

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

Mickey Hager

She smiled and he blushed, but hoped that she had not noticed. It was a quick glance. She was walking, as she did everyday, down the sidewalk, to the corner—with the coffee shop on her right, across the street. She would then round the corner, turning left to take the short walk to her building, half a block down. He hadn't wanted to be seen, necessarily, but having been seen, could do nothing but blush.

Could a smile mean that she had noticed him and in noticing him, thought he was strange? Or, had her smile meant simply that she had waited for him to be seen—after all of these days of not seeming to be seen—and she was acknowledging it?

It was a daily routine for him, though it had not intended to be, not initially. At first, he was really unconcerned about her and what she might think of him. He had simply walked one day to the coffee house to nurse his bruised ego. It was a strong Chai Latte that would soothe him and take away his ache.

He had just ended a very dramatic relationship, as most were, and wanted nothing more than a moment of nothing at all. He wanted to be alone, sullen and he wanted to be depressed. It was not a few moments after ordering his drink, sitting at a small table near the window and taking a tentative sip, that she had walked by for the first time. He was startled and nearly spilled his drink into his lap. She noticed none of this from the outside of the shop window, but simply slipped lightly along the walk, turned to her left and headed up the street.

He had, not a moment earlier, thought oddly to himself how what he really needed in his life—what he really could tolerate in a woman—was someone completely different than this last, drastic, torrent of a woman with whom he had recently broken up. What he needed, he told himself, halfway between leaving the counter and halfway between his first sip, was...and then, there she was.

Now it was hardly, or mostly, a month later and he had made this trek, to the coffee shop, to the same counter, to the same seat, by the same window, to watch her pass by. She never failed him. She was consistently regular in her schedule and, in some way, this felt good to him. She was where she was supposed to be.

In all of these daily routines, she had not, not even once, glanced to her right. Not once had she looked to the coffee shop. Not once had she even acknowledged that he was there. That too, seemed okay to him. That she was consistent, even in this absence of awareness of him, amused him.

Today, she changed her routine, but only in the fact that her slight change meant that she had noticed him—at least she had today.

He, as he was Tom Ganto, earned his living as a freelance designer. Though this was not the most glamorous of occupations, it did afford Tom the time that he needed for himself. His work schedule was entirely his own, bendable to his own timeframes. He worked when he needed to work and rested when he needed to rest. In some ways, though, this on-again, off-again occupation had taken its toll on him. It was clear to him now, as it was so emphatically pointed out to him by his most recent, and now disbanded, relationship, he had a hard time staying focused in the present. In truth, Tom found that it was not impossible for him to wander off in his mind to some task that he had yet to complete and in doing so appeared distant and unavailable to everyone around him.

Or so, his last girlfriend had insisted when she called it “quits” and walked away.

But there was always opportunity, as any freelancer would know, it just depended upon where you looked next. In the case of the coffee shop, and now with the newfound recognition that a smile had brought to him, there was opportunity once again.

Not taking a chance on a simple coincidence, Tom made an extra effort to get back to the coffee shop the very next day. This time, though something was different. Something had changed.

She was coming down the walk, as she always had, but Tom was not in his regular spot. He was not inside the coffee shop this afternoon, but instead trying briskly to get across the street and over to the door. He did not make it before she caught his eye and smiled. Tom stopped dead, half up the curb, and this time, having nothing left to blush about, simply said “hi”.

“Hi,” was her reply.

Tom startled himself with his awkwardness, but felt determined not to ruin the moment. He ventured, “How are you?” and paused for a reply.

Without missing a step, and nearly inches from him, she replied, “fine”, and then turned to her left, as she always had, just before reaching him head-on.

Tom turned to follow her, as if some pull of magnetism drew a bead on him. He shook off his surprise and swallowing down his pride, strode up beside her.

“Could I get you a coffee or something else?” Tom asked.

“No. Not today.” She replied.

“I was just about to go inside myself—” Tom started, but was cut short.

“I know. I see that you are a regular.”

“Not so much.” Tom defended. “I just like the break from my day.”

He was walking with her, now, stride for stride as she glided up the walk. Her long legs, he just now noticed, took long, but leisurely draws against the pavement. She seemed to pull herself along the walk with the gait of a giraffe—big strides but smooth in stroke.

“I’m Tom, by the way.” Tom offered, extending his hand, almost formally.

“Hi Tom,” she replied. “I’m Elona,” pulling her hand from her coat pocket and reaching for his.

The moment he touched her palm he felt warm. He noticed that her hand was soft and that her skin had a rosy complexion, though pale and pink. It was petite and delicate and she held her hand out to him, not like she was giving it to him, but as if she were handing him a rare pearl and wanted him to be as careful with it as she was. Her hand suited her perfectly.

“Are you on your way to work?” she asked.

“Ah, no.” Tom breathed softly. “I kinda work for myself. I freelance and dig up design projects as I can.”

“That sounds like a good idea. I wish I had some talent to work for myself.” Elona offered.

“It’s not much, really,” Tom shied.

“So you’re an artist then?” she asked.

“Not really an artist—just a designer, I guess.”

“Oh,” Elona responded, quietly.

“I like art,” Tom quickly added. “I appreciate it at least, I guess.”

“Well, we’re having an opening tonight in our gallery. Do you want to come?”

“In your gallery...?” Tom puzzled.

“Not MY gallery, but the gallery where I work, here,” Elona noted, pointing to a storefront where the two of them now had approached. “We rotate the work every month or so and tonight we are opening a new show.”

You should come.”

“I will,” Tom blurted out. His excitement jumped from him before he could reel it back. He blushed slightly and hoped that his approach was not too forward.

“Great,” Elona nodded and extended her hand one more time. They had now stopped and were standing in front of a large, glass-faced storefront. Inside, Tom could see workmen in coveralls busily rearranging colorful canvases of great size. It took three of them to guide the pieces into place. For a quick moment, Tom vividly imagined a Three Stooges-like stunt, with the three workmen all dropping the canvas in unison and in that instant, the canvas tipped forward and plunged one workman through its frame, ripping it through, like a lion plunging through a hoop of paper at a circus performance.

Tom shook his head. He looked back at Elona for some recognition that his daydream hadn't lasted as long as it seemed to have had to him. She only smiled.

“So you'll come then?”

Tom smiled and took her hand carefully in both of his, holding it still for a moment. “I'll be there,” he said.

“Tom. Tom? TOM!” Griffin poked through finally on the last exclamation and Tom cleared his head and focused his attention on Griffin, one of his closest friends, now sitting across from him at the coffee shop.

“Where'd ya go, man?” Griffin grinned, “I lost you for a sec.”

“Sorry, Grif. I got lost for a minute thinking about this girl I met.” Tom sipped his cooling coffee. “I'm here. What were we talking about?”

“You were talking, man. You haven't stopped talking about this Elenor, or whatever.”

“Elona,” Tom corrected, breathing the name softly, almost to himself, as he spoke it. “Her name was Elona.”

“Yeah, whatever. Something must have happened to put you in this mood. She a Betty? She a Looker?” Griffin coaxed.

“Sure. I guess,” Tom stammered. “She's just, kind a...fine, I guess. She's like a porcelain doll...”

“Riiii-ght.” Griffin smirked.

“No, really. She's hard to describe, but I would say she seems so firm and solid, but when you get up close you realize that she is fragile and delicate.”

"And yet, she blew you off last night?" Griffin offered back.

"What?" Tom gathered himself from his soft lapse and refocused on Griffin.

"You told me, or were telling me, that you went to that gallery last night to see her and she ignored you."

"I wouldn't say she ignored me. I don't know, maybe I read her wrong." Tom explained. "Sometimes you meet people and there's like this attraction, like the world is full of electrons flying all around in directions and when you meet this person, they all seem to align in one direction. It's scary, but I just thought that it wasn't just me that noticed it. I thought that she must have noticed it, too."

"So you meet this chick and you get your electrons stiff in one direction, but she comes off as cold, right. She's just playin' ya. It's no big deal. Walk away or hang out, don't take it seriously." Griffin offered.

"It's more than that, though," Tom started.

"Alright, tell me again what happened," Griffin leaned forward to offer his interest.

"Well, I told you, I went to the gallery just after the opening started."

"You arrived late."

"Yes. There were a lot of people there and I kind of slipped in, between them."

"What was the room like?"

"Well, it was like a big box, but slightly deeper than wide."

"Where was she when you came in?"

"I didn't see her at first, but as I moved to the center of the room, I saw that she was at the opposite end, in the middle of the back wall."

Griffin drew a box on a napkin sitting on the table. "So, you were about here," he plucks down a dot, "and she was back here?" Griffin traced a circular point at one end of his box, centered along the thin line.

"Sure. Something like that, I guess. So what?"

"You come in, right? You move to the middle of the room, right? You see her but she doesn't see you, right?"

"Yes."

"And there are people all around in a crowded room?"

"Yes."

"It's simple math, my friend. She wasn't looking for you. She was working the crowd. You were just another face in the swirl of people. You

on the other hand were most definitely looking for her. It's all in your perception."

Tom shook his head, side to side, and pursed his lips. "Whatever man."

"Did you ever approach her?"

"No."

"And why not?"

"I moved around the room several times, thinking that she might notice me, but she never did, so I bailed. I didn't want to embarrass myself thinking that I wasn't where I was supposed to be."

Griffin nodded in agreement, "Yep. She's playin' you all right. And, she's got you cold."

"How so? I don't get it."

"She wants to be mysterious. She wants you to come to her. Or, maybe there was someone else in the room she was attracted to and your theory about electrons lining up is just your imagination. Either way, you're hooked and you won't stop thinking about it."

Days had passed since his talk with Griffin and Tom busied himself with his projects. One morning, backing out of the coffee shop, guiding the door with his elbow so as not to drop his hot coffee over his sketches, he bumped in to someone.

"Elona! Hey. I didn't see you there," Tom said, startled.

"Hey stranger. Where you been hiding?" Elona offered, gleefully.

"Just working, I guess. Not really much of anything."

"Did you enjoy the opening the other night?" Elona asked.

Tom stuttered and cleared his head for a moment, but even before he could think of something appropriate, his mouth was open and air was escaping it, "uhhhh..." was all he said.

"The opening; the gallery opening the other night? Did you enjoy the work?"

"Sure," Tom offered quickly, "It was good," then a pause, "There were a lot of people."

"Yeah, I know. Surprised me too," Elona offered. "I didn't expect such a big turnout, but really, even so, we didn't sell anything."

"I would guess that people come for the social thing—to hang out and talk."

“That would be about it, plus the free booze.” Elona smiled. “A couple of friends and I are going to a club tonight to see this great band. You should come.”

“Sure, okay,” Tom stammered, unsure of how to respond.

“They’re great—the band—real odd and fun,” Elona coaxed. “Do you know where the Underground is? They’re playing there.”

“Sounds good, what time?”

“I think the band goes on at ten.”

“Okay, sure, I’ll stop by,” Tom offered and then realized the time, “Shit! Sorry. I’ve got to get to an appointment. I’ll catch you later.”

Tom hurried up the street and, now half a block up, turned slightly to see if Elona was still there. She was and she waved softly up to him. He smiled, turned the corner and headed to his appointment.

At the Underground, Tom tentatively moved through the packed patrons. It was hip to elbow tight as he pinched his way forward. He took a position in the middle of the club, hoping to catch a glimpse of Elona and her friends. The club was dark and the room was hot. What was it with this girl and crowded places, he thought to himself?

In a moment, Elona moved easily beside him, as if she were an apparition; a ghostly pale specter who appeared at whim.

“Let’s dance!” she called to him and Tom allowed himself to be led to the edge of the stage and he watched as Elona slowly pumped the rhythm of the music with her swinging hips. He joined her, placing his hands lightly on her thighs, as if he were feeling the music pass through her as she swayed from side to side.

The evening was a blur of music, drink and laughter and Tom forgot all about time, and even his doubts about Elona. She was light and delicate, much like the person he had met on the street that day and much less like the stiff, formal gallery clerk whom he perceived at the opening.

Elona floated easily from one conversation to another; from one rhythm to another. She slipped in and out of a breathy gaiety and just as easily into a sultry grind of music and dance. And then, the night was over.

Tom watched as Elona and her small group of friends gathered their purses and coats and headed for the door. She kissed him lightly on the cheek and offered, “You had fun! Aren’t you glad you came?”

He was, and then, he was home.

The phone rang and Tom shot straight up from bed. It had sounded to him as if his ear were made of metal and that someone was yanking at a cord that had once been attached to the center of his brain. And, as the cord ripped through, it set off an alarm, rattling furiously against the side of his head. Tom stabbed at the phone before it could rip again.

“hh-hello,” he stammered.

“Tom. It’s Griffin. Where you been man?”

“Asleep Griffin. Why?” Tom breathed flatly.

“It’s like you disappeared on me. I haven’t seen you in a couple of days.”

“Crap!” Tom bellowed and leapt up from the bed. “I forgot my client. I have a project that is due—Griffin what day is it?”

“It’s Tuesday,” Griffin replied.

“Shit, I’m dead. Griffin I gotta go. I’ll call you later...or, hey! Meet me for coffee this afternoon at the shop downtown, okay?”

“Sure Tom. I’ll see you there around two.”

“So, what’s the deal?” Griffin asked, practically before Tom could even get in the door of the corner coffee shop.

“What-a ya mean?” Tom asked.

“I haven’t heard from you in, like, two days.”

“I don’t know, man. I just loose track of time.”

“What the hell happened with Elona?” Griffin poked.

“Gee-sus, I don’t know where to begin. I went to the club and met her friends and it was cool. She was great. She was all about me.”

“Okay. Now what?” Griffin said, teasingly.

“I don’t know!” Tom shot back, “I guess I’ll try and see her again.”

“Did you make a date?”

“I don’t think she works that way.”

“What way?”

“The DATE way. You know? She just sort of ‘hangs-out.’”

“With who?”

“With the people she likes, I guess.” Tom offered.

Griffin shook his head from side to side, “Strange.”

“Not really. She’s just casual.”

“Whatever man. A few days ago you were telling me that she didn’t even notice you and now she’s ‘all about you,’” Griffin motioned the last part by stroking his fingers in the air to indicate a quote from Tom.

“Griffin, I can’t explain it. She just is.”

“I hate to say it, dude, but she’s got you caught, whatever it is that she’s doing.”

“Works for me.” Tom said flatly, lifting his coffee to sip it and to end the conversation.

Two days had gone by before Tom saw Elona. Once, again, it was at the coffee shop. Tom was on his way in when he spotted Elona coming down the block. Tom waited as she came closer and nodded a greeting to her. She smiled, said hello, and turned to her left to cross the street.

Tom frowned to himself. Had he made that lousy of an impression that now she didn’t want anything to do with him? He had thought he had opened the door of opportunity, so to speak, with his presence at the club. Apparently he would need to rethink his position.

He went inside the coffee shop and bought himself a very strong brew.

The next day, his cell phone rang and to his surprise, it was Elona. He answered and asked her how she was.

“I’m fine. Thank you very much,” she replied, almost sarcastically.

“What-a you know?” Tom asked casually.

“I know that I can be just as aloof and indifferent as the next person, if that’s what you want, Tom,” she offered.

“To what?” Tom puzzled.

“If you want to act as if you don’t know me when you see me, then fine. I can be just as uninvolved.”

“I don’t know that I understand...” Tom started to defend, but was cut short.

“Look. I don’t know what kind of game you are playing. Maybe you’ve got another girl you don’t want me to know about—or whatever. Just don’t act as if you don’t know who I am when I see you.” Then ‘click’. She had hung up.

Now Tom was truly confused. Was this the most interesting woman he had ever met, or was she the craziest? What was that all about, he wondered? He made a mental note of the time of the call. It was around 11:30. Elona was clearly at her job when she called. Tom had not seen her that morning at the coffee shop, but perhaps she was talking about the incident the day before. He hadn’t thought he had been anything but polite and that it was she who had turned up her chin and left him cold. What had he missed?

He told himself that he would wait to call her back until she had time to cool off. He would see if he could catch up to her at the coffee shop the next day. That was as good a plan as he could come up with at the moment.

The following day, he hurried to the coffee shop, already late. She was not in sight. He went inside and bought his coffee, took his window table and waited a few minutes, hoping that he would see her coming down the sidewalk. She did not. He decided he would buy her a cup of coffee as a peace offering, and take it to the gallery. He paid for the coffee and headed out the door and up the walk.

Inside the gallery, Elona was speaking to a man. Tom presumed he must be a customer, someone wanting to buy a piece of art. Tom waited for Elona to finish, watched as she extended her hand to the man and as the man cupped her hand in the two of his. Elona smiled and nodded as the man left the shop. Tom approached with the coffee and gave her a soft 'hello'.

"Why Tom!" Elona said gleefully. "Where have you been hiding?"

Tom, startled by the professional tone of her voice, and by the non-acknowledgement of the most recent conversation, quickly changed his demeanor, on the fly, in his head. He jumped back to a time when they first met and took an approach of sincerity and politeness, instead of the defensive posture that he had entered with.

"I thought you might like some coffee," Tom held the coffee forward. "I didn't see you come by the shop this morning."

"I had an early appointment, who just left, so I must have beaten you in," Elona smiled in return. "Some of us have schedules to keep."

She had said it with no inference of status or of any intent to rebuke Tom. She said it as if it were a joke between the two of them. Tom attempted to remember the joke, but instead, only looked confused and bewildered.

"Hey, Tom," Elona began, "Meet me for a quick bite after work tonight."

"Sure. Where?" Tom asked, now on unstable footing. Twice now she had taken the first approach and invited Tom to attend, first the club with her friends, and now a bite to eat. He was not getting the opportunity to take a lead in beginnings of this relationship, and based on the call from the day before, it didn't appear that he would.

"Meet me over at the little Thai place, on the other end of the street. You know where?"

"Sure. I know. What time?"

"How about 6:30? I have to get back for a showing tonight, but I have

about an hour that I can take for a break.”

Tom smiled. He appreciated Elona’s straightforward approach, but was beginning to doubt his stability in anything. While he was with Elona, it appeared that time was at a complete standstill. He nodded his agreement and she reached out and touched his arm.

AZZZZZAAAAAP! Was the sound he heard and Elona quickly jerked her fingers back in recoil, as a blue bolt shot from her fingertips.

“Wow!” She said, kissing her fingers, “That’s quite a charge you’ve got there.”

She smiled and laughed a bit. Tom was perplexed. He had felt the jolt of the static discharge just as she had, but it seemed as if it were taking place far off in the distance, somewhere else, not associated with the present. Even so, his arm felt a bit numb.

“Sorry. I didn’t think my shoes would allow that sort of thing,” Tom motioned to his lace-ups with their rubber soles.

“It must be the air. I think there is going to be a storm tonight. The whole room is charged. You can just feel it,” Elona offered.

Tom smiled, now feeling back in the present and said easily, “I’ll see you later, then.”

Then he left the gallery.

Elona was right, the air was charged and he could smell the ozone in the atmosphere. The sky was beginning to cast over in a thick, charcoal-gray, roll of tumbling cloud. It looked as though it would be a turbulent night, one way or the other.

As it happened, Tom was late getting to the Thai restaurant. It was in part due to the storm that was now raging, and in part due to Tom finding himself unable to stay focused on his work. Throughout the afternoon, he found himself shifting out of the project in front of him and into a reworking of the events with Elona. Had it really gone the way he remembered? He was beginning to doubt himself. He played it back in his head and then, just for satisfaction, played it a different direction—even if it wasn’t the actualization of the event itself. He replayed and replayed several different scenarios, only to end up back where he had started, with his own perception of the actual event itself.

Or was it? By this time, he had played out so many different scenarios in his head, he was not so sure that what he had perceived as actuality was anything of the sort. They all began to blur and his probability of clearly

recalling the event became muddled. In any event, the whole thing gave him a headache and by dwelling on it, he was not getting any work done. And, he was late.

The weather had turned tumultuous. The sky was pitch black, thick with a brew of heavy swirling clouds. Although it was not yet actually twilight, the sun was gone, and time was lost entirely. There was an eerie heat in the air, mixed, intermittently, with a cold draft of air. The whole atmosphere gave the impression that some event was about to happen, that some great doom was to unfold.

The rain began as light pelts, but quickly turned into sheets of heavy, thick droplets. As each drop smacked against his umbrella, or against the sidewalk in front of him, Tom could hear a hiss—a release of the heat of the day as it met the cool of the rain.

Tom hurried to push through the people, most of whom were hurrying to push through each other to get out of the weather. Tom lurched into the doorway of the restaurant as Elona was getting up from a booth and preparing to leave. Tom huffed over to her and exhaled his apology.

“I was held up by the weather. I am so sorry,” He offered.

“It’s okay,” Elona shrugged back, picking up her purse and slipping some money onto the table, “Maybe it just isn’t the right time for us.”

“No, no. It is all my fault. Let me at least walk you back,” Tom said.

“That would be fine. I don’t have an umbrella.”

“We can share mine,” said Tom, and they did.

As they walked back down the street to the opposite end of the block, Tom realized that in the light, Elona’s eyes seemed to glow. Each step closer to the gallery left Tom with less and less breath, until, as they were standing directly in front of it, with Tom holding the umbrella in one hand, he had to quickly put his hand on the side of the wet brick building to keep himself from falling over.

He hadn’t eaten anything, he told himself, and this is what was making him feel weak. By contrast, Elona radiated and now, standing there, balls of bright lightning burst across the clouds in great discharge. The air was alive with electricity, but Tom felt sick and small.

Elona leaned over and kissed him softly. The wind whipped with a furious howl and a blast of lightning exploded from the sky. All along the street, the lights of buildings and of streetlights flicked out. Everything was black.

Elona laughed, “Now see what you’ve done.”

Tom looked around anxiously, as if he believed that he had indeed done something.

“Okay. I’ll let you off the hook this time, but call me later,” Elona smiled.

“Sure,” Tom nodded and Elona turned and went into the gallery, leaving Tom out of breath, still holding onto the side of the building for support.

Tom stood motionless and waited for some sign that he should move, but could find no reason to go. Elona was out of sight, deep in the darkness of the gallery building. Everything around him was charged and full of energy but at the same time, there was nothing to focus his attention to. The rain blasted everything in sight with a relentless torrent. Straight down it came, as the clouds squeezed all moisture from the air and furiously plummeted it to the ground.

And as quickly as it had seemed to start, the rain let up. Slowly it backed down from its assault and, just as easily, the lights faded back on, up and down the block. Everything was returning to normal and Tom could think of nothing more to do but to go home. And that is what he did.

“I just can’t get it figured,” Tom started his conversation with Griffin. They were speaking over the phone and Tom wrestled whether to tell Griffin the whole story about Elona up to this point.

“How do you mean?” Griffin asked.

“I don’t know. One moment she’s distant and then, at another time, she seems warm and close. She keeps shifting so much I am constantly off guard. I don’t know which one of her I am going to be talking to.”

“You think maybe she’s a Gemini?” Griffin laughed.

“Don’t be stupid. I’m serious. I don’t know if she isn’t some sort of schizophrenic. But I do know that I just can’t shake her. It’s like she’s got some hold on me.”

“Maybe that is just what she wants—maybe that is just what she wants you to think. She can keep you guessing and keep you interested.”

“Griffin, do I seem to be all here?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I just think that maybe it’s me. I don’t feel like I am all here sometimes. I guess it’s just me, trying to think my way out of this, but really, I don’t know that I’m not the one that is schizophrenic.”

Griffin paused for a long time and if it weren’t for his breathing, Tom could have thought he was talking to himself.

“Griffin?”

“Look Tom, sometimes you aren’t the most attentive person. You do have a tendency to—I don’t know—fade out, I guess. You can be hard to keep on a schedule, Tom.”

“I know that. I just wonder if maybe there is something wrong with me. I am terrible about time and keeping appointments. I just don’t seem to be able to line things up the way everyone else does. I tell you Tom, I keep getting these terrible flashes of *déjà vu*, you know, thinking that I have been through all of this before.”

“That’s old hat, Tom. Everyone gets that. It doesn’t mean *you* are schizophrenic. Tom, your problem is that you are a man on your own time. You can’t get on some one else’s clock, pal, and expect that it is going to fit your own. You are in your own space, my friend and you set the time.”

“Griffin, you aren’t helping.”

Griffin laughed and offered, “Here’s the thing: it is either going to work with this girl or it isn’t. You can’t make it into something that it is not and you can’t work it out in your head that there is something wrong with either you or with her, just to get you off the hook. Your perception of this is not going to be the same as hers. It just isn’t. My advice is that you just play it out and let it run its course.”

“Griffin, if it weren’t for you, I don’t know where I would be, I swear.”

“I am here to be your reality anchor, my friend.”

Early one afternoon, Tom worked at his computer to push a project through. Though Tom was not sure how much time had actually passed since he last saw Elona, he remembered that she had asked him to ‘call her later’. Was ‘later’ meant as later that evening—however long ago that had been. Or, was ‘later’ meant to mean in few days. Tom couldn’t imagine what it was he was intended to do and he was frozen with doubt. All his world slowed around him as he spun back his thoughts to that evening and tried to reconstruct the event. He couldn’t get it to register as anything but a distant glimpse. How long had it been?

Taking a chance, he flipped open the phone book and found the listing for the gallery where she worked. He remembered that Elona had called him, once—how long ago? Days? He checked the number against his cell phone, and the numbers matched. He dialed the phone and waited for it to ring through. Some one picked up line and answered “hello.” It was a

woman, but it didn't sound like the voice of Elona.

"Er, ah, is Elona available?" Tom ventured.

"No. She is off today. May I take a message?" The person on the other end of the phone offered.

"Ah, no. That's okay. I will try later," Tom said and clicked the phone off.

Tom realized that not only did he not have any idea when it was he had last seen Elona, he also didn't have any idea what day it was. Was it Saturday? Was it Sunday? What day would Elona have off?

Tom scraped together his pile of notes for his project and decided to head out to the coffee shop. A quick cup would help him clear his head and maybe, if he was lucky, he might run into Elona again.

She couldn't be upset with him, he thought. She had asked him to call her, but she hadn't given him her number, at least that is what seemed most true in his fading memory. She hadn't made it easy for him to find her. He couldn't just guess how to reach her and he couldn't make her number appear out of thin air. As much as he wanted to find a way to blame himself, this time he was sure he was without fault.

Even so, he knew he would be apologizing to her for his forgetfulness.

As he walked to the coffee shop, Tom imagined the conversation he would be having with Elona when he saw her again:

"How are you?" he would ask.

"Tom, where have you been?" she would question.

"Nowhere, really," he would respond.

"Why haven't you called me?" she would offer, probably very softly, not intending to put him on defense.

"I am sorry. I would liked to have called you but I didn't have your number," he would respond, hoping not to infer her fault.

"Tom, it's been days since I've seen you. Are you alright? I was beginning to be worried about you," she might suggest, with a hint of affection.

"I'm fine, just very very busy these days, my work-load is crazy, sorry," he would return, playing up his self-importance.

"Tom," she would say, *"I'm not sure where this is going, but let's be careful not to take each other for granted, okay?"*

"Elona," he would say, making sure to say her name slowly, *"I could never take you for granted."*

At that moment, he caught a glimpse of Elona, crossing the street one

block up. He watched her move from the opposite sidewalk and step out off the curb. Her head was down and she looked sullen. In a flash, Tom shifted his focus to a car, quickly turning around the top of the block. The car straightened itself through the intersection and then accelerated, straight for Elona. Tom was stunned, but wasted no time to react. He raced the half-block up the street and leapt forward, swinging Elona to one side as the car moved past them both in a fury. Tom was amazed that he had reached her, within seconds of the car, and that the distance between the two of them seemed as if it were only steps away.

Elona was startled and hesitated to respond.

“What was that?” She asked curtly.

“That was a car. It looked as if it was going to hit you...” Tom started.

“WHAT?” Elona puzzled.

“That car. It was going to hit you. You weren’t watching where you were going.”

“Tom. I am not sure what you are trying to do, but I assure you that I am always aware of traffic when I cross this street. I have walked this street many times and have yet to come to any trouble.”

Tom frowned and shook his head. Could she not have noticed the car, he thought to himself? Strange that she wouldn’t want to thank him for his effort. He had risked his life.

“Tom. You are acting very strange and it is scaring me. What’s with the dramatics?”

Tom dropped his head, not knowing what to say. Up to this moment he had worked out his dialogue, but since the car—or at least his belief that the car—was going to end her life, Tom hadn’t a clue now what he was supposed to say to Elona. He cocked his head to one side and said, as simply as he could muster: “I don’t know kid. It’s just me, I guess.” And he turned and walked away.

Elona, startled by his reaction, said quickly, “Tom...” but stopped herself from saying anything further.

Tom walked away, sure to himself that he had done what he was supposed to do, however irrational it might have seemed to Elona. Tom had saved her from that car. He had moved with the speed of light itself and intervened on her behalf, but she did not notice, or at least, did not care. Tom felt empty from head to toe, like some great electric dynamo that was now depleted of charge. His arms ached and his head hurt. His whole body

felt as if it were one large piece of tinfoil. At any moment, someone would walk up to him, he imagined, and punch a finger straight through him. All in all, he told himself, he should have stayed in bed.

Back home, Tom slid behind his desk and sat staring into space. His thoughts meandered over every moment, every breath, every notion that he had experienced what he was sure that he had experienced.

It was insanity, pure and simple. What part of this could he be missing? He knew he was there. He knew he had pulled Elona from sure and sudden death. He knew, but he was confused about the possibility, and that he might actually convince himself, might find a notion, that he was completely wrong.

Wrong.

So sure was he that he had been there and had done what he felt that he had to do, equally he was sure that he might have actually made up the whole thing. He might have imagined it, as a means to impress Elona. He might have created this crisis so completely in his head that he felt the impulse to act.

Tom faded in and out.

The daylight waned and the soft shadow of the leaves from outside his window painted a labyrinth of strokes across his face. Tom sat quietly thinking and time escaped around him.

Tom is at the street again. His thoughts are the same, but something is different. Time is different. Tom sees Elona up the block as she crosses the street. Aware that something is intended to happen, Tom looks up the street, but there is nothing. The block is empty of traffic. Tom crosses over to Elona and smiles. She smiles in return.

"How are you?" he asks.

"Tom, where have you been?" she replies in question.

"Nowhere, really," Tom responds.

"Why haven't you called me?" Elona prods very softly.

"I am sorry. I would liked to have called you but I didn't have your number."

"Tom, it's been days since I've seen you. Are you all right? I was beginning to be worried about you."

"I'm fine, just very very busy these days, my work-load is crazy, sorry."

"Tom, I'm not sure where this is going, but let's be careful not to take each other for granted, okay?"

“Elona,” Tom begins, making sure to say her name slowly, “*I could never take you for granted.*”

Tom takes Elona’s hand and walks her home. Inside her apartment, he kisses her softly, first on the cheek, guiding his way to her lips. She responds in kind, leaning forward to take his kiss, first softly, then with added push to pull him forward.

Elona takes Tom by the hand and leads him to her bedroom. The lights are dim and a breeze through the window, opened barely enough to allow it, adds a chill in the air. Elona undresses, with her back to Tom, first her sweater, over her head and tossed to one side, then her skirt. She moves to sit on the edge of the bed, opposite of Tom, and kicks off her shoes. In a single motion, she lifts the comforter and slides into bed. Tom follows suit and begins to slowly undress.

He feels as if he is in a play—that someone is watching over his shoulder—but he is hesitant to turn and look. If he looks, the magic of the situation might be spoiled by the glimpse of an audience of some sort, or a camera in the corner with a director coaxing “action.”

Tom pulls off his jacket, his shirt and then kicking off his shoes, drops his pants. He crawls forward onto the bed and lifting the blanket, and nestles himself against Elona. Her chin finds a position against his chest and she shivers a moment, then, curls herself around him like a cat against a hearth, feeding off of the warmth of his body. Tom’s mind fades to black as they begin to make love. In his thoughts, Tom feels Elona pulling energy out of him. It is as if he is charging her in some way, that he is refueling her spirit by this act of love. Tom is warm with desire and the desire runs through him and into Elona.

The room fills with a soft glow of warmth and energy.

Some moments later, almost inexplicably, Tom snapped back into his office.

“Crap,” was the first thing he could think to say.

He checked his watch and noticed for the first time that it was light outside. It was early morning. The day had gone away around him and he hadn’t a clue where he had been. In his head, as Grif would say, lost somewhere in his head.

The phone rang and Tom could hear it, but it sounded so far off—so far away. Tom drifted.

“Hey, it’s Griffin. You there man? Pick up,” bleeped the recorder as it

carried the sound to him.

Tom thought to himself: 'Yeah Griffin, I'm here. I just don't know where. I wish I could explain it to you Griffin. I wish I could explain it to myself. All I really know, for now, is that this is all about energy. We are all about energy. We just don't see it. We feel it in so many ways. Like the energy at a rock concert or the energy at a football game—or any energy from any big, spectacular event—it IS energy in the real sense. It is the energy that lifts up and pushes off and pushes back. It is the energy that people feed off of.

'You know the energy, Griffin. You've had those relationships where you feel you are being dragged down. You know when you feel that you're with someone and they are pulling the life out of you and they probably ARE, Griffin, but it is because they need your energy to lift themselves up. You need the energy too, Griffin. You need the energy to lift yourself up, and just like me, you will find someone that lifts you. Maybe all the energy in the world is finite and we have to share it among ourselves. Maybe there just isn't enough to go around for everyone? You have to give up some in order to get some back. You have to push off and then, once in motion, you are diverted by someone else pushing off of you.

'Griffin, all I know is that, somehow, I am Elona's energy. I don't know why and I don't know how, but for whatever reason, I come back only when she pulls me back—maybe only when she needs my energy...or when I need hers. And where am I when she doesn't need it? I don't know, really. I am here and not here. I am living but unobserved. I am neutral in this field of energy, at some constant point of rest, unnecessary to everything else.

'But she will pull me back because she needs my energy. I am certain of that. And, when she does, Griffin. I'll try and explain this all to you then.

'Then, Griffin, I will see you then.'