

Bruce Berger

A Special Kind of Friend

It took only five minutes to drive to her Garden District house, down narrow Coliseum Street, dim from the oppressive shade of the overhanging magnolias, past the ancient eight-foot white brick wall guarding the mausoleums of Lafayette Cemetery No. 1, then right on equally narrow Second Street to find a parking space large enough for his car. Another few minutes were necessary to squeeze the ramshackle pale-yellow Ambassador to the curb.

He hesitated. *Do I want to do this? What do I think I'm doing?* A week before, he'd gone to an oyster and Dixie Beer party in her backyard, invited by his fellow law clerk, Norma, a friend of Leah's. He would never have talked to Leah at all had he not cut himself trying to shuck an oyster. Served him right, fooling around with shellfish. Cold and wet and slimy, inside and outside, and ugly to look at, ugly to contemplate eating, even with Cajun hot sauce or Rockefeller sauce with anise and garlic, ugly but delicious. The shucking didn't look as hard as it turned out to be, and on his third oyster the knife slipped and gouged his finger. More annoyed than pained, he watched his blood drip on the grass. He held his finger up toward Norma, who stood nearby drinking a Hurricane from a large plastic cup, and said something stupid like "Now what?" or "Where do I get first aid?" or "What the fuck?" Norma pulled him over to Leah and instructed her to provide the appropriate medical services of a gracious New Orleans hostess. Leah guided him into the rear of her house while Norma drained the Hurricane.

He'd embarrassed himself. Who doesn't know how to shuck an oyster after living in New Orleans for eight months? The embarrassment faded, though, as he found himself close to Leah for the first time. Pretty in an ethereal way, unusually pretty. It couldn't have been the medium-length, straight, light brown hair. Nothing unusual about that. It couldn't have been her slender girlish form. Nothing unusual about that. But, as she held his cut finger under cold running water – a task he could have managed himself – he smelled the enticing floral fragrance of her hair, maybe gardenia. It was so New Orleans, dark, humid, mysterious. And what struck him even more was her voice, on one level proper, concerned, sympathetic, and yet on another level distant and pained, as if she spoke to him through a cloud, from a distant galaxy. What he sensed – he couldn't have spelled it out – was a vast emptiness yearning to be filled, a deep longing. She'd thrown a party, stocked it with oysters and Hurricanes and beer, opened her backyard to scores of friends and friends of friends, and yet, he guessed, was lonely.

That's what must have made him get her number from Norma and call her two days later. His co-clerk had laughed, knowing he had a girlfriend in DC. She'd asked him if he was sure. He *was* sure. Yet, it took him a few hours to work up the nerve to call.

"This is Martin, Leah. The dumb oyster shucker? You bandaged my finger at your party?"

"You're calling to say you're suing me?"

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He had to laugh. She was either very quick or Norma had warned Leah that he might call. "If I thought you'd go out with me *because* I sued you, I might do that. But I hadn't planned to."

"So you're not planning to ask me out?"

"No. I mean yes. I am."

"Tuesday morning, then. Be here at eight. We'll go for coffee."

It was the same voice, both there and not there, but added to it was a new, almost manic, quality. He hadn't recalled that from their brief encounter at her party, but it came through on the telephone. Then he considered her imperative: he would do what she wanted or else. There would be no negotiations. She was at best an enigma. He wondered if she was unbalanced, not quite bipolar, but tending in that direction.

All the more fascinating.



She pulled him into the house a half-second after he'd rung the bell. Must have seen him pull up, park, and sit in his car contemplating. Must think he was indecisive. She wore dark blue denim jeans and a loose-fitting grey and white Tulane t-shirt.

Inside, he looked around uncertainly in the semi-darkness. She'd drawn the window shades. Two candles burned in glass jars, perched on the end tables surrounding a threadbare sofa that might once have been green.

"Just wait a sec while I look for my sunglasses. What do you think?" She gestured vaguely. "Not much, I know. I just rent the first floor, but at least this has the cachet of the Garden District."

"Much nicer here than my apartment, which stares at Touro Infirmary's backside. What's that scent, anyway? Reminds me of Café du Monde."

"And so it should. It's beignets. Somehow they got that into these candles." She grabbed

a pair of blue-tinted sunglasses from a bookshelf and donned them. "All set. Shall we?"

Smiling, she offered him her hand. As he held it, she leaned in like a bee diving into a flower and brushed her lips against the side of his face. He tried then to encircle her with his arms, but she stepped back quickly.

"We're going for coffee. Remember?"

"I'd be happy for a cup here."

"Out for coffee. Still Perkin on Prytania is my favorite. Let's get going."

She held his hand for most of the six-block walk, as if they'd been friends since kindergarten, and it felt natural to Martin. She led the conversation, commenting on houses they passed, reflecting upon the early heat and humidity, reminiscing about Mardi Gras, and at times remaining silent. Indeed, when he'd tried to ask a question, she shushed him.

"Just listen to the birds for a minute, will you?" She stopped, turned

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halfway around, and looked up. "Hear that?"

He did hear an urgent, repetitive whistling sound and nodded.

"Sounds like a whimbrel," she continued, "heading north. He better hurry or he'll miss mating season."

"Really?"

"They're very rare in New Orleans."



At the coffee shop, they sat on adjoining sides of a square table. The windows of Still Perkin let in tons of light, and Leah continued to wear her shades. Martin and Leah had ordered lattes, and Leah had rebuffed Martin's effort to pay for both. As they sipped, they watched other customers ordering drinks, occupying tables, enjoying breakfast. They seemed to have run out of topics of conversation.

Leah finally broke the uncomfortable silence. "So why did you ask me out, Martin?" There was an unmistakably aggressive tone, even as she continued to smile, even as he kept thinking that she looked great. Her question put him on the defensive. It was as if he'd been accosted by two cops in the French Quarter, cops who'd pushed him against a wall on Bourbon Street to hassle him because of his long hair. It took him a few seconds to regain his composure.

"Why wouldn't I?"

They stared at each other. He could just see her eyebrows over the sunglasses. Martin noticed the slight dissimilarity between the left and right sides of her face. In particular, her left eyebrow was smoothly curved, whereas the right eyebrow seemed almost like an inverted "v," a typesetter's marking for correcting an error, beguiling. And through the blue-tinted class, he saw that her right eye was a tad smaller than her left. He wondered whether she saw him more with one eye than the other.

"Norma said that you had a girlfriend. Out of town, but still a girlfriend. So what's a guy with a girlfriend doing by asking out another girl? You broke up? You're breaking up? You want to break up?"

"Not exactly, no." But what was he doing? He wondered.

Leah put her cup down and placed both hands on the table, as if about to push herself up to a standing position. "You've got to do better than that if you want to come back to my house."

"Annette and I ... when my clerkship started we agreed, during this year apart, we'd see other people." Even as he spoke, he sensed his explanation was as threadbare as Leah's sofa and perhaps as sickly green.

"You're experimenting to see if you truly love each other?"

"I wouldn't put it like that."

"Do you think I'm pretty, then?" Before he could answer, she leaned over and nuzzled his ear. "Do you like that?"

After what couldn't have been more than a second, he moved his head away. He'd felt himself growing excited.

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"Very pretty," he managed. "And, yes, I did like that."

"So why don't you just tell this girl ... Annette? ... that you and she are done? Norma says your plan was that Annette would move back in with you for a month this summer when her school year's over. I don't get any of this."

"It's complicated."

"Drink your latte. It's getting cold."

"But what's the story with you? I mean, beyond that you're a grad student, that you're a lab assistant, that you know all about birds and whatnot. Why aren't you tied up in a relationship?" He regretted the question as soon as he asked it, seeing her demeanor crumble to one of utter despair.

"Was." She paused for a few seconds before continuing. "Ended badly. You have some nerve asking, but now you know enough. Well, let's get on with it. Walk me home." On her way out the door, she tossed her half-drunk latte into the trash. He had to hurry to catch up with her.

Martin tried to hold her hand on the way back, as he'd held it on the way to Still Perkin, but she wasn't having it. Clearly, she was in a funk, refusing to respond to his efforts to start a conversation. She was punishing him for his impertinence. Obviously, she was of the view that it was fine for her to probe his private affairs, but curiosity didn't work the other way around.

He expected to say goodbye when they'd reached her house. He would mumble "see you," get into his car, extricate it from its parking space, and be done with Leah. It had been a crazy idea. He could have found other ways to fill up the empty months before Annette's arrival.

But, she surprised him, grabbing his hand. "C'mon inside. Let's do this right."

She relit the beignet candles, took off her sunglasses, and, without so much as an invitation, he found himself sitting with her on her sofa, kissing her deeply. Her tongue slid into his mouth, meeting his own. He tasted the cinnamon she'd sprinkled into her latte. There was, in her kiss, a longing for something beyond sex. The kiss was its own end. In opening her mouth to his, she was asking for something he did not understand, something he could not deliver, something he didn't possess. As soon as he attempted more intimate contact, she pushed his hand away.

"No. We're only kissing friends." And then she opened to him again and, with the titillating union of their mouths, the sexual tension mounted in both of their bodies, tension that would never find release. He had to stop and catch his breath. He sat back, looking at her, amazed, frightened.

"What are you saying?"

"What I said. We can be kissing friends only."

He'd never contemplated the concept.

"You're kidding. Kissing friends?"

"Like this." She pulled him closer again and showed him. When he once again groped for her breast, still confused, she allowed a few seconds

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of fondling, then pulled his hand away. She detached her mouth from his long enough to say "No, that's more than kissing," then pushed him down on the sofa and continued the game before he could think to extricate himself and leave. He counseled his hand not to touch her any further, anywhere, other than to pull her closer.

The kisses were sweet, caring, and electric. He might be able to continue as a kissing friend for a while. Maybe even for another date or two. Then something would have to give. He would stop seeing her if she continued with that nonsense or she'd give in to nature. What good would it do to leave each other breathless, frustrated, and ready for something that wouldn't happen?

Coming up for air after one particularly intense kiss, during which he felt her shuddering, Martin realized he was very late for work. The judge would worry about him. Before he could escape, Leah said she needed to tell him something important. She promised brevity.

Martin expected her to confess that she still had that boyfriend. That "ended badly" meant "hasn't ended at all."

She moved away from him on the sofa, looking at him for a second – whether with despair, amusement, or both, he wasn't sure. Here it comes. She had the nerve to accuse me of experimenting while my real girlfriend was away, but now she's going to tell me that's all she was doing: a brief investigation of kissing someone other than her true love. He felt more curiosity than dismay. How had she managed to play him? How had he let himself be caught in her web?

"I'm a survivor."

It was the last thing he'd expected.



"Yes? What?"

"Two years ago, my mom was visiting and we were in a car, waiting at a stop light on Poydras. We were rear-ended by a truck that must have been going eighty. Killed my mom right there on the street. Left me shattered. Literally. I was in a hospital for months. That same Touro your apartment faces. It took a long time to learn how to walk again. So, I'm a survivor."

"I'm so sorry, Leah," he said mechanically.

He sat quietly, waiting for more, but she'd said all she was going to say. If he needed to understand better, he would have to figure it out for himself. He would have to call her again, spend more time with her.

They sat looking at each other.

One of the candles went out suddenly, although the air in Leah's apartment hardly moved. The spirits couldn't be suppressed. Minutes ticked away. They heard voices on Second Street, people chatting amiably and laughing. Maybe college kids coming home late from the previous night's party. It was 10 a.m., but this was New Orleans.

It was time to kiss her good morning and go to work.