



HENDRIX AND THE SPARROW

By Lisa Printz Roday

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Hendrix and the Sparrow

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Hours before I met who I thought would be the man of my dreams on a Binghamton, New York public bus, I called my father for relationship advise.

Collect.

In the middle of a workday.

In 1979 that came as close to an emergency consultation as it got.

Getting relationship advice from my father came at a price. I first had to sit through the “he isn’t good enough for you” speech that had, at least until then, been his standard preamble.

In the case of my then current beau, Tennis Player, I had pretty much come to the same conclusion, but craved a much-needed gut-check. Did Dad agree I had good reason to be annoyed?

An open family secret that Dad didn’t rate my tennis playing boyfriend high on his “good enough for you” list, not shockingly he thought I had every right to feel hurt, angry, and disappointed.

Having Dad validate what I already knew, my resolve hardened. It didn't help Tennis Player's cause that I had also checked in with my mother, my unwavering truth teller. She didn't drop on his side of the net, either.

And so, I found myself staring out the mud splattered window on a lovely afternoon about a month before my college graduation; the "shoulder" between winter and summer in upstate New York—spring, a.k.a. "mud season". Under the warming sun, the snow melt that blanketed this part of New York State from October to April gave way to mucky pathways that "twocked" with every footstep. Parking lots filled with enormous puddles as the mounds of months of shoveled snow began to slowly shrink. And The Beatles' Here Comes the Sun blared from windows all over campus.

For most, this hopeful sign that fair weather was upon us was cause for celebration. But despite the bright sun, my mood was foul, wrecked by an ever-growing anger at Tennis Player for leaving me behind while he jetted off to play tennis in a national tournament.

He qualified for the NCAA Championship in Jackson, Mississippi and when he didn't ask me to join him for what was easily the most significant tournament of his career, I felt deeply hurt. He said with a sly wink that my being there would be a "distraction." That's when I got angry.

It embarrasses me now to admit just how shallow our six-year relationship had been. With blinding devotion--the domesticity of living together, the physical intimacy, the collegial way we together swept the ever-snowy exterior staircase to our apartment, having his favorite post-tennis match snack at the ready—I had misinterpreted these manifestations of our life together. They were nothing more than sham indicia of love.

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He'd already been gone about a week and instead of easing, my temper simmered just below a boil.

Between my parent's unified front and my own rising anger, as the sun-drenched landscape of rural Upstate New York filtered through the mud-caked bus window, I decided then and there that I would break up with the Tennis Player when he got back from Jackson.

My thoughts were interrupted by a boyishly handsome stranger. How long had he been looking at me? I would be lying if I said I remembered the pick-up line. It must have been pretty good because instead of getting off near my apartment, I stayed on the bus with him as it continued its northbound route further away from my stop.

By then I had learned some basic facts about Boyishly Handsome that convinced me that he wasn't an axe murderer. I recall fleetingly considering my safety, but we chatted with ease and our banter bore the unmistakable edge of flirting.

By the time we neared his stop, we had established a mutual love for big dogs, baseball (despite differing New York team allegiances), our respective parents and siblings, Chicago—the band, not the city—and a corner of the world where we had grown up close enough to have frequented the same movie theater and fast-food burger and shake place. Oh, and that nobody ever called him Larry.

When the bus slowed and Boyishly Handsome said, "C'mon, I wanna show you my Hendrix collection", I didn't politely demur. I didn't think, "nobody knows where I am." Nope, I got right up, left my sullen self behind, and marched up the aisle right behind him.

At his somewhat bleak looking off-campus house, we climbed the stairs to the second floor. Directly in front of us was a window seat and a large window through which the late afternoon sun shone brightly. I paused to see which way he was heading. But instead of making a right or a left, he stunned me by making a beeline for the window. “C’mon,” he urged as he hopped up onto the window seat and raised the lower sash in one athletic motion, “wait ‘til you see it out here.”

Only a bit tentatively, I followed him out the window onto the gently sloping bit of roof.

Within seconds of sitting down, he disappeared back through the window calling behind him, “Be right back.”

A sparrow looked at me, head cocked, from its perch on the branch of a giant oak practically close enough for me to touch.

I said aloud to the sparrow, “if you see anything scary, go get help,” as if he were the avian version of Lassie.

Within minutes the unmistakable riffs of Jimi Hendrix’s guitar filled the air.

Jimi was growling “Freedom” when this boyishly handsome wonder reappeared balancing two glasses filled with clear liquid that I knew wasn’t water as he maneuvered back onto the roof.

“Here”, he said, handing me one, “don’t you just love this?”, he asked rhetorically, as his now free hand beat rhythmically on his jeans. “It’s Absolut,” he added. I knew he meant the vodka, but he could just as easily have been talking about Hendrix.

He bounded up at the final strains of “freedom.... that’s what I want....” and popped back through the window. Was he always this frenetic, I wondered?

Hendrix faded and the Steve Miller Band filled the silence. In the meantime, under the sparrow’s watchful gaze, I poured 90% of my vodka into the roof gutter at my feet while Boyishly Handsome was in the house.

He reappeared in a flash, smiling, “You’re out”, and gesturing at my empty glass. Back through the window and out again he came with two refilled glasses. The song was nearing an end when I caught a glimpse of a brown speck out of the corner of my eye. I watched as the sparrow, now back on its branch, had hopped the short distance between us to peck at the liquid I had poured into the gutter.

With a seemingly endless reservoir of energy mixed with a healthy dose of glee, Boyishly Handsome changed albums and artists for two hours or more, refilling our glasses from an apparently gigantic bottle of vodka. I drank just enough to be convincing, but not enough to lose control.

I wonder if Boyishly Handsome remembers how hard he smashed his head on what must have been his 20th trip through the open window. The look on his face was priceless. Startled at first, but then he just cracked up laughing. Seeing that he was fine, I started laughing, too. His laugh was a raucous, self-deprecating, “I’m such a clumsy, drunken idiot to be hopping in and out of this second story window like it’s nothing” laugh. It was the kind of laughter that left me breathless and wistful for it the instant it ended.

Clearly at an intersection, our chaste afternoon seemed about to take a sharp right toward steamy. But just then, as he leaned toward me, he exclaimed, “Look at that!” and fixed his gaze toward my feet.

I turned away from him to see the sparrow teeter back and forth on the rim of the gutter. I realized that my tiny protector had likely consumed a greater percentage of 80 proof vodka by body weight than I had. Awkwardly, the sparrow turned, flapped his wings twice and fell out of the sky to the ground.

For a split second, neither of us moved. I had already decided to feign shock rather than give away my part in this tragedy.

I looked back at Boyishly Handsome; his eyes filled, the tears already sliding down his cheeks.

Seeing this unmistakable expression of compassion, something perceptible inside me shifted. Unbidden tears of wonder and surprise blurred my vision and for the first time in my life, my heart could clearly see love.

He took my hand and led me through the window, onto the window seat and down the steep stairs. We walked hand in hand through the house, through the kitchen where he grabbed a roll of paper towel with his free hand and led us out the back door to the yard where the tiny sparrow lay in the grass.

“Shit,” he said, his voice thick with sadness. He dropped my hand then, unfurled a length of paper towel and tenderly rolled the motionless bird into it.

Seconds later, the seemingly unceremonious “burial” in the nearest trash bin made me wonder if the rush of feelings I had felt for him just moments before were misplaced.

But when he turned back toward me as he shut the lid on the bin, his eyes were once again filled with tears. “Shit,” he said again.

I closed my eyes and soon felt his forehead leaning against mine. When I opened them, I saw his soft blue pupils just inches from my own. “Helluva story we’ll have to tell our children, eh, Kid?”, he said softly, anointing me with the moniker he would call me forever after. Hours ago, I would have laughed at his presumption.

But I saw that we had both felt the seismic shift. We took each other’s hands and dove headfirst into the chasm of possibilities. I never felt surer that my grandmother’s oft-repeated advice that when it was right “I’d know it” unfurled at our feet.

Later that month, having kept my promise to myself to ditch the Tennis Player, I graduated and moved my stuff back to my parents’ house. The planned leisurely summer before the start of law school filled day and night with Boyishly Handsome. To say his addition to my carefully planned summer changed things diminishes his impact. He rocked my world.

My mother, smitten from the first “hello”, my brother, guardedly cool (Tennis Player ranked high on his list), and my grandmother—a very tough sell—an instant fan, I waited impatiently for Dad’s verdict the first time I nervously brought Boyishly Handsome home to meet my family.

Pulling me into the kitchen on the pretext that he needed help with drink refills, Dad looked at me with an earnest smile, “He’s a keeper,” Dad declared. The rush of emotions we both felt, interrupted by an eruption of joyous laughter from the next room, only added to my elation.

As it turned out, both my elation and Dad were short lived. And Boyishly Handsome got caught in the crossfire.