

Just An Ordinary Guy
Curt Eriksen

Everything you can imagine is real.

Pablo Picasso

Randy and Silvia met on a Saturday night in November at the Viva Madrid, a bar near the Plaza de Santa Ana. That's where a lot of people their age hung out, the hip Spanish and international twenty or thirty-somethings. Randy had only been living in Madrid for a few months and Silvia had come up from Málaga in October to finish her master's degree in journalism at the Complutense, but they had both been directed to the bar on strong recommendations.

Randy wasn't much of a *ligón*, a word he had only discovered a week ago when his clumsy, yet earnest, attempts to pick up a girl with hennaed hair that was practically orange had failed. But when he noticed the way Silvia kept looking at the large framed print of a pair of Parisian flappers hanging above his head, he decided to reposition himself closer to her.

After he had jostled through the crowd to the bar and bought another *caña*—hesitating when he turned around with the long tubular glass held high so that no one would knock into his elbow and spill the beer; then frowning in feigned and exaggerated disappointment to see that he had lost his spot against the wall, as even more pretty people wedged through the door and gathered beneath the monochromed print of the pair of dykes—Randy sidled up to Silvia and looked her directly in the eye.

“Hola,” he said.

“Hola.”

On closer inspection her eyes were more green than grey, and that surprised him. But he wasn't very confident with the paltry Spanish that he had picked up, so he couldn't inquire about the exact color. Instead he said, in English, “That's about as much as I know.”

“I don't believe you,” she replied, quite emphatically, with a slight and unplaceable accent that suited the short black and apparently unfussed hair—she could have been from just about anywhere in the world, perhaps an art student, and she might have gone either way.

“Well, I'm learning,” he admitted.

“So am I.”

After that neither of them could think of anything to say, so they sipped their beers and looked around the room as if they had lost interest in one another, while they moved their hips self-consciously to the electrified bongo beat of the Talking Heads.

Watch out! You might get what you're after!

Then, when Randy saw a couple preparing to abandon a table at the top of the stairs, he shouted loud enough to make himself heard above the music and suggested that they hurry up there and sit down. They just managed to work their way through the posers who thronged the staircase and get to the table on time, pulling out the chairs a moment before another couple arrived, and the sudden thrill of competing for these seats created a bond between them that enhanced their intimacy.

So they sat close at the little table and told each other all about themselves, until the crowd had dispersed and the music was turned off and the Argentinean bartender who co-owned the place started overturning the empty chairs and stacking them on the white marble tabletops. By the time the Argentinean could get them down the stairs and out the door his colleague had already lowered the heavy metal grating. Randy and Silvia had to duck under the grating as they stepped into the deserted alley, where the noise of the evening they had spent in the Viva Madrid still rang in their ears.

At the corner of the Calle de Echegaray there was another bar that was open, and the neon lights inside that glamorless dive were reflected in the wet flagstones that had already been hosed down by the graveyard shift of street cleaners.

Randy and Silvia wandered towards the corner with no intention of going into that bar. It just wasn't the sort of place where a chic young couple like themselves would find much of an ambience they could blend into. Those places always stank of refried olive oil and the television placed high in a corner was always turned on. Even when they were empty, bars like this one were claustrophobic with the disembodied voices of the handful of Spanish actors who dubbed all of the American films ricocheting off the greasy tiles that covered the walls.

Rather, each of them was waiting for the other to propose that they carry on in one of the innumerable trendy discotheques in the city that closed sometime after dawn, say the Villa Rosa or Sol, someplace where they might have the chance to accidentally touch each other in the tremulous and velvety dark. But they were both tired as well, and wished too that they didn't live with so many other people. It would have been nice to

curl up in bed and continue with the process of getting to know each other in the privacy of a room they didn't share.

Instead they simply exchanged telephone numbers and Randy hailed a taxi and kissed Silvia on each cheek, deliriously aware of the soft brush of her skin and the trace of a perfume that had survived the four or five hours she'd spent in an overcrowded bar clouded with cigarette smoke. Randy hadn't shaved that morning but Silvia didn't mind the light scratching of his beard, since the shadow on his chin and jaws made him look older and more mature than he was.

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During that next week each of them debated whether or not to call the other. Randy was from San Francisco and he was a little confused about his masculinity, not sure what it required of him sometimes. As a consequence of nothing other than sheer inertia his father became a stockbroker after his mother sold the cannery business that her own father had run until a heart attack forced him off the road and into a ditch on his way to work in the Santa Clara Valley one morning. But when they were even younger, both of Randy's parents had indulged in all the promiscuity and other forms of license that the Summer of Love offered to upper middle-class kids in California: producing Randy as a result.

Since Randy's mother nearly died giving birth to him in what passed for a maternity ward on the communal farm where they were living, she was afraid to try again and he grew up as an only child. After Randy was born in March of 1968 his parents decided to stay on the farm, in order to provide their son with 'siblings' and a social

environment that was conducive to the sort of progressive education they envisioned for him. And while they were still living on that farm—which exported oranges and grapes by the ton to the rest of the country—Randy had an experience that marked his attitude towards women for the rest of his life.

He was almost nine at the time and, rather than having to pay a nickel or a dime to get a glance at a fleeceless pudendum, he was offered the same amount to show his stuff. But when a small group of ten and eleven-year-old ‘sisters’ bullied him into dropping his pants, adding a consolation prize of well over two dollars in order to get him to undo his fly, and Randy finally built up enough courage to overcome his shame and go through with it, they all burst out laughing.

“Ooooh,” squawked one of them, the strawberry blonde princess he had always most wanted to please. “It looks like a squiggly little worm.”

Randy spent years after that trying to rid his psyche of the damage to his sense of what it meant to be a man. At home it was his mother who wore the pants. A teenaged friend of Randy’s whom she had managed to seduce often referred to her as “an iceberg.” Randy’s dad didn’t seem to have enough testosterone to be much good at anything other than mixing cocktails. When his mom sold the cannery to Del Monte she gave her husband (they had finally married, in order to take advantage of the tax benefits) half of everything she received for the business. And Randy’s father set himself up as an advisor in green investments long before most people knew what he was talking about. Fortunately for him there wasn’t much he could invest in at the time, and his share of the capital went wholly into municipal bonds. If he wouldn’t have been so unassertive he

would have lost his shirt with everyone else on Black Monday, but instead he didn't react at all and the bonds eventually came due. As a result he was doing just fine now.

But Randy's father had taught him next to nothing about what it means to be a man, and so Randy thought it might be best to wait for Silvia to make the next move.

Silvia's father was a part-time garbage collector working for the *ayuntamiento* in Málaga, a man with an archeologist's eye for the telltale fragment. Behind their apartment block on the outskirts of the city, within walking distance of the Mediterranean, he had built a sheet metal shed and it was in there that he spent most of his afternoons, organizing the clues of other people's lives and pounding and soldering them into abstract shapes. Over time, and without any effort or desire on his part, Sylvia's father became something of a local celebrity. Those neighbors who liked to exaggerate referred to him as Picasso, another native son. When *El País* ran a three-page spread on him and Silvia saw his face on the cover of the Sunday magazine, she decided on journalism as a career. Her father's example taught her that anything was possible, and she too wanted her name to become known.

Silvia had learned everything she knew about boys and girls on the beach near her apartment and without her mother around to impose on her the archaic Catholic notions of what was right and wrong, Silvia developed her own curious criteria. Even so, she had often found that, whenever she was really interested in someone, her mother's values and sense of decorum flowered within her breast and she abandoned her bold inclinations and became docile, if only out of fear of making a fool out of herself. So she didn't call Randy either.

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It was therefore with an equal degree of anxiety that each of them walked to the Viva Madrid the next Friday night.

Silvia was a tall willowy girl with long legs and, feeling tipsy that first night, she had confessed to Randy that she liked to feel her pants fit so snugly against her hips and thighs that they were almost another skin. It was one of the things she blurted out, and Randy harbored the suggestion in his mind and played the image over and over again all week: how he would peel those pants off, and what he would do with Silvia if he could. So that's what Randy was looking for: a pair of long, thin, and tightly sheathed legs.

Other than that—and despite his having thought of little else but Silvia all week—Randy could only clearly remember the color of her hair and eyes. Silvia had told him that her mother was born in Hungary, near the Austrian border, and that she had escaped to the West with her parents during the 1956 Revolution. Silvia's maternal grandfather was a former member of the Arrow Cross Party and though he had managed to cover his tracks after the war, he thought it wise to slip away during the confusion of the first heady days of the revolution. He had a brother who was a priest and with whom he hadn't spoken in years, but Sylvia's great-uncle came through after all with the contacts that enabled her mother's family to seek refuge in Franco's Spain.

Randy was thinking of his own mother, who had once again mentioned the possibility of leaving his father in the last letter Randy had received from her, when a girl in a red leather miniskirt, with shoulder-length platinum blonde hair cupping a face as hard and round as a lollipop, stood right in front of him.

“Hi,” she said. “Remember me?”

Over the girl’s shoulder Randy saw Silvia enter the alley that led to the bar.

Silvia was about twenty feet away and hadn’t seen him yet.

Randy turned around and started walking in the opposite direction.

“Wait!” shouted the girl in the red miniskirt.

Randy strode purposefully away and wondered why it had to be like this. When he got around the corner of the Calle del Principe he glanced back once and saw the girl, stumbling after him, the stiletto heels of her red shoes catching in the deep grooves between the flagstones.

Momentarily mesmerized once again by the focus of so much unfulfilled yearning, Randy watched the girl trip and fall in what appeared to be a theatrical swoon. Then he fled, slipping into the first anonymous bar he came to and walking straight to the toilet at the far end of the narrow room, past the row of short balding men standing at the long counter smoking cigarettes with one hand while holding brandy snifters in the other.

Randy shut the door to the toilet behind him and fumbled with his zipper. He didn’t need to piss, but he needed to think. How could she have possibly found him again? Was it just bad luck? Or miserable fucking karma?

Someone banged with their fist on the door and Randy hurriedly zipped up his pants. When he opened the door a man who was almost as wide as Randy was tall said in a smoke-scarred voice, “What took you so long?”

Randy could smell the liquor that rolled off the man in nauseous waves. A patchy salt-and-pepper beard covered his pockmarked face and he was breathing audibly through

his mouth, where the smoldering butt of a cigar was clenched between two yellow molars.

“Get out of the way,” he slurred.

Randy had an unnatural fear of drunks, since alcohol had practically emasculated his father.

“Sorry,” he said, as he squeezed past the man, whose belly was firm and round as a medicine ball.

Randy’s hands were still shaking when he stood at the counter, unsure of what to do next. Absentmindedly he pulled one paper napkin after another out of the metallic dispenser and tried to wipe the germs from the doorknob of the toilet off his fingers.

“You better be buying,” said the bartender, who was as comically thin and wry as the other man was gross and belligerent. He stood defiantly on the other side of the counter with a dirty rag slung over one of his drooping shoulders, sporting a once-white uniform and a greasy black bowtie.

“A glass of water, please,” said Randy, in English.

The man leaned across the counter and narrowed his eyes.

“Who do you think you are?” he asked, in Spanish.

Randy pulled his wallet out and said, “Una botella de agua. Por favor.”

“That’ll cost you,” said the man, delicately picking up the bill that Randy had laid on the counter.

From where Randy stood, waiting for the bottle of mineral water, he could see the girl in the red miniskirt through the glass door at the entrance to the bar. She was

standing with one foot on the sidewalk and the other in the road, searching up and down the pair of streets that intersected at that corner, her purse in one hand and her shoes in the other. Randy looked around the bar, but there was no other exit.

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A month after Randy had arrived in Madrid he was drifting about the Plaza de España one evening, envying the couples he saw lying in the grass and under the bushes, blissfully unaware of—or at least not bothered in the least by—the other pedestrians strolling around the monument to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Randy had run away from San Francisco, where he worked in a bookstore and lived in a basement after dropping out of Stanford, when a girl from Berkley who had come in one morning to pick up Foucault's *Madness & Civilization* told him she was pregnant. Randy had only had sex with her once, and though it was true that the expired condoms she stashed in a drawer beside her bed kept tearing, he was certain that the girl was lying. Before she had dragged him into her bedroom, and while they were still pawing on the couch and drinking directly from the bottle of vintage Cask 23 that Randy had five-fingered from his father's cellar, he made the mistake of telling her who he was and, when she still didn't get it, implying something of the fortune he was heir to on either side of his family.

After that he vowed never to use this tactic again, and in Madrid he meant to reinvent himself as the son of just about anyone but a pair of fruit-canning barons. But he had been given a calling card by a young Spaniard he met in a neighborhood bar one night, shortly after he found a place to stay, the only person Randy had spoken to in

English for weeks. And that young man told Randy about the girls who worked on the 11th floor of the Torre de España, “Some of the finest in the world.”

Since money was no object, and despite his resolution not to rely on the privileges of his birth—Randy had already relinquished his right to privacy by joining an association of squatters who refused to pay the landlords of the buildings they occupied on the basis of anarchist principles—he decided to go up there. The precise instructions were written on the back of the Spaniard’s calling card. So Randy left the Plaza de España and walked up the Calle de la Princesa until he had gone around the building. There was a back entrance to the Torre de España, near the Vips and other restaurants that surrounded a large courtyard, and the man had explained to Randy that he had to go in that way.

There was no porter and nothing to indicate that the building housed a prostitution network. Instead it was built and decorated like an upscale hotel, with silent elevators and long, wide, carpeted hallways leading to evenly spaced offices that discreetly announced whatever business it was that they were engaged in with small brass plaques located just below the peephole.

Randy was looking for a place called Zodiac, S.A. when he saw the girl walking towards him in the same red leather miniskirt. At the time she took his breath away. It wasn’t just the sharp scissoring movement of her long legs and the narrow waist swelling into obvious and absurdly perfect breasts that overwhelmed him: but the anticipation and thrill of trespassing on hallowed ground.

For one thing his father and mother had always insisted upon was that love, by which they meant sex, should be ‘free.’ Of course what each of them meant by ‘free’ varied according to the circumstances: Randy’s father basically meant that the busty secretaries he hired and fired with a staggering regularity should be free to come and go subject to his capacity to maintain or lose his interest in them; whereas Randy’s mother meant that any man she happened to fix her fancy on, regardless of whether he was legally of age or not, should freely consent to having sex with her.

Still, Randy felt that, were he to pay for sex, he would violate some monstrous family taboo and in this way finally *free himself* from the curse of having been born to a pair of incorrigible and hopelessly nostalgic adolescents who slept in the same bed out of no desire to be near each other, but rather a sense of obligation to the myth of their earth-shaking and revolutionary love.

What Randy didn’t know at the time was that the girl in the red leather miniskirt walking towards him down the hall of the 11th floor of the Torre de España was a Californian like himself, a wannabe Valley Girl who had come to Madrid with the prospect of teaching English as a second language but was soon seduced instead by a pimp wearing a fake Rolex who offered her the cocaine fantasy of making enough money to pay cash for a beach house in Malibu.

As they neared each other their eyes locked, and once they had passed each other in the hall they both turned their heads simultaneously and looked back. That glance—which contained some seed of the recognition that later became apparent when they finally told each other where they were from—was too much for Randy, and he wheeled

around and followed the girl. But by the time he got to the elevator the doors had already closed between them. Randy stood there and watched the numbers count down from eleven to seven before he bolted for the emergency exit and started racing down the stairs. When he got to the courtyard again he saw the girl bending to enter a taxi and he ran towards her, scattering the pigeons at his feet. But by the time he got to the car she was already comfortably seated in the back, one long leg folded over the other, and there was only time enough for her to wink at him before the taxi pulled into the traffic and disappeared.

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Now she was standing outside the door to the bar where Randy leaned at the counter sipping from a bottle of mineral water, while the other patrons stared at the television set high in one corner of the room and cursed—*¡Me cago en Dios!*—every time the Real Madrid players lost control of the ball.

Randy had become obsessed with the girl in the red leather miniskirt and he started hanging out around the Torre de España in the hopes of doing unspeakable things to her. He carefully followed the instructions on the calling card and finally found Zodiac, S.A., but none of the girls that were presented in the lineup were the one he was looking for. He tried to make himself understood, saying “rojo, rojo” and using his hands to suggest both the girl’s height and the length of her miniskirt. But that only produced a prostitute who had been taking a nap, a huge beefy woman with bags under her eyes who weighed at least two hundred pounds.

It was about a month later, in the middle of September, while Randy was wandering around in the Casa del Campo one evening, that he saw the girl in the red leather miniskirt again. He had a few private classes by then and was earning some money and he had expanded his vocabulary a little, but Randy was so lonely and depressed and starved for sex that he constantly considered going back to San Francisco, an idea his mother enthusiastically supported. And then he saw her, as dusk fell, standing with a bunch of other scantily clad women of all colors, shapes and sizes at the curb of one of the roads that wound through the dusty park.

Randy watched for a while, as the single-occupant cars cruised by. The shadows of the pine trees were dissolving and the widely spaced lampposts were flickering to life, but most of the drivers didn't bother to turn on their headlights. Every now and then a car would stop and the girl standing nearest to it would saunter over to the driver's side with an exaggerated swing in her hips. She would lean into the car and display her cleavage while she and the man negotiated and then, depending on whether or not they reached an agreement, the girl would either get in the car and ride away with him or turn her back on the man and pretend that he no longer existed.

Being the scion of men and women who had bartered like this for decades if not centuries, a certain instinct for commerce coursed through Randy's veins. But he also revolted against this presumed slavery of the soul, and when a car pulled up next to the girl in the red leather miniskirt he ran across the road and started waving his hands and screaming, "Leave her alone!"

The tires squealed and the air was suddenly filled with the smell of burnt rubber as the herd of whores scrambled in different directions. Randy chased the girl in the red leather miniskirt up the road and he was just about to overtake her when she pulled something out of her purse and spun around and sprayed mace into his eyes. Randy folded instantly onto his knees and started blubbering, “I can’t see! I can’t see!”

When the girl heard him speak English she said, still panting for breath, “You’re not a cop?”

Slowly the other women filtered back from the cover of the woods and they gathered around Randy, who was slumped in the road holding his face in his hands and sobbing, “I’m blind. I’m blind.”

The women argued vehemently, and in a variety of accents and languages, about whether or not they should beat the hell out of Randy and teach him a lesson, or leave it to the pimp’s goons who would be around soon enough to check on the cash flow.

But the Californian girl decided to take pity on a fellow compatriot. She didn’t recognize Randy from her days and nights at the Torre de España—where the faces of all leering men, young and old, passable or disgusting, had long ago blurred into a single unremarkable and resolutely anonymous stamp on her coke-addled mind. But she considered the clothes Randy was wearing and thought she could smell money.

“I’ll take care of this one,” she said, in Spanish. And to him, in English, “Get up! You better be gone quick. Before you get into some real trouble.”

She took Randy back to her apartment, but she wouldn’t have him. Sexually, she wasn’t interested in the least.

“I’m sick of it. You guys think a girl can fuck forever. But I assure you, it’s no fun being a hole in a used doormat.”

“They why don’t you quit?” he challenged her, once they got to know each other a little better.

“I will,” she said. “When I’ve done what I have to do.”

Randy was desperate to know what that was, and he tried to pry the secret out of her, but she only ever barely insinuated the dream of the house on the beach in Malibu. In this and in every other way she encouraged Randy’s devotion to the mysterious cult of her person. And in his naïveté Randy thought that he might be able to convince this California girl to change her mind about him. He had always been such a likeable guy, despite that mishap when he was nine. And since she saw through him she played along enough to draw him out, letting Randy run his trembling hands over her body occasionally, while strictly forbidding the slightest penetration and making sure he paid for the privilege of having fondled her ass and boobs.

Randy knew it was an unusual, not to mention frustrating, situation. But he was as addicted to the possibility of getting between Clara’s legs—that’s what everyone called her, and she refused to tell him her real name—as she was to the powder she snorted. He figured this much out: that they each had a terrible need, and he asked his co-squatters where he could find a discreet and trustworthy *camello*. It wasn’t long before his innate sense of the value of quality you can rely on led him up the distribution ladder, and he started bringing her gifts of uncut ten gram rocks.

She might, very rarely, thank Randy for this by allowing him to briefly stick his tongue in her mouth, but that was the absolute limit. And since she never let him sleep over he inevitably went home and waited until his roommates had gone to sleep or passed out before he took care of the ache himself.

Finally there came a point when Randy looked in the mirror one morning and noticed a dramatic change. His eyes had always been clear and very blue and his innocence had lent them a startled expression, while his much pampered conscience had left his brow clean and smooth. But that morning he noticed how cloudy and full of bile his eyes had become, and that a single vertical crease had formed between his sandy eyebrows.

Randy traced this wrinkle with a fingertip while one of the squatters pounded on the bathroom door and shouted, “¡Es urgente! ¡Me estoy cagando!” And something the Berkley girl said to him the night they shared the prize-winning bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon bubbled up in Randy’s mind: “Obsessions are vertical dimensions of thought. They’re like a riptide. You can only free yourself of them by swimming sideways.”

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If there was one thing Randy’s father had taught him, it was how to vanish. A man didn’t necessarily have to disappear in order to vanish, he could simply withdraw instead as Randy’s father had done, but Randy knew that he would have to go cold turkey in order to kick the habit of the girl in the red leather miniskirt. So he quit calling her and going around to her apartment and bringing her expensive gifts and he even sat down one afternoon and tallied the debt to his father, whose dividends from companies that made

solar water heaters and windmills had financed his son's flirtation with masochism in a southern European capital.

It wasn't easy, but Randy finally got over the girl. Or so it had seemed. He no longer thought about her quite as much, recalling in exquisite and tortured detail the many ways she used to lead him on before she inevitably pushed him away. And eventually he came to accept the belief that he was so hung up on her in the first place simply because she wouldn't let him have what so many other men, both before him and since, had had from her. This didn't seem like the sort of profound insight he had hoped to discover when he started attending the Vipassana meditation workshop that some of his squat-mates recommended to him, but he figured it would have to do. This recognition of the facts did, though, help him considerably towards de-intoxicating his imagination of the girl.

Randy had even begun to feel normal again, as if he might find satisfaction elsewhere. There were a lot of pretty girls in Madrid, and he wasn't a hunchback. The twice-weekly meditation classes presented a few opportunities, but the girls who offered themselves to him were always too *sincere*, reminding Randy of the sort of hairy-arsed and braless hippy he always imagined his mother to have been when she too was young. He didn't feel strong enough to cross that threshold, but he did start hanging out in pick-up bars again.

And then he met Silvia, whose green eyes and black cropped hair surged now in his memory.

Randy drained the bottle of mineral water and set it on the counter. The bartender hadn't given him any change, but he didn't care. Silvia was out there, right around the corner, a person who might be very much like himself, someone he could get to *know*. He looked through the glass door again and saw the Californian girl in the red leather miniskirt leaning against the side of the building as she slipped a high-heeled shoe onto one foot.

He owed her nothing, but she had found out where he lived and went there to make her own demands. This included a "maintenance fee," in order to keep her mouth shut. She wasn't as slow as the Berkley coed and had done her own research to boot. She knew what Randy was worth and didn't want to let him get away. Randy wasn't sure how much real trouble she could make for him, or his parents, but he had no intention of finding out.

In fact, he had all but decided to leave Madrid when his classes broke up for Christmas. But then he met Silvia.

Randy summoned a courage similar to that which had enabled him to expose himself to the critical scrutiny of his 'sisters' on the communal farm, and he walked the length of the long counter and pushed the glass door open.

It had started to drizzle and the girl's platinum blonde hair was beaded with raindrops. She looked at him, from head to toe, as if she were sizing up a potential client.

"Where've you been?" she demanded.

Randy said, "I don't owe you anything."

"Oh no?"

She brushed the bangs out of her defiant eyes and he could see the streaks of mascara and it occurred to him that she might have been crying. She had told him—while they had been what, *friends*?—that once a girl in her line of work started falling from grace the word went around and she was soon blackballed on every list in town. That’s why Randy found her hustling in the Casa del Campo that night: her continual refusals to accept the caprices of certain patrons had led to her expulsion from the Torre de España.

“Look,” he said. “It was all a mistake.” He shook his head and stared at his shoes. Then he raised his eyes. “I don’t know what I expected from you,” he muttered. But he was trembling to stand so near her again.

She wasn’t wearing a jacket and her arms were covered with goose bumps and she used the hand that wasn’t holding the purse to briskly rub the other arm while she looked up and down the intersecting streets, as if she could see her troubled past in the mist. For the first time Randy recognized her for what she was: just another luckless creature of flesh and bone, someone every bit as vulnerable as he was.

“You’re right,” she said. And she looked at him hard. “You don’t owe me anything.”

The relinquishing of her unfounded claim on Randy made him feel suddenly unmoored.

“Here,” he said, taking his jacket off and offering it to her.

She glared at the jacket and said, “I don’t want that. That’s not what I want.”

Then Randy dug his wallet out of his back pocket and she shrieked, “Not here! Not in public!”

She was nervously looking up and down the intersecting streets again. With the dark streaks of mascara under her eyes she reminded Randy of a lost puppy. He knew better than that, but he had discovered that his heart and mind were often at odds.

The girl turned her attention on him again and said, “I just want to go home.”

And Randy could see in her eyes that this was true, though he didn’t know what she meant by home. On an impulse, he put his arm around her shoulder and she didn’t flinch. And then he recalled that song by the Staple Singers that his mom and dad used to put on the turntable and dance to all the time, and he could almost hear it again.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll take you there.”

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