

## For Cynthia

I think of her every time I get water from a refrigerator with an automatic filter. Oh, sure, her wavy blonde hair was stunning and her brown eyes could make you lose whatever thought you had, but it's the water that sticks out; her refrigerator tapped directly into a supply hundreds of feet underground, ancient caverns and crisp, clean minerals, and boy how, you could taste it. That water even smelled clear like water ought to.

I met Cynthia Barston in a bookstore. I was browsing the fiction section, and suddenly I smelled sunflowers. Not just one: thousands, a giant field golden straight to the horizon. The scent filled my whole head, and my nose took a deep breath just to get another whiff even as it turned my head, and there she stood.

"Hi," I said. It surprised me, snuck right up and jumped right out, which is probably good because I'm not sure I would have managed it otherwise. I had as much control over that greeting as over my own heartbeat.

She smiled at me, just the corners of her mouth, and her lovely eyes twinkled. "Hello," she said, and she reached by me to take a copy of *Dubliners* from the shelf.

"Good choice," I told her.

"Is it?"

"You've never read it?"

She shook her head. “I just started a creative writing class, and our professor assigned it. He said the best way to learn short stories was to read this book,” she waved it, gently.

“A couple of them are really good, yeah. Tell you what, though. You want to read some good, entertaining short stories, read this,” I told her, and I pulled a copy of Stephen King’s *Night Shift* from the shelf.

“King?”

“I know, he’s got that horror-writer-reputation going for him, but I’m telling you, this is a really good collection.”

“You work here?”

“Nah. Just read a lot.”

“So you’re not trying to sell it to me?”

“What? Oh, no,” I said. “Just figured you might enjoy it. And King’s a little more accessible than Joyce. They’re easier stories.”

“Okay,” she said. “Sold me.”

“I don’t think you’ll regret it. And I’ll tell you what, if you do, I’ll buy you coffee,” I told her. The words were out of my mouth before I’d considered them, before I’d thought them; all I’d had the chance to do was feel them, but I did that as hard as I could.

She smiled at me, closed-mouthed but genuine, shy but knowing and appreciating. “Are you asking me out?”

I shrugged. “I’m just offering a cuppa Joe if you don’t like a book I apparently talked you into buying. Pay back, really.”

She laughed, a lovely lilting sound that seemed to come from her whole body, just beamed out of her, and the whole world relished feeling young for a moment, heard her laugh and remembered what it was like to be a child, and full of wonder. “A cup of Joe? Who says that?”

I probably blushed. “All right, well. Decaf mocha latte spritzer. Heck, I’ll buy you a cream soda if you want.”

“Oh, mister big spender now, huh?”

“Actually, the soda’s probably cheaper.”

She chuckled, and I smiled, and then we stood in silence a second, before she said, “Well, are you going to give me your number? Unless you want me to think I didn’t like this really, really hard. Is your telepathy good?”

I took the book from her, and I pulled the pen I always keep in my pocket out, wrote my name and number on the inside front cover.

“You always carry a pen in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me,” she said.

It’s not the first time I’ve heard that. “Always have it. You just never know when an idea’ll hit you, do you?”

She smiled. “Ah. You’re a writer.”

“I like telling stories.”

She scanned the inside cover of the book. “Dylan.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry,” I told her, offered my hand. “I’m Dylan.”

She took my hand, and I decided I was lucky I didn’t gasp at the electricity of her skin on mine. “Nice to meet you, Dylan. I’m Cynthia.”

“Well nice to meet you too, Cynthia. Give me a call, if you don’t like the book.”

“Oh, I’ll call you either way. Because if I do like the book, the coffee’s on me. Only fair, isn’t it?”

“Only.”

She nodded. “All right. Well, I’ll talk to you soon, then. Have a good night.”

“You too,” I told her, and she headed out of the aisle, toward the cashiers, and I checked her out as she went, yes. I don’t think I would’ve been surprised if flowers had bloomed up in her wake, and I wondered, too, if they might have, had she only been outside.

I’ve always told people I hate musicals because no one just walks out of a library and bursts into spontaneous song, but I disproved my own theory that night. I left the bookstore singing Stevie Wonder, “Part-Time Lover,” if you care to know. I was very much looking forward to talking to

Cynthia again, and it was the first time in a long while I'd been in so fine a mood.

I had just moved back home back then, you see, to a small suburb in southern New Jersey after having lived in Manhattan for six years. I was hoping to get my bearings again, sort out my life and figure out what I wanted from it.

Was it Wolfe who said you never can go home again? I can't remember, and it's obviously not true, because there I was, but I'll admit it wasn't easy. It didn't seem to fit right: a little short in the cuffs and tight across the chest and, even if it did fit well, I don't think it would be my style.

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I almost didn't answer her call when my cell phone rang over a week later because I didn't recognize her number. I did, however, recognize her voice the moment I heard it, the moment she said, sorry I didn't call you, you were right, I got so wrapped up reading the stories, wow, they were great. I think I owe you coffee.

And so we made plans to meet in that very same bookstore, and we had a lovely time. She bought us two coffees, and we sipped them and talked about everything from our jobs to our childhoods in our own small towns, our lives and our diversions. We sat there from seven in the evening until the disembodied voice on the intercom told us we'd better decide on our final purchases; it was only then that we looked at our watches, then at each other, and we sheepishly smiled, amused that we had so thoroughly lost track of the time.

"I'd really like to do this again," I told her, when we'd arrived at her car. It was a crisp, clear night, and I've never seen so many stars anywhere as I did that evening, in her eyes. I wanted to stand there all night and wish on every one of them.

She hesitated when I said it, though, and looked away. "Look, I don't— I had a really good time with you, but I have to tell you I just got out of a pretty long relationship."

I nodded. Of course I'd heard it before. Hasn't everyone? Haven't you? "Oh, well, hey, I mean," I told her as I tried to fumble my way to what I meant, "I understand. But we could just hang out, couldn't we? Like we just did."

I could tell she was deliberating, considering, and then her mouth seemed to smile in spite of her, and she nodded. "Okay, yeah. I'd like that."

"Cool. I'll give you a call later this week."

I didn't call her later that week. Well, I did, yes, technically, but not before she'd called me both the day following our coffee break and the next, and then the next. Each night we talked for hours, and all those hours seemed to pass like we always wish time might.

During one of those long talks, when we were digressing through her classes and her interests, she mentioned that her writing teacher had assigned several Poe stories.

"Ooh. Ouch."

"Ouch?"

"Ouch," I nodded, as if she could see it. "I've never been a fan of Poe's stories. The poems, yeah, but not the stories."

"What's your favorite? 'The Raven'?"

"Actually, I know a lot of people go with that one, but I like 'Annabel Lee' more. I went to the museum once with my sister, and—"

"The museum?"

"The old Poe house? It's on, um. I think it's Seventh and Spring Garden."

"In the city?"

"Well, in Philly, yep," I told her. Because Philadelphia is Philadelphia, but the City is Manhattan. "He lived there for a year, and now they've got it all bare, and they do a little tour and everything. It's pretty cool."

"I never knew that. What're you doing this weekend? Wanna go?" she asked, and when a girl like Cynthia Barston asks you to do something with her, you don't say no. At

least, I don't. We decided to go to the museum, and then maybe get a bite to eat.

"Well, then, pick me up at one," she told me, and gave me directions to her house, and I told her I'd be there. I'll admit I was nervous when I hung up with her. Not just because I was going with one of the prettiest girls I've ever seen, but because I'd already realized how special she was and how interested I was in her.

I knew how I was feeling, and she'd already told me her situation. I didn't want to invest in something one-sided, something doomed, because, having just moved home, still looking for a decent job, still hoping for a decent life, I had other things I needed to invest in.

I might have stuck with that mindset, too, if Cynthia hadn't called me the next two nights, as well. If we hadn't spoken more hours about more things than I'd realized you can talk about with someone. But we did, and so, by the time Saturday morning woke me up, I wasn't thinking about jobs or apartments or anything else, for that matter. I was just thinking about Cynthia.

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I woke to birdsong that beautiful Saturday morning, and I sprang from bed, which doesn't usually happen. I'm not a big fan of getting out of bed on the weekends, but that day I did it with pizzazz. That day I leapt, hummed while I showered, put my contacts in, shaved, even while I dressed, a happy, if tuneless, humming. I'm completely tone deaf, but that didn't matter. The sunlight spangled in through my bedroom window, and I put on a light blue polo shirt to bring out my eyes, my khakis, and a black blazer. I looked in the mirror on the back of my bedroom door, adjusted my collar, winked at myself, and I was stepping out my door when I realized I wanted to buy Cynthia Barston flowers. Just to see her smile.

The world waiting for me was just waking up from winter, just stretching and rubbing the sleep of a bleak, dreary February out of its eyes. The air was still brisk, sure, I

couldn't call it warm, but the sun was still out, even if the world was going to hit the snooze button one last time.

My father was out, pushing the mower across a lawn greener than it had any right to be, green like poets wish grass would be.

"Mornin', Pop," I waved, didn't think he'd be able to hear me over the mower anyway, but he let go of the handle. It grumbled to a stop.

"You're all dressed up. Where you headed?"

I smiled. "Ah, just out. You know."

I couldn't tell for sure how he looked at me, then; he has these huge, wraparound safety glasses with big, dark lenses that are all he ever wears. "She cute?"

I chuckled. "Oh, yeah. You'd be prouda me. I was thinking of getting her flowers, t—," I told him, even as my brain registered that, just beyond him, the forsythias were in full, fine, golden bloom. "Hey, you mind if I take a few sprigs," I nodded toward the flowers.

He looked back over his shoulder, shrugged. "Don't see why not," he said, pulled his multipurpose tool from his pocket as I stepped past him, and I grasped some branches, snipped here and there until I had a burst of flowers I knew I'd be happy to hand to Cynthia Barston. Those flowers were yellow like bees and convertibles with their tops down and that catchy summer song you can't help turning up, and when I pulled them close and their scent filled my whole head, they smelt like the sweet hope for spring.

"They won't last, you know."

I turned back to my dad.

"They don't bloom long," he told me. His arms were on his hips, and he was looking at the hedges just to my left. "Oh, they're pretty and all, but they won't last more'n a few weeks."

I considered that a moment. "Well, flowers don't ever really last anyway, do they?"

My father looked at me, and after a moment smiled. “True enough,” he said. “True enough at that. They’ll be pretty while they last.”

“And it’ll be worth it just to see the smile on her face.”

My dad smiled at that, then, “Well, go on, get outta here, go have some fun.”

And so I did.

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Cynthia smiled exactly like I’d wanted her to when I gave them to her, wide and with no reservation. I melted.

“They’re beautiful,” she said as she took them, smelled them. “Thank you.” Her smile lit up her whole voice, downright beamed on through it, and I was the happiest guy in the world for a minute there. Monks in the mountains meditate all their lives hoping for a moment of nirvana like I felt when Cynthia smiled.

“Come on in,” she told me, and so I did, met her parents, her brother, shook hands all around. Her father offered me something to drink, and when I asked for water, that was when he gave me a glass of water finer than I’ve ever tasted. We all sat a few minutes, went through the usual small talk and the who-are-you-that-you’re-dating-my-daughter, but everyone was great.

We left and went to the museum, joked and wondered about Poe’s marrying his thirteen-year-old cousin, listened to Christopher Walken recite “The Raven,” on a CD in the reading room on the lower level, and then we went around the corner and had some appetizers at a small bistro.

After that we drove to South Street and walked most of its length, enjoying that fine day until evening fell like intimacy. She put her hand through my arm as we walked, and it made my day; I’d always wanted to walk down a city street arm-in-arm with a beautiful girl. When I pointed out a twinkling star and told her to make a wish on it because it was the one I’d used, she looked up, closed her eyes as if in prayer, and then turned and kissed me.

I've heard that your first kiss is the one by which all the rest in your life are measured, but my first kiss was the measure until I kissed Cynthia Barston and forgot all about it. I kept my eyes closed when she pulled back, because I wanted to hold, keep, and cherish that moment just another longer.

"Well, that's my wish, coming true," I said, but my voice was a long distance away.

She laughed, and I felt her voice in my heart. "Come on, silly," she told me.

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That was the beginning, and that was when I started falling. I didn't mean to. I didn't plan to, and I didn't even want to. If anything, I tried not to, but we talked every day and saw each other almost as many, and before long I was looking at all those things that might've been working against us and thinking maybe they weren't all that much too worry about after all.

You'll have to forgive me; I was twenty-four and in love. Cynthia seemed to be everything I'd wanted in a girl and had been afraid to hope for, a girl who could hypnotize you by dancing. A girl who could quote Nietzsche as easily as she could quote *Calvin and Hobbes*. And, most of all, a beautiful girl who was happy spending time with me, and what more could I ask for? I don't know about you, but I know when to stop.

It felt like what Cynthia and I had could be the healthy, wonderful relationship I'd so wanted. We made plans to go camping and even to go to Manhattan for a weekend, which would've been my first trip back, and she was the only person I ever told about my growing pains, moving back home from my life in the City. How I felt about it, that I was a little ashamed that September 11th had affected me so hard because I knew a lot of people a lot worse off; one of my colleagues had lost her two brothers and an uncle, all fire fighters, in the subsequent emergency efforts.

Cynthia listened to me, and really, that might have been all I needed. My chest felt lighter after I told her all of that,

my breath like it had more room, and when my heart found it felt freer, it went to her.

Last Sunday, I realized something. We'd been dating for a few short weeks that had felt good and right and full of shared secret smiles. I had felt comfortable with other girls before, but there was something there, with Cynthia, that had never been there before; I was vulnerable. Cynthia could hurt me. No other girl had ever had that ability.

I told her that, because it surprised me and because, since she'd made me feel better about my feelings toward leaving Manhattan, I figured she could probably make me feel better about that, too.

She just raised her head from my chest, looked into my eyes and held them close, and she said, "That's not in the plan," and kissed me.

It was all I needed to hear. I'd been restraining myself before then, but I fell then, and hard.

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I sensed something was wrong. I asked her about it, but she said she was just tired. I knew she'd worked that day, so I accepted her answer at face value even though I doubted it. We went out to a movie, and then I drove her home because she was tired. I walked her to her door. We hugged, kissed, and then, knowing that she was staying with friends for the weekend, I told her to call me when she got back. She smiled, said okay, and kissed me again.

I walked back to my car, watched the door close and her form disappear into the darkness visible through the glass. I missed her.

I just got off the phone with her.

It's over now. She thought she was ready for a relationship, but she really wants to try the single thing for a while. She thought if a guy was special enough she'd want nothing more than to be with him, and it would make everything clear, but nothing had changed. She said each of those things, and each one hurt in a completely different way, and left my breath just a little farther away.

Is it my fault? She said no. It's not me. It's her.

Of course it is. Of course.

I know that. I shouldn't have expected anything more than exactly what I got.

She said she loves hanging out with me, and I make her happy, and she wants to stay friends. Of course she does. Of course.

I told her that, since she'd been honest with me, I'd be honest with her; I'd been falling for her, and I didn't think I could be just friends right away, not with the feelings I had.

She said she understood, and I'd know where to find her when I was ready, and I told her, you know, I don't think this is going to come out sounding right but don't know how else to say it, either, but the same goes for you. Once you're past your confusion, call me if you want, and maybe we can try, because I'd like that, and I think you're special.

She was dead silent.

"What?" I asked.

"I don't want you waiting for me."

I laughed. I won't wait for her. Of course I won't, but—

Was it Tennyson who said it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? I'm not certain, but I don't believe I would be hurting quite so badly if we'd just stayed friends and I hadn't found out how wonderful and beautiful she is.

I don't know anything, really, only that I'm stunned. I know I couldn't talk much after she told me, because there was really not much more to say.

I felt detached after I hung up with her, and I went driving. I had to, for the same reason I wanted to return home that autumn, just to see where I'm from again. Just to see familiar things and to try to find some comfort. I noticed, as I went, that the blossoms were gone from the forsythia bushes.

It may be telling that I got lost, driving that night, in the darkness of a town I'd lived in for eighteen years. Maybe home's just not as familiar as I thought it would be.

I found nothing out there, no answers, no questions even. I just drove, and I thought of Cynthia and the way she kissed, the feel of her softly solid body in my arms. I thought of her eyes, her smile, the sound of her voice and her laugh. I thought of how she lit up when I gave her those flowers, and I wondered how long, exactly, those flowers had bloomed, and why I hadn't noticed them all fall away until they were already gone.

-Will Entrekin