



Natalie

DJ Vallone

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a *novella* by:

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It was barely three months ago at this very spot near the end of the bar that I found Natalie for the second time, and the door to my heavily armored strongbox of a life came unhinged.

That night seems as familiar to me as *last* night, even though the time passage that ferried me here has already disappeared like the Harvard Bridge in a Boston fog. And, curiously, as in a worrisome dream sequence, there doesn't seem to be any possible way back. Even when dawn pours in again with its familiar golden streams, vivid memories will continue to haunt me, memories of the most amazing night of my life, the night that both convinced me I was alive and severed me from reality.

I am not pining away though, wishing that I could somehow turn back the clock or the circumstances of my recent past. But neither would I willingly surrender a single memory of those dreamy, measureless days spent with Natalie, days which saw us soar high above this woe-begotten world on rekindled love, days which constitute the full measure any man can expect in return for his entire existence. Still, if it were possible to go back and simply tweak a few particulars this way or that, perhaps I could have altered the subsequent chain of events somewhat, thereby preventing all hell from breaking loose. And believe me: I have racked my brain senseless trying to identify the exact point when such pressure might have been applied – just a tiny twist, perhaps – to assure a more favorable outcome.

Misfortune and misgivings aside, however, I have reached the conclusion that tempting fate, or if you prefer, “challenging the gods,” is but a fool’s distraction, roughly like spitting into a headwind. Especially since it was fate herself that so cleverly brought Natalie and me together again on that misty night in May, or perhaps God had done it; I cannot be exactly sure. And besides, in view of the facts, who am I to be so bold? Considering what I have come to know of myself, of my weaknesses and failures, my tenuous hold on reality, my fragile ego, and my longing to believe in someone mightier than I who controls the seemingly random events of this world and can save us all from self-destruction, I of all people should know better than to overreach.

Nevertheless, there remains one reasonable question, and that is “why?” Why? Everything seemed so perfect.

Nineteen years ago...

When I first laid eyes on her, Natalie had perched herself on the carpeted window seat halfway up the stairs of the old Theta Chi house and was reading a paperback book by the amber early morning light. Here was a curious appurtenance, I thought, but a nonetheless welcome embellishment to the normally stark fraternity house ambiance. Truth be told: upon entering the gathering room through the tiny vestibule, I was momentarily transfixed by her presence – her chestnut hair ablaze, her graceful silhouette eclipsing the rising sun. In fact, I had to forcibly arrest myself from staring up at her. To break the spell, I began pacing the floor. I had business there that morning; Scott Emerson would be coming down momentarily and we would be walking together to class. He was behind schedule as usual.

Then, realizing that the girl must have noticed me as well, I became immediately self-conscious. I straightened my shoulders and reached a hand up to smooth my hair; I was aware of my gait for the first time in recent memory. Though, later, she would claim never to have seen me at all, she had me at a distinct disadvantage from the very beginning.

“Who is that girl,” I asked, once safely out the door.

“Natalie Mayfield,” Scott said. “She is *something*, isn’t she?”

“No kidding. Who’s something is she?”

“No one’s really. She’s just a good friend of one of the brothers, Jake Sutherland. They went to high school together. Been friends ever since.”

At that moment, I made a mental commitment to ask out the young goddess, Natalie, though I had no idea how to go about getting properly introduced, let alone how to ultimately persuade her that I was worth an evening of her life. Not that I was a complete nerd or anything like the stereotype my engineering major might otherwise suggest. Quite the contrary, actually. At just over six feet, 155 pounds, with a kind face and brown eyes, women typically found me attractive. But, for some inexplicable reason, I possessed little self-confidence with the opposite sex at the age of nineteen, and for another, this particular young woman had rattled me before I could even make her acquaintance. The best I could do was hope that circumstances might somehow work out in my favor, and, as you must have guessed by now, they did.

Within a few short weeks from that auspicious morning of my sophomore year, Natalie Mayfield had turned my life totally upside-down. Unfortunately, I had no way of knowing that this relationship was destined to end before I could get to graduation,

and that she would leave me, and Boston, on her quest for “the meaning of life” without ever giving me back my heart. Not being clairvoyant, I simply let Cupid take his shot at me and, just as swiftly as the arrow penetrated, I became hopelessly captivated by her. Now, looking at the bright side of those twenty-eight months, she became the source of the most enduring memories of my college years, to the degree that I cannot now remember a single significant thing about school in which Natalie did not figure prominently. Amazingly still, after all this time, those moments we spent together continue to shine like jewels out of the dark recesses of my mind. Like the time we drove up to Mt. Washington on a whim and hiked to the summit, freezing most of the way, neither of us willing to admit we would rather turn back. And the countless Friday afternoons we picnicked by the river, people-watching and studying nature like painters would, enjoying the ever-changing colors on display – the steel-grays of the Charles, the sky and its moody blues, the tapestry of earth tones brightening in spring and softening with the exodus of summer. To this day, I cannot think of B.U., or of our fair city on the Charles, or most especially about the kaleidoscope of nature’s beauty without being reminded of Natalie and our storybook love.

This past spring...

I had driven into Boston on a lark. My mind was in a muddle and I had nothing better to do. Worried about the buy-out and the uncomfortable corner my company had painted me into, I thought a change of scenery might help set me straight. I had in mind to stop at the Blond Dingo for a beer. It was our regular hangout when we were at B.U., especially on weekends and

primarily for dancing, which, near as I could tell, was Natalie's favorite pastime back then. Sure, you could get a good draught of Guinness there, like a hundred other places in town, but in addition to being right off-campus, the "Dingo" had the liveliest dance floor around.

I had no secret hopes of finding a dance partner that night; I had long since outgrown my limited hardwood skills. But, neither did I suspect the place could have changed so drastically over the years.

The overly long Friday at the office finally behind me, I completed the crawl through intermittent patches of fog along the in-bound 20 from Waltham. I parked my Acura about twenty paces past the tavern. Evening was descending out of the gray, a premature dusk for a mid-spring night in Boston. It also seemed unusually quiet for a Friday, but then I realized that exams were probably over and students would have already flown off in every direction in anticipation of summer pursuits.

A faint stench accosted me on the sidewalk, vaguely reminiscent of all bars everywhere — an unholy blend of tobacco, ammonia and beer. I nonetheless entered the Dingo, pulling back the heavy, wooden door by its sticky, oil-stained handle—another bad omen, or so it seemed. Once inside, I recognized the same battered tables and chairs that had been in use two decades ago, and the paint on the walls, long since discolored to a dingy yellow-brown, distinctly familiar as well. The bar itself, a remarkable beauty in mahogany from the turn of the last century, had not been altered, but it looked tired somehow, not at all gleaming and tidy as I remembered it. Then again, things may have appeared as they did because I was viewing them through a thick haze of cigarette smoke. Yet, considering these disconcerting visual stimuli, and others, equally powerful though

unseen, and with nothing other than a snapshot appraisal, the decision to stay or leave had to be made. Fortunately, after another swift surveillance of the room revealed the absence of biker types and not a single odd-ball creature with multi-colored, spiked hair, facial piercings or tattoos, I did not feel persuaded to find dinner elsewhere. I say fortunately because, had I left without a drink, fate itself would truly have been compromised.

I picked my way across the room, past tables sparsely populated with what could only be hard-drinking locals. I found an empty two-seater around the end of the bar near the old dance floor, which had apparently fallen from grace. Several tables were set up on the dimpled hardwood, another three perched prominently on the old stage. These were all occupied, a sure indication that no band would be tuning up there any time soon.

The menu was not long, but neither did it bear any resemblance to the one I recalled. Peppered with items one could not have conceived when I was here last, there were selections like Portabella mushroom sandwiches with French-fried yams, and teriyaki chicken with oriental vegetables. Perhaps the owners had hired a professional chef with hopes that food could draw in a crowd while also generating more demand for beer and booze. Then, in attempting to legitimize the Dingo as a restaurant, they must also have felt it necessary to fill every square foot of floor space with tables. This might explain the lack of entertainment on a Friday, in addition to the fact that good bands were difficult to find these days and even harder to keep. But, regardless of how well-prepared the food might prove to be, I could not help feeling a deep remorse over my realization that the source of a thousand college memories for me had been reduced to this – another unremarkable tavern in a town already

crowded with the same. What were they reaching for here? Perhaps just a living.

While I was still adjusting to the surroundings, a waitress approached. Half-smiling down at me, she asked, “What can I get you to drink?”

My eyes followed her lips, gently upturned and somehow familiar. Then I caught her eyes. I was incredulous. Could this actually be *her*, or was my mind deceiving me once again, hoping to find her as it has been for over a decade, measuring stature, comparing hair color, figures, facial features and body language to none other than Natalie, as if by some freakish chance, our paths might cross – but reduced to disappointment again and again. It was always someone else.

“A pint of Guinness, if you’ve got it on tap.”

“Sure thing.”

I watched her more carefully as she turned on one heel and walked around to the waitress station at the bar. There was some additional width to the hips but the saunter seemed recognizable, a kind of shuffle that forced her to sway from the waist up, ever-so-slightly, side-to-side. My heartbeat quickened. I had to know, even at the risk of embarrassing myself. Yet surprisingly, even at the age of thirty-seven, breaking the ice with a woman did not come easily for me. I comforted myself with the thought that little harm could come from asking. At worst, she might chastise me for hitting on her, something a dozen other guys must do each night in a place like this.

I watched her tip her head to check her order pad before slipping it back into her apron. She picked up a tray, placed a couple of mixed drinks on it and made for another table across the room. With my pulse still accelerating, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. This was ridiculous; I was experiencing the

emotions of a young spaniel. Then she appeared again next to me. “Hi, again. By the way, my name is Natalie. You ready to order?”

She recommended the Dingoburger and fries, a carryover from the old menu – not at all surprising, coming from her. I had another two beers while waiting for her shift to end at nine-thirty. Barely a second later, she bounced out of the kitchen carrying her jacket. Shooting me a familiar look she said: “Let’s get out of here. I’ve had enough of this place for one night.”

Once outside, we walked instinctively but silently across the street toward campus and the river. My mind was whirring. There was so much I wanted to ask her, and tell her – nearly everything I had done and thought during the years we had been apart, things she surely must want to know – but I could not find the words to begin. Fear penetrated me with the chilly evening mist, that after finding her again at long last, we would no longer have a single thing in common. Then again, what else could be reasonably expected after more than a decade-and-a-half?

We stepped onto the curb by the bookstore mall and I reached over to take her hand. Her grip was warm, soft, comforting.

“I thought you were married,” she said, pulling up my hand. “I don’t see a ring.”

“Divorced. Nearly ten years now.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Not really. It was for the best. We grew apart.”

“You mean like us.”

“That’s not the way I remember it.” I said.

“It was my fault, I know.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“I do... blame me, that is.”

“Well it’s ancient history. What I’m really curious about is how you ended up back here in Boston, working at the Dingo?”

“That’s a long story.”

“I’ve got plenty of time.”

A spate of rain had fallen earlier from a tropical low that drifted up the coast on warm, southwest winds. When the storm cleared in the late afternoon, cool air settled in and fog began to ascend from the ground and the river alike. Down by the riverbank, the grass was still wet, so we found a bench to sit on. We remained anchored there for hours, talking while watching the fog ebb and flow on light breezes. It was not at all as I feared. We easily discovered ourselves again, almost as though we had never been apart. And there, amid the hundreds of other thoughts bursting forth from the recesses of my mind, came the realization that this night would have made a perfect Halloween – just like All Hallows’ Eve is supposed to look. Only it was spring, and Natalie and I were anything but dead. Nor were we pretending to be anyone but ourselves. Evidently, that part of our relationship had not changed; there was no masquerade.

A foghorn sounded out in the Back Bay. With one arm around her shoulder, I drew Natalie closer. “Not a day has gone by that I haven’t thought of you, Nat. Now, here we are, together again. It hardly seems real.”

She rested her head against me. “I know what you mean.”

Earlier that morning, I was convinced I had to do something, maybe even resign from the firm. Regrettably, I had already allowed myself to get too deeply embroiled in a scheme that, in my opinion, could only end badly. With characteristic naivete, for two weeks I had been carried along on the current from upstream like the loyal company man I was – innocent only at

first, though that hardly seemed relevant in retrospect. Now the water was getting rough and I wanted out, especially when I recognized how duplicitous I had been. Had I possessed any real backbone, I would have resigned three weeks ago, just after the merger was announced.

At that time, Tim Brown, the company lawyer, told me to keep my mouth shut if the Italians should ask about the Leap Frog Project “Pilot” in their due diligence process. Naturally, he failed to let on that all official company documentation and e-mail references to the test had already been destroyed amid attempts to make the fiasco disappear from view. No one would be the wiser, except for the anointed few, and we had all been previously sworn to secrecy regarding the project to keep any news of the ill-fated test from leaking out to competitors. What Tim must also have known at the time, but sagely refrained from acknowledging, was that there were still a lot of computer and personal files containing notes on Project Leap Frog, everything from the germ of the idea to the failed pilot last month. Asking us to surrender those notes at the same time would have made the cover-up a little too obvious, and they did not want to be obvious. So, as it was, in agreeing to maintain the already stipulated policy of sworn secrecy on the project, I could only suspect that the merger was at risk should the facts about the pilot become known outside of R&D and executive management circles. It appeared as though Dan Davies, President and CEO, was deliberately trying to hide the truth about Leap Frog, despite the due diligence process that accompanied the merger. But it was pointless to ask the lawyer, Brown, what he thought. He wasn’t the type of person to spill his guts on any topic, least of all one involving collusion and corruption.

Now, three weeks later and no longer personally blameless, I could see the craftiness of the plan quite clearly in retrospect. And, even if I had not exactly figured out what was happening on the day of Tim Brown's gag order, I knew it for certain twenty-four hours later when my boss Terrance McNabb, the company's senior executive VP, asked me to pack up all my notes on Leap Frog and send them to his office. "...every last thing you've got, Connie. Are you clear?"

I was clear all right. Some kind of cover-up was in the making and I was being asked to play along, like a rube, or worse: the designated and complicit fall guy. Yet, I went along anyway, like a pig in a kayak.

I awoke to the familiar ringing of my cellular phone. Clumsily, I climbed out of the strange bed where Natalie lay undisturbed, pulled on my boxers and took three steps with clammy feet on the cold, sticky hardwood to retrieve the phone from my jacket pocket.

"Hello," I said, answering rather quietly, trying not to wake Nat.

"Conrad, it's Sandra. Do you know what time it is?"

"To be honest, no. You woke me up."

"Well, it's eight-forty and you were supposed to be here ten minutes ago to pick up the girls. You knew I had plans and a hair appointment."

"Sorry, Sandy, I've had a rough week and a late night. I'll get there as soon as I can. Half-hour tops, unless there's traffic."

"All right, but hurry," she said. "I don't want to be late to my appointment. You know, there was a time when you were a lot more considerate."

"Yeah. And you used to be a tad more pleasant in the morning."

“You leave me no choice.”

“Sandy, you’ve always had a choice, but let’s not get into all that now. I’m hanging up or you’ll be late for sure. Bye.”

“Good-bye.”

“Who called?” Natalie said, groggily, lifting herself to a seated position and holding the sheet up to cover her nakedness.

“Just Sandy, my former princess bride. I’ve got to pick up the girls this morning and, thanks to our late night escapades, I totally forgot.”

“My fault, huh?”

“Only if you have a guilty conscience. Come on, let’s get dressed and you can go with me out to Brookline to pick them up. You’re going to want to meet them eventually, no better time than the present. Afterward, we can go over to my condo and fix some brunch.”

“I don’t know, Con. It’s so soon. I don’t think I’m ready to meet your ex-wife just yet. And, besides, I need some time to look my best.”

“No problem, you can wait in the car. Even I won’t get invited in. Besides, you’re gorgeous. I’m sure you’ll look better than the girls will. Neither of them are Saturday morning people.”

“Okay, but at least let me shower first.”

“Only if I can accompany you.”

“No monkey business, Connie.”

“Nope, no time for monkey business. We’ll get to that later.”

She carefully stepped out of the bed exposing her still-athletic body to me in the daylight; there was more maturity in her shape but no less allure. Her legs rose up from shapely feet and ankles to hips and a backside that had rounded beautifully over time. There was only the slightest protrusion above her waist, an attractive womanly abdomen. Full breasts were set high upon

her chest, and then there was her face – the face of an Irish goddess, with a graceful chin, a slender nose, bright blue eyes and natural color in her cheeks. Tussled from the pillow, her long, brown hair, abounding with red highlights, caught sunlight from the bedroom window, reminding me of the very first time I saw her.

“You better get your shower first,” I said. “Otherwise we won’t get out of here before noon.”

“What’s the matter Connie, no willpower?”

“None whatsoever.”

“All right then. I’ll be quick.”

She turned, and I watched her make her way into the hall toward the only bathroom in her apartment. I thought about something she had mentioned last night in the heat of passion, that she had not made love since we were together last, over fifteen years ago. No other man had as much as seen her naked, she said. But, last night she had become suddenly aware of how she had missed me, otherwise she could not do such a thing – have sex outside of marriage, that is. And in doing so, she was overriding both her better judgment and her inner, moral authority. She claimed she needed me more than peace of mind. But, having forced herself to put thoughts of our relationship out of her head years ago, she nonetheless acknowledged that her love for me remained strong.

I could only smile and shake my head.

The Back Bay air was electric with the sounds of songbirds that morning. We stepped outside and immediately remarked about hearing a cardinal’s call, then we each put our index fingers to the tips of our noses, a gesture we had always used for simultaneous utterances in the past. She won, and I had to kiss

her, huge punishment that it was. Refreshingly, it seemed that the years since we were last together had simply dissolved away. We were immediately back in stride with one another.

We got into my car and headed toward Brookline with the windows open. What a morning to enjoy – fragrances, sights, sounds – an absolute sensory feast. It was definitely a morning I would want in any highlight film about my life. And, unlike the day before, my troubles at work were far from the center of my consciousness.

I held Nat’s hand but drove hastily. Unfortunately, there was not time to fully appreciate the beauty of the trees or flowers. I can remember thinking, however, that I wanted to park the car and, with Natalie on my arm, stroll through Sandra’s leafy Brookline neighborhood – the neighborhood I once called my own – enjoying the fruit of my alimony and child support payments at such a spectacular time of year.

Upon my arrival, Sandra was only semi-cordial. She practically shoved Amy and Michelle out the door at me, claiming that hair appointments wait for no one. Seeing Natalie in the car she asked, “Who’s that, Connie? Don’t tell me you’ve got a girlfriend.”

“Oh, that’s Natalie. You’ll have to meet her sometime.”

“THE Natalie, from college?”

“The very one.”

Only a day or so earlier, I had read in a magazine some advice to men on how to deal with women. *Always keep them guessing*, it said, among other things. Judging by the look on Sandy’s face as I turned to go, this was sound counsel.

Not surprisingly, Natalie and the girls hit it off immediately, thanks to their mutual love for sports. Back at B.U., Natalie had

been on the volleyball team and had minored in physical education. She easily fell into conversations with the girls about the current goings on with the Bruins, the Celtics and Red Sox. Amy was particularly thrilled to have a listening ear besides mine for her long dissertations on middle school softball. Michelle, being an Aquarius, and therefore a fish at heart, chattered about her diving classes and what she was going to do once she got her deep water certification in June. Natalie told her about her favorite spot for diving: the offshore Atlantic near her folks' place in Miami's South Beach with its clear, warm water and colorful fish. Michelle said she hoped to have the chance to dive there someday. Soaking this all up like warm sunshine, I was having a great day, except for being sore from pinching myself. It hardly seemed real.

Nat and I cooked brunch at my condo in Waltham – scrambled eggs and pancakes – and then, immediately after cleaning up, we drove off to Fenway for an afternoon ballgame and got tickets for the cheap seats. A leisurely dinner on Newberry Street capped the day in the city. Nearer to home, we rented a movie for the girls before settling in for the night.

Later, finally alone with Natalie while the girls watched their movie in the front room, I asked about her years as a church office receptionist in small-town Vermont. She agreed to fill me in, but only if, afterward, I would explain to her why I was troubled over the project at work. I had merely hinted at my predicament last evening before dropping the subject in favor of more pleasant conversation.

We lay on the bed facing each other, our heads propped with pillows. Her story went something like this:

“I was there for fifteen years in the same job. Pastor Roy was a pretty good guy to work for or I wouldn't have stayed so long.

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