find her. What happened? She was very upset.”

“It's urgent that I speak to her!”

“Please leave.”

“You don't understand, I--”

“I perfectly understand what she told me. Are you leaving or do I have to call the police?”

What is this thing called love?

His misery was made worse by the kindness of Kathy. Bad enough Tim had lost Jane for a second time, but Kathy's concern about his well being made him feel guilty for desiring someone else.

Kathy worried he might have the virus and suggested he get tested.

"I don't have covid," he insisted. "I just feel run down. I'll be fine."

Several times he phoned the flower shop but hung up when Cheyenne answered. He knew there was nothing he could say to bring Jane back.

In a few days he was better, in the sense that he was less obsessed about losing her and was feeling sorry for himself less. In a few weeks, he almost was back to normal.

Normal, in this case, was running on automatic pilot again, preparing for his classes in the fall, letting Kathy's good nature define the household mood, learning again to accept his life as it had become. He was not a rock star. He was not living with the woman who attracted him like no other, however chaotic and unpredictable such a life surely would have become. He was a high school music teacher, trying to live a life without extremes. He was a man who could have become a crooner and was left with singing standards in the shower and at karaoke bars. He was a man with a legacy of failed dreams.

One morning he ran into Kathy's good friend Martha at the cafe. She had come to his usual corner table on her way out.

"Give my best to Kathy," Martha said. "Tell her I'll call her soon."

"Aren't you seeing her tonight?"

It was the third Wednesday of the month.

"No. Why do you say that?"

"Your group meeting isn't tonight?"

"We've been on hiatus since the pandemic."

"You didn't break into small groups to keep meeting?"

"No."

"I must have misunderstood."

But Tim hadn't misunderstood.. Kathy had lied to him.

At their early dinner he asked her, "Do you have a topic for the meeting tonight?"

"We just wing it."

When she left, he was behind her, giving her distance, getting into his car to follow her. He wasn't surprised that she drove to a motel and entered the parking lot. He pulled to the curb and watched her park, get out and go to a motel door. It opened and she entered. Tim couldn't see who was waiting for her.

How in hell was he supposed to make sense out of this? Stable, nice, comforting Kathy was having an affair. Why? She actually didn't seem that interested in sex, at least with him, and if an affair wasn't primarily about sex, then what was it about? Kathy was sneaking away to fuck her brains out once a month. What else was he to believe? But what was wrong with sex with him?

He stayed up to wait for her return. His initial reaction was to confront her but the more he thought about it, the longer he waited for her return, the less attractive this obvious reaction felt. Splitting up was so messy and miserable. They would have to divide belongings, figuring out who would get something they had purchased together. Their friends would have to take sides. It would be a stressful, prolonged mess he did not welcome in the least, especially not at the beginning of a new school term.

But what else could he do but confront her? She was cheating on him! And so he sat in a chair

that faced the door and waited. It did not occur to Tim that he recently had cheated on her as well.

Hours later, Kathy nudged him.

“Hey, you fell asleep. Come to bed.”

Tim opened his eyes. Kathy came into focus.

“What time is it?”

“Late,” she said. “I’m going to bed.”

“How was your meeting?”

“Long and exhausting. Good night.”

“Good night.”

But who had she been with tonight? And how long had her affair been going on? And why did she feel she had to go elsewhere to get whatever it was that he was failing at? And why had he let her walk away before managing to articulate any of this?

He had no answers. He had no life. He was in the kind of emotional turmoil that Cole Porter could have written a song about. Whatever was to be done, it wasn't going to be done tonight. Tim thought of going to bed but feared an encounter if Kathy were still awake. He didn't have the energy for it.

He went to the divan and stretched out. How in hell had his life come to this? It was his last thought before drifting off to sleep.

His first thought in the morning, waking up stiff and sore, was that he still had a decision to make. He went to the kitchen to make coffee.

Kathy came in and said, “Are you mad at me?”

Tim hesitated, then said, “Why should I be mad at you?”

“Sleeping on the divan. That's a first.”

“I just fell asleep. No special meaning to it.”

“Good. I was thinking of making blueberry pancakes. Sound good to you?”

He nodded but she missed it.

“Tim? Blueberry pancakes?”

“Blueberry pancakes are fine.”

He sipped coffee and watched her make breakfast, marveling at how normal she was behaving.

Maybe this situation was not unusual in her world. What did he know?

After breakfast, Kathy went to work. Tim did the dishes. Then he sat at the table and worked on his lesson plans for the upcoming school year.

The phone rang.

“Hello?”

“I made a terrible mistake,” said Jane.

Tim felt a stab in his stomach.

“Tim?”

He hung up.

The phone rang again. He didn't answer.

Jane continued to call him for the next hour, the last call ringing for over ten minutes. Tim didn't answer. Finally the phone stopped ringing.

It rang again late in the afternoon. Tim hesitated but answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi.” It was Kathy. “I have to work late tonight, so have dinner without me.”

He didn't respond.

“Tim?”

“Are you having an affair?”

There was a silence.

Kathy said, “How long have you known?”

“Not long.”

“I don't want to leave you.”

It was Tim's turn to be silent.

“Can we talk about this later?” Kathy asked.

“Tonight?”

“That's fine. I hope we can have an open relationship.”

“I'm not sure how that works,” said Tim.

“I'll be home before nine. Promise.”

“Who is it?”

“You don't know him. It doesn't matter. Tim, I care for you a good deal. I want us to work.”

After their conversation, Tim was confused. He mixed a drink and put on a Sinatra album. The Chairman of the Board sang about the ecstasy of love found and the grief of love lost, about longing and fulfillment, dreams and disappointments. But Sinatra didn't have a song about open relationships.

Tim made his decision in an instant with sudden clarity. He could check into a motel by nine and come back to get the rest of his things later in the week. The important thing was to be gone when Kathy came home.

He turned off Sinatra and headed for the bedroom to pack.

END

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