

Strangers

by Patricia Kinney

It was another night out. Alone. I sat on the faded barstool, staring into my bottle of Busch. I got my final divorce papers in the mail today; I should have been celebrating. Instead, I sat in this dive bar, feeling sorry for myself. I asked myself again *what the hell was I doing here? I'll finish my beer and I'm outta here.*

The music faded and I stood to go. As I tipped my beer to drain it, several things happened at once. The crowd around the jukebox parted, the opening riff of "Careless Whisper" chilled the back of my neck, making the silver chain around it seem colder, and I saw her.

She was sideways, smiling a wistful smile at the couple walking out the door. She waved a hand at them, turning back to the jukebox on the wall. I watched her plug in a few numbers, and walk back to her drink. She had an easy, fluid walk; smooth and loose.

I sat back down, unaware until then how my hands were cramped from clutching the beer bottle so tightly. My calloused palms were wet as I absentmindedly wiped them on the leg of my jeans. *Get a grip man*, I thought. *You're acting like a school kid. Christ, you're over forty!* Yet, I couldn't stop watching her, sitting there across the bar.

Wavy, red hair framed her small face. It was long, hanging loosely over her shoulders, ending where it brushed the swell of her chest. Her arms draped over the bar casually; one hand holding onto her drink, almost for dear life. She wasn't dressed to impress, as far as I could tell. Sure, the t-shirt fit all of the right places, and her jeans cupped her body like a lover's hands, but the cowboy boots threw me off. They were brown, leather, and abused.

I turned her over and over in my mind. Something about her confused me. She wore a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes, shaded as they were by the glow of the lamps behind her. It seemed fixed; it didn't quite belong. She looked around the bar, smiling here, nodding there, and her eyes rested on me for not quite a second. She looked right through me, dismissed me.

She stood up abruptly, as the music died. Muted chatter replaced the hard riffs. She strode over to the jukebox, boots clicking across the floor; a look of purpose on her face. As she reached into the pocket of her tight, tattered jeans, the guy on the stool behind her turned. He handed her a buck and said, "Rock it, honey."

The genuine smile that she favored him with rocked me backwards. Narrow lips parted to reveal

crooked teeth. She took the dollar and fed it to the machine. I stood up, determined to talk to her; to see why I couldn't look away. Walking up to her side, I glimpsed the concentration on her brow as she deliberated about what song she'd pick. Seeing my opening, I said, "You look like you know what you're doing. Could you help me play a song?"

She looked up at me with crying eyes. Oh, she was smiling, but she was crying "help me" inside. I'd recognize that look anywhere; it's the same look I saw in the mirror for the last year or so. That half-dead, "I don't care what happens" look. Those liquid emeralds took me by surprise as they stared into my own dark eyes. For a minute or more, all of the surrounding sounds went away; the music, the clink of bottles and glasses, the idle chit-chat of the die-hard regulars, all went silent as I listened to the story that her eyes told me.

The spell broke as she looked away, nervously fidgeting with her shirt hem. "What do you want to hear?" she asked, a small smile tugging at her lips.

"Anything by Godsmack," I said, smiling my own shy smile in return.

"They're such an awesome band. Sully's book was amazing too!" she said, her eyes lighting up.

"Yeah, they're one of my favorites." *Smooth man, real smooth.* "You like music a lot, don't you?" I asked.

"It's the only thing that makes sense in my life. It's one of the few things that keep me hanging on," she said. Her face took on a bleak expression that made me want to wrap my arms around her. *Relax man*, I told myself. *You need to take a step back.*

I turned around, toward the stool where I'd left my beer. I don't know why I suddenly had felt protective of her. I wasn't looking to get involved. My recent divorce had put a bad taste into my mouth. I was lonely, but I wasn't looking.

I glanced back at her, unable to shake the sense that she needed something from me, and maybe I could give it to her. *Maybe you could take a chance*, I thought. I grew up wanting to protect women. My mom raised me alone; watching her struggle gave me a healthy respect for them. Too bad, my ex-wife was a barracuda; going after what she wanted at all costs, including our marriage. Her expression still looked lost; her eyes downcast as she stood there like she was lost. Fuck, I didn't like to see that look on her face.

I started to go to her, as another man called to her from across the bar. He was grinning a stupid grin while appreciating the view of her. She looked at me, desperation clearly written across her face, before she turned and walked over to him. I watched him wrap an arm around her, leering into her face

while he elbowed his buddy. Once again, she looked over at me. The sadness in her eyes struck that protective streak in me.

I walked over behind her, and said, "Let's get a drink." The finality in my voice kept grin-guy from protesting.

She took my hand as we crossed the bar. I could see her staring at me, gratitude pouring from her eyes. "I'm Tracy," I said. I don't know why I gave her my full name. Normally, I just introduced myself as Trace.

"Sam," she said, a little smile playing across her lips.

We sat down at the bar. She looked up at me, curiously raising an eyebrow. "I've never seen you here before."

"This is my first time. A friend told me it's a good place to meet people. Do you come here a lot?" I asked, even though I knew she did. She looked too comfortable.

"Every night." Her tone was matter-of-fact, but her expression was haunted.

"Why?"

"I don't want to be alone," she said, pain reflecting from the way that she bit her lip and looked at me; a wildness in her eyes at the thought of being by herself. I was surprised by her honesty.

"Why?" I asked again.

"I just don't. But you're here, so I'm not alone. Am I?" she asked, pleading with her eyes.

I didn't know what to say. Her little girl voice tore at my heart. How *could she just attach herself to a complete stranger? What's your story?* I wondered. I could tell she was lonely, but that wasn't the only thing going on. I was lonely too, but I had friends, family; I wasn't depending on the kindness of strangers to ease my hurt. I was saved from answering when a guy stumbled up to her and asked her to dance. She smiled an easy smile, and took his hand.

I watched them, clutching my beer bottle to keep from throwing it across the room. He put his hands on her hips, grinding on her suggestively. She was laughing, making me realize that she took whatever attention came her way; no matter what the intention. It was so sad.

Just go, kept repeating in my head. *She'll find someone else to not be alone with.* I stood up, and a thought crossed my mind. *What kind of life was that for this girl? She was young, she seemed intelligent, she had a knock-out body; she should have been special to someone.*

That could be you, my conscience whispered. With that thought in mind, I strode over to where they danced. I couldn't help playing white knight. No one should live that way.

"I got you a drink," I said, coming up behind her. When she turned, my eyes met hers, and I could see the desperation once again. My inner senses said to walk away, but damned if I could leave her to the mercy of people who were just going to use her. My palms were sweaty again as I waited to see if she wanted me to save her.

She turned away from him and walked toward me. The look he gave me was pure murder. I couldn't resist putting my arm around her waist, just to piss him off further. My smartass action backfired because the touch was electric; I couldn't muffle the groan that escaped from my throat. She smiled at me, in that way that says "I like that." Again, we were the only two people in the thinning crowd.

Resigned to the fact that I was going to play savior, I guided her back to our spot at the bar, my hand resting on her hip. She tucked her body into my side; a half-embrace. She looked up at me, gratitude in her eyes. I wondered again just why the hell she was willing to do this to herself. I sat down on the empty stool, and without really thinking about it, pulled her into my lap. She looked at me, questioning again. I shook my head slightly, not willing to talk at the moment.

She seemed to understand. She picked up her drink, lightly leaning her back into my chest. It was comfortable, easy. It blew my mind how easy that it was.

Multiple layers ran under her surface; that much I was sure of. She could change from lost little girl to provocative woman in an instant. I wondered what she'd be like when we were alone. I was going to take her home; that much was obvious. I'm a nice guy, but I'm not a saint.

How the hell did she get to you so fast? I asked myself. Maybe it was the expression on her face when she talked about being alone, or maybe she was just a mirror for the way that I was feeling. She was lost and lonely. She needed someone to take care of her, at least as far as I could see.

When the bartender called last call, I turned to her. "Let's get out of here."

"OK," she said, that same tiny smile on her lips.

I took her hand, and led her out into the dark night. The parking lot was deserted; all of the action was inside. The early morning air caused us both to shiver. I turned to her, drawing her small body in against mine. I rocked her back and forth in the shine of the one lonely lamp burning above the door. "Do you want to do this?" I asked her, whispering in the silent darkness. She looked up at me, those green eyes shining full of trust.

"Yes," she said.

"We'll go back to my place. I've got beer, food, and we can just talk, unless there's somewhere else

you want to go?”

“I want to be with you,” she said in such a way that made my spine prickle with pride, at the same time, causing warning calls from my brain. *Dangerous territory man.* I pushed the thought aside.

I pointed to my Harley, gleaming black in the moonlight. I started to tell her where to get on, but she straddled it before I could get the words out of my mouth. I could tell that she’d ridden before. I wondered who had let her on a motorcycle without a helmet, since she never even looked around for one. I put mine on her, and it almost swallowed her head.

She looked up at me in surprise as I buckled it under her chin and adjusted the straps for her. I said, “You gotta be safe.” The expression on her face made me want to cry for her. It was a mixture of shock and awe. We had known each other for about three hours, and already her eyes worshipped me.

What happened to you girl? I thought. Hadn’t anyone ever cared what happened to her? I planned to find out. I swung my leg over the seat, wondering briefly if I was doing the right thing. I guessed I’d find out when it was all said and done. In that moment, with her arms clinging to my stomach, her breasts pressed against my back, and her inner thighs wrapped around my waist, I didn’t even care.

The cool wind brushed our faces as we pulled out of the parking lot; her chin rested on my shoulder, her breath warm on my ear as she leaned in close. She started to speak, softly.

“I love the feeling that you get on a bike. That freedom. It’s like it takes you away; away from the problems, the drama, the pain,” her voice almost a whisper with that last word. “I hate to come back down,” she said.

I stiffened a little. It hurt to hear her voice, inflected with such bitterness. I wondered if I ever sounded like that, since she just stated my exact feelings. *How did you know?* I thought. I managed a normal tone when I said, “I know what you mean. Do you want to ride for awhile before we go to my place?”

“Definitely,” she said.

I don’t think I’ve ever driven any motorcycle so slow. We just cruised along; Sam contentedly laying her head on my shoulder. I loved the feel of her, the loose relaxed way she leaned into me, the way she’d brush her lips across my neck as she talked about how she loved the moon, the feel of the wind, and the rush of adrenaline she was getting. It pleased me to know that, if only for this moment, she was happy. I knew she needed that. The thought kept my mind occupied as I headed toward home.

I turned into the driveway, the headlight reflecting off of the trees hanging over the roof of my RV. I’d been camping at my dad’s house for about six months; his way of making up for leaving when I was a

kid I guess. My ex-wife got the house. I didn't care; I liked living in the camper. It was easier than packing a ton of stuff every time I had to go out of town for a job.

I killed the engine, and her body stiffened against mine. I got off and took her hand to lead her up the steps. I wondered what she was thinking as I unlocked the door and held it open for her. I looked around critically; *I really should have cleaned up*, I thought. "Make yourself at home. Do you want a beer? Are you hungry?"

"A beer would be great," she said. I handed one to her, and grabbed one for myself. She stood there looking at me, something on her face that I couldn't read. I shoved some dirty laundry off of the couch, and motioned for her to sit. She perched hesitantly on the edge. I flipped the stereo on; sitting on the arm of the couch. Now that I had her where I wanted her, I did exactly what I had wanted to all night.

"Why do you do this? Don't you know you could get hurt, going home with the wrong person?" She looked at me like I had three heads. "What?" I asked.

She shook her head, laughing a little. "I've never had a guy take me home and talk to me. You caught me off guard." The ice broken, her body relaxed, and she sprawled her legs out over the sofa. *Good, she was at ease now*, I thought.

I raised an eyebrow then, so sure that I was right about her. "Tell me," I said.

She was brutally honest; holding nothing back as she told the story with a haunted look in her eyes. Crappy family, a sexually abusive father, raped by a trusted friend. She ran headlong into an abusive marriage. He beat the shit out of her, daily. She just didn't care anymore. Strangers treated her better than people she trusted. *No one ever cared about her, why should she care either?* That was the way she put it.

"I'm finally divorced," she said, a deep sadness in her voice. I couldn't imagine why.

"Hey, it's ok," I said. "A lot of people get divorced. I just got my final papers today."

"Did you leave your kids to get away?" she asked. The torment in her face wrecked me. "I've screwed up so bad, somewhere along the way." *So she punishes herself for her own mistreatment*, I thought. I finally got it. The reason she got to me all along.

I didn't know what to say to her. I gathered her body up in my arms, cradling her like an infant. She laid her head on my chest. We shared a quiet minute, before she asked in a whisper, "Why do you care?"

"Because no one else does," I told her the truth. She jerked her head upright, shock in her face. "I

watched you tonight, and I just couldn't look away. You hurt my heart. I see a lot of myself in you, and damn it, I hope someone would hold a hand out to me if I was in this bad of shape."

That look of awe was back in her eyes. I realized I wanted to be her hero. It's what had drawn me to Sam all along. Oh, I wanted her badly; the way a man wants a woman, but she needed more than that. She needed someone to stay; the way that love never does. She didn't understand that, but I did. She made me realize exactly what I was missing.

I took her to bed, and laid with her in the dark. She turned to me, pressing her body snugly against mine. It sent a heat through me, straight down to my groin. Looking into her face, I knew that she wanted me to explore those electric sensations that were radiating between us. *I can't do this*, I thought. All those men had used her; hurt her. I couldn't stomach the thought of being just another one of those guys.

I put my arms around her, and lightly kissed her forehead. My skin was tingling as I fought to ignore the craving to kiss her lips until she was breathless. *You could make love to her. Why not? She's willing*, my mind urged. *Because it'll ruin this*, I thought. *It'll prove I'm just another guy, and then I'll lose her. We're good for each other and sex will only complicate things.*

Sam started to speak, and I stopped her with a shhh. "It's late," I said. "Go to sleep. You're safe with me." In minutes, her light breathing told me she was asleep. I spent the night holding her, thinking about all that she had shared with me. *She trusted me*, I thought, and I wanted to keep that.

Some nights, I regretted my decision not to let her become more to me. I think we could have lasted. But when the morning light hits my eyes, I think of the way that she looked at me and I know I made the right choice for her. Isn't that what loving someone means?

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