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My Tiananmen

IT'S THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF TIANANMEN. And as I watch the news coverage, the images spring loose a sharp memory of where I was, what I was doing, what I was feeling. I was in San Diego, on a business trip, watching Tank Man stare down that row of tanks, shopping bags in hand, nimbly skipping left, then right to block their clumsy progress. An act so mesmerizing, so unaccountable, its ring of strange bravery still sounds all these years later. And back then, as I watched, it kept me, for some minutes, doing what I dreaded, making that phone call home to my wife in Boston.

She was having an affair. It had gone on for months; and though she still continued to deny it, I knew it in my bones. I checked my watch. With the time difference, it would be late evening and she would likely be with her lover, perhaps in our bed at that very moment. And as I stared at the hotel phone, then up at the TV screen, I would rather that line of tanks rolled over me, one by crushing one, than have to make that call.

We had been married barely a year after living together for four, almost five years. I had been characteristically indecisive and ambivalent about the relationship and never really considered marriage. She did her best to be patient and adapt to my moody presence. N. was smart, dazzlingly sexual, with a marathon runner's energy that pulled and held me. But when her patience faded, as it frequently did, she could also fly into a black rage that scared and repelled me. So we moved in and out together, stuck in an emotional cycle that left us both unsatisfied and unfulfilled. We lived in this uneasy, unchanging state for far too long.

And then everything changed. On a vacation in the Caribbean, she found a lump in her breast. She immediately placed a call back to Boston to set up a doctor's appointment. On our return, the news was both good and not so good. A biopsy confirmed our fears of cancer; but it was caught early and her doctor assured us a lumpectomy and radiation was all that was needed. The "all that was needed" turned out to be painful and difficult; but, though shaken, we were relieved when the radiation sessions ended and we could resume something of a normal life. Not "normal", however, in the sense of what went before. Having faced losing her, I was jolted and determined now to put my doubts and uncertainties aside and just love her. Simply love her and all would be well. I was never so sure of anything in my life.

During her treatment, I had promised that once she was through and healed enough to travel, I would take her on a getaway wherever she wanted to go. N. chose Northern California and wine country. We drove the rocky, stunningly beautiful coast; we stayed in small lovely inns; ate at Che Panisse where the food more than lived up to the place's fame and reputation; and of course, we slowly worked our way through the vineyards and the rich, red wines they offered. Our last weekend was spent at the Whale Watch Inn. Old, rustic, perched on a high bluff overlooking the Pacific, it lived up to its name. We watched for hours as the humpbacks made their passage; we ate fresh, simple food and sipped good wine on

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the garden patio. And bonded then with new love, with the great relief we had come through, we decided of course to get married.

It was February, middle of Winter back in cold Boston. A silly time for marriage; but bruised and determined, we decided not to wait for a warm Spring or a briskly beautiful Fall. We put in calls to a few friends, hustled up a marriage license, found a cousin who still managed to pass as a minister to perform the service, and voilà, it was done!

Of course, we were both leery of quickly settling back into our usual routines. But N. was full of energy and spirit, determined to spark a new life for herself and us. She left her well-paid financial consulting job she was thoroughly bored with to explore her deep, old interest in food. She started reviewing newly published cookbooks; she began writing articles for local papers on neighborhood ethnic food markets; and she found a part-time job working in marketing for a famous gourmet food shop in Cambridge.

And me? I was happily swallowing up the role of the buoyant, devoted husband. I felt I had finally grown up and put behind me my boyish sulky ambivalence. I liked being married to this spirited, sparkly woman; I liked the tide of affection and sexiness that came in, washing over us with the great relief of still being together.

This joyful tide lasted but six months before slowly, painfully, drawing back out. The signs at first were small, insignificant. N. had joined a new health club to rebuild after treatment her long-limbed, musclely body. I was all for it. But after some weeks, I noticed her taking special care with her appearance before heading off to the gym: putting on her best, favorite earrings; adjusting her hair for 15 minutes in front of the mirror; choosing, instead of her usual worn work-out gear, tight tops and form-fitting jeans. I told myself this meant nothing more than her regaining a positive sense of her looks after the cancer scare.

But her part-time job at the gourmet market seemed to be extending to an all-hours, evenings-on-call position. "Oh, just some special projects," she said when I asked about the late nights. "It's really exciting!"

And she was excited. And happy. Full of a sexy energy I hadn't seen since the Whale Watch Inn days. She told me the owner had approved her plans for a new "themed" approach, to be marked by a grand "reopening" with new product tastings and wine sampling. That apparently explained the late evenings and behind shut-door phone calls (so she "could really concentrate," she said).

I was uneasy but so wanted to believe her that I shrugged off the budding suspicions; and when the day of the reopening celebration came, I was happy to accompany her. The market glowed with red and gold ethnic food banners and colorful Chinese paper lanterns; customers overflowed onto the sidewalk; everyone was smiling, chatty, piling plates with free food and refilling their small plastic cups at the wine-tasting station. The grand reopening was a grand success and my beautiful wife was flushed and happy. I saw her across the crowded room with her hand on the shoulder of a short, muscular guy with a big brown mustache. I went over and she introduced me to her boss, Mark. We shook and he pressed his powerful grip as he looked uncomfortably around the room. He asked

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how I liked “the show”, nodded when I answered “great, great,” then quickly excused himself. N. said she had to check something and disappeared after him.

The rest of the evening became for me a horror show. I tasted and sampled and waited for my wife to reappear so we could drive home. I pushed through the chatty crowd, looked in every aisle and corner of the market, but she wasn't there. Worried, anxious, I went up to an acquaintance of my wife's I barely knew and asked if she'd seen N. She shook her head and shrugged. “Maybe...” she started to say and then just again shrugged her shoulders. I mumbled something about needing to drive home but not wanting to leave N. without a ride back. “Hey, I'm about to leave,” she said. “I can drop you and she can go when she's ready.” Angry, dejected, I let out a deep breath and was about to say “yeah, sure”, when I realized I had no idea if N. had her car keys.

So I waited as the crowd thinned and watched the drinks and food being put away. Then a door I hadn't noticed at the back of the market suddenly opened and N. reappeared. She saw me and walked over, her face impassive. “Where were you?” I asked. She said she and Mark had been meeting upstairs in his office. “To go over tonight and...you know, make some plans for what's next. It's late, let's go,” she said.

I followed her out and we drove home in silence. Later, in bed, I said this: “Look, I'm glad tonight went well, but what's going on with you and this Mark?”

“What do you mean?” she said in an annoyed, exasperated voice.

“I mean you just disappear for hours, leaving me to wonder where the hell you are and...”

She cut me off. “It wasn't hours and don't be crazy, please! This is important for me, a real break to do what I've always wanted. It was a meeting, business, for God's sake leave it alone!” And with that she turned over and shut her bedside lamp.

As the months went on, we reprised that late-night conversation numerous times. She grew increasingly fed up with and dismissive of my suspicions. She said I was “delusional” and should “just knock it off”. And she was so insistent and convincing, I began to question myself and what could be at the root of this rising and unfounded jealousy.

Of course, I wanted, needed to believe N. I had journeyed in this relationship from indifference and then ambivalence to what I called love, real, undoubted love. I remembered the scene in the hospital recovery room after her breast cancer biopsy. Her doctor led me to her and gestured with outstretched arm to her slumped form upright in a raised bed. “Give her another half-hour or so,” he said. “She's still surfacing from the anesthesia.”

I nodded and looked at N. Her hair was a mess; her facial muscles slack and drooping; small gobs of drool dripped down her chin and onto her chest. “I love her,” I said. The words just escaped like air, like breath, unplanned but essential.

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The young doctor forced an embarrassed smile and said "good, good." He clapped me once on the arm and strode off.

Many months later, as we sat on that patio high above the Pacific and watched the Humpbacks, N. told me her doctor had recreated that recovery room scene for her. "Maybe you want to hold onto this guy," he had told her then.

I picked up the remote and clicked off Tiananmen. There was a client party on the big hotel balcony overlooking the city and my presence was expected. The phone call home would wait.

The night air was dry and cool and if I half-closed my eyes the distant lights seemed to blur and spin in a soothing pulse. I felt a tap on my arm.

"Well, hello there!"

It was a tall, fit-looking blonde I had chatted with on a break in this morning's meeting. "Marie," she said with a smile when she saw I was at a loss for her name. "Join me for a drink?" she asked, gesturing to the outdoor bar.

"Sure," I said.

As I followed her through the mingling crowd, I couldn't help staring at her firm, tight behind. And bits and pieces of that morning's conversation flowed back. She co-owned a big ranch somewhere, Wyoming was it? She'd loved riding, she said, for hours and hours in the low, purple hill country surrounding her home.

"You ride, ever? she asked when we returned to our place at the railing overlooking the lights.

"Me?" I laughed, taking a sip of my scotch.

I'm not much of a drinker and I'd hesitated when the bartender asked "What can I get you folks?" "Two scotches," Marie quickly, confidently said; then, looking at me over her shoulder, "On the rocks?" "Sure," I nodded, "why not."

Marie smiled. "Yeah, you!" She had blue, blue eyes, I noticed, and a gap between her very white lower front teeth.

"Do I ride? Hmm." I took another sip. "Is this a trick question?"

"No," she laughed, pushing my shoulder in a friendly, buddy way, but causing my drink to splash over my shirt.

"Oh, no," she gasped, laughing, and pressed her palm over the wet splotch on my chest. She held it there a beat longer than necessary and I felt the warmth of her hand through the wet cloth. "I'll get you another," she said, and before I could say no, don't bother, she was on her way back to the bar.

"So, ride?" she asked again handing me my new drink.

"Not really. City guy. City born, bred. City everything."

"Well, even city guys can learn new tricks." She clicked my glass in a toast. "To new tricks" she said and downed her drink.

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What followed was one of those slightly boozy, strangers-on-a-plane conversations where a rapid, welcoming intimacy just seemed to warmly happen. She told me of the aching, long-ago loss of a child; of a marriage, not exactly unhappy, but long dulled by work and distance and sameness. And I let my sad heart open enough so she leaned against me and whispered, her cheek against my neck, "Oh, honey, I'm sorry."

There was a long, close stare; and I knew, she knew, we could go off to one of our rooms and spend the night. I wanted her warmth, her touch, the feel of her hard body next to mine. But all I could do was lean my forehead against hers and say, "Hey, I've got to catch an early plane."

"Sure," she said, stepping back. And then with a gap-toothed, awkward smile, "Sleep tight."

I went back to my room. I turned on the TV but Tiananmen was gone, the fate of Tank Man unknown. I clicked it off and picked up the phone.