

from 30 Days in Camelot...

Her name was Toni, short for Antonietta, and she was my dead brother's girlfriend.

I'd met her once before, more than a year earlier, when Jeff brought her back East to see our mother, minutes before she died. We were in Massachusetts General Hospital, the only hospital our mother would let herself be taken to. She was transferred there by the so-called convalescent home we put her in when my wife and I couldn't take care of her any more. She'd steadily worsened there until her pain got so bad that they put her on a morphine drip. She faded away quickly then. Her skin got yellow, her smell sour. Her smile was thin and her eyes didn't really fix on you anymore. She seemed vaguely distracted, preoccupied, like I'm sure she was, with pain, and with dying.

My wife, Gail, and I were barely talking then. After the nursing home, which she had insisted upon and which she was right about, we settled in to separate routines of working, visiting the home, making separate dinners, and sleeping in various rooms. When we did talk, we talked about errands, or bills, or how my mom looked that day, or what a nurse or doctor said, or who called, or what was on TV. We were grieving, angry, numb, and we both a little bit shocked to learn that we didn't really have each other to lean on. I think we thought of ourselves as people who would come together and be stronger in times of crisis. But we didn't, and we weren't. Instead we watched my mother, closer really to Gail than I, fight the cancer, lose, give up, and fade to black. And we were paralyzed by it, shamed by it, also

beaten by it. I spent a lot of time alone, watching TV, sleeping in front of the TV, the TV watching me.

When her breathing failed they rushed her to the hospital, put her on the machine and told us to expect the worst. It was December, two weeks before Christmas. Gail and I went home to our house with the undecorated Christmas tree, and talked about the breathing machine. Turn it off or keep it on. We fought. She wanted it turned off. I wanted it on, at least until Jeff could fly out and say goodbye. Jeff lived in California. Jeff had not been out to visit since the cancer started, more than a year before. Jeff had only seen Gail a handful of times and they'd never warmed up to each other. Gail figured that Jeff didn't deserve the chance, not at my mother's expense. She was probably right.

I disagreed.

I won.

She went to bed and I called Jeff, late at night even on the West, and told him. He'd been waiting for the call. Not that night, but for weeks. I knew this, and I also knew without having to ask and without his having to explain, why he hadn't been there. Such is the shared knowledge of family, of blood, the mystery that I couldn't waste my time trying to explain, not to Gail, not then anyway. My mom knew this too. "That's Jeff," she'd said when she could still talk, forgiving him. Gail had not been as forgiving, badmouthing him frequently as my mom went down and up and finally downhill forever. She didn't think I should have been forgiving either. I was, though maybe I shouldn't have been.

She also didn't think he'd come at the end, though I knew he would, which he did, four days later. That night, the night the doctors said my mother was dead and I should turn off the machine, I hung up the phone with Jeff and paced the dark house for hours. Gail was sleeping. Near dawn I watched a rerun of some old cop show on TV and cried, stupidly, at the sadness of it all.

I picked Jeff up at Logan Airport on a cold December morning, steam in the air, the city's smells and sounds hanging low to the ground. The sky above as we drove along the highway ramp was a frigid royal blue. Before the road dipped down into the tunnel you could see the harbor, frozen it seemed but for white caps, and the dingy city gleaming in the icy sun. Toni was with him, the first I'd heard of her, though they'd lived together for a year. Jeff was 38, three years younger than me. Toni was much younger. They were dressed for an LA winter and even inside the terminal, near baggage claim where I met them, they were freezing and disheveled from the red eye flight through Pittsburgh. Jeff and I shook hands, embraced, said little. Toni said nothing, looking shy and worried for Jeff. I liked her. Gail, who was at the hospital waiting for us, was teamed with the nurses and doctors against us now, waiting for us to stop indulging ourselves so that they could get the deed done. Gail immediately did not like Toni. She didn't say anything, but I could tell.

We went straight from the airport, through the tunnel to the hospital and straight up to the room. Jeff was not prepared. He staggered, Toni caught him, and he leaned against the wall, couldn't take his eyes off her, knew for the first time I think, that it was really happening. His mother was dying.

"How long?" he asked me, his voice a whisper, barely audible.

"Not long once they shut the respirator off."

"Does dad know?"

"He knows enough. I'll call him when it's over."

"Where is he anyway?"

"This time of year? The house in Florida. I haven't talked with him in a few weeks though."

He looked back at his mother. He was far more of a mama's boy than I, though most people thought the opposite. Most people thought that when Jeff left town he was abandoning our mother, that he was siding with our father, that he was blaming her for whatever might have gone wrong with his childhood. Certainly our mother did nothing to dispel that. She definitely felt abandoned by Jeff, though I'd have been shocked to hear her express such a thought. She *acted* hurt. But what people didn't understand was that she wasn't hurt, not that Jeff left. She simply missed him. He was her favorite. He was probably her favorite person, period. And what people didn't understand about Jeff was that he had to get out and make his way in the world *because* he was so devoted to his mother. Watching out for her, in his subtle, standing by the door, style, was holding him back and stifling him. And he never got over his guilt for moving away, for leaving home, for leaving her.

"When do we shut it off?" he asked. He had been quiet for several minutes. The heater buzzed and hissed as hot air was forced into the room, creating a stifling humidity. There was no one in the extra bed in the room, which Toni sat on, and the room was ringed with medical equipment, mostly turned off, except for the

respirator, and covered with fitted sheets of vinyl, like they'd put her in a supply room.

"Whenever you're ready," I said.

"I'm ready," he said. And he meant it.

I left Jeff and Toni alone with our mother for the last time. I didn't kiss her or say goodbye. I had done these things already. So had Gail, who met me in the hall, irritated, "Well?"

"Tell them we're ready."

"OK," she said, her eyes going soft. She grabbed the two little fingers of my left hand and squeezed, our most tender gesture in weeks.

The nurses came and went into the room, and Jeff and Toni came out. They were both crying. Jeff composed himself and walked up to Gail and gave her a quick embrace. He stepped back. "This is Toni," he said, moved and proud.

Gail, my wife and companion for seven years and, as it turned out, virtual stranger, looked my brother Jeff straight in the eye and said, "She looks twelve, Jeff."

Jeff stiffened, met her gaze, stepped back from it.

I said, "Jesus, Gail."

She turned to me, turned on me, said, "Go to hell," and walked down the hallway, away from the room.

Jeff turned, his arm around Toni, and walked passed me, passed the room, out of the ward and out of the hospital. I had no way to contact him and he didn't show for the funeral. My wife never forgave him for that. I'm not really sure I ever

did either, but I also never forgave her for that comment, at that time and place, her grief be damned.

I sat in the hallway alone while my mother expired. It took hours, but I couldn't bring myself to go back in the room. It was nearly dawn when the nurse I'd been seeing all night, a woman about my age, Jamaican, heavier than me but who moved across the hallway with grace and purpose, with a calm urgency, finally spoke to me. I had been watching her coming and going for hours, before Gail stormed out, before Jeff and Toni came and went. She went to my mother's room, to other rooms, to the oval station that the nurses used as home base. There were other nurses too, and an occasional doctor, orderly, or maintenance person, but it was this one nurse who I mostly watched. Her first name was Florence, that much I remember, and the last time I saw her she walked straight down the hall to where I was slumped in a chair. She paused for a second while I met her gaze, then took a deep breath and sat down next to me. She said only, "Your mother has passed." Then she waited and watched me for my response. *Your mother has passed.* The words echoed in my ears, even now, and I couldn't help thinking what a strange and singular moment hearing that phrase is in a person's life.

I had look away when she said it, but then I returned my gaze to her eyes, which were softer than I remembered, more sympathetic than I expected, and I said, "Thank you."

I don't remember who then got up first, but I'm guessing it was her. I made my way to the room, which was empty, and I kissed my mother on the forehead, told her I loved her, and told her I was proud to be her son. I left the room and found

Gail crying in the chapel. I put my arm around her, led her outside, ushered her into the cold car, drove her home.

Within a month we were fighting. About anything and everything. About not making enough money and buying the wrong kind of milk. The distance and silence of the previous few months crashed around us, deafened us to each other's pleas for peace. I got mean, pathetic, and stupid. I couldn't deal with my mother gone, my brother far away and not talking, my wife a stranger. I blamed her, hated her, hated my mother, Jeff, myself. I picked fight after fight until she finally left me. It took half a year and it's been almost that long and I haven't talked to her very much or very well since. We are not divorced, have not even filed. I think she pities me, which is why I avoid her.

And so she's gone.

And now Jeff's gone too, stabbed in the heart by person or persons unknown. And there was his girl, Toni, who I'd come out to find, who I'd come out to ask, "What happened?" and maybe, "what was he like, my brother?"

My last days of married life were interminably long, and after the days, after the daily grind of a job I didn't love, the forced march of the hard routine, the weak smiles and bitten tongues, blood in my mouth and no strength to speak, I staggered home to longer nights. Gail, before she left, tried at first to comfort me, support me, reinforce me, later learned to steer clear, later steered her way clear for days, for

weeks at a time, eventually forever. I was relieved to be alone. After the letdown of the letdown of nothing much to do, and doing nothing much, I preferred to be left alone, to not be touched or talked to, to stare at a TV, or smoke cigarette after cigarette while playing computer solitaire, my home computer used once for things I'd lost the handle on, used then for only that.

I could barely believe or admit what was happening to me. And of course there is nothing more pitiful or boring to those around it, and nothing more frustrating to those going through it. I remember now the many and identical nights, home by six, thankful for nothing more than to be free of work for another day, but left with nothing left but waiting for the next day. Gail would come to me as I slumped in a chair, still wearing my suit an hour after pulling into the driveway, and massage my neck, kiss my ears and cheek, ask me what she could do. And I'd recoil from her touch, from the warmth and tenderness and consolation of it. Afraid, I think now, to fall with it. Afraid to admit to it. Left instead with a silent whine, refusing all offers until she'd give up, leave me alone, let me stare away at nothing, and nothing much to do. I did little housework, less cooking, and spent no time just sitting and talking and enjoying my life with my wife. I was a pitiful wretch.

I had no friends or hobbies those days. I don't remember what I did on weekends. After a time Gail and I stopped going away on weekends. After a little more time she went away without me. She'd go off to her family or out or away with her girlfriends, and I'd stay home, watch TV, sometimes read a book. Sex between us was rare and increasingly distant. Towards the end there was a desperateness to

it that lent it some depth, and some emotion, but it grew steadily sadder, progressively shallower. Neither of us did anything about it.

Sometimes on the weekends, if it was spring or fall or summer, I'd play some golf, but I wasn't very good and didn't really enjoy it very much. I had yet to discover, or rather rediscover, for I'd known it once years before, the rejuvenating here and now of walking a golf course on a sunny day. I never went to work or brought work home on the weekends. I never talked or thought much about the job away from the office either. I did it well enough when I was there, but when I wasn't there I didn't care at all. I'd thought when I was younger I'd turn out a workaholic, the kind of guy who had a passion for his work, who routinely worked sixty hour weeks and thought vacations were a waste of time. When I realized that that wasn't true about me, the letdown was not a hard one. It was a quick look in the mirror and a shrug of the shoulders. Such was the joyless depth to which I'd sunk.

I was dying inside and unwilling to cry out. I was as one who is lost in the woods.

It's a place I did not get away from unscarred or unscathed, nor should I have. I lost much, nothing more precious than time. Except Gail. Except my mom's last days. Except Jeff.

I tried to explain this to Gail one night, a woman who'd known no such depths or boredom or fear of mediocrity, but it was too late. She wasn't really listening to me anymore, and I never really got it right.

A couple of weeks after Jeff was killed I got to Los Angeles and went to Jeff and Toni's apartment. I knocked and got no answer but knew the key was in an old Altoids tin buried in the back of a planter holding a Sega palm next to the door. I dug it out, got inside, and found the windows closed and the shades drawn. Walking across cheap beige carpet through the living room area to the galley kitchen I found dirty dishes and pots scattered across the stove and the countertops. The air was foul and heavy with the smell of rotting food and roach spray. In the bedroom, I found Toni lying on the bed, looking more dead than alive, hard to distinguish from the other heaps, the room twilight dark, the contents of the closet and all the drawers in the dresser tossed here and there in little piles. I don't remember what I was thinking, but I remember trying to get her up and I remember her eyes, open and absent, and knowing that something was really, really wrong.

I remember trying not to panic. I felt this seething sort of anger but put it on a shelf. It could wait. I had to get her up. I turned to the phone, changed my mind, turned to her, went to her, put my arms under her arms and lifted her from the bed, pulled her to me. I tried to make her walk. Her legs were limp and mine were shaking. I held her up and still, steadied myself, inside and out. The room was dark. I grabbed for the phone, but stopped. *No cops*, I thought. I don't know why.

After a moment or two she revived a bit, lifted her arms around mine, held on in fact, and I moved her, pulled her, made her take a step or two across the room, awkward and stumbling and into the living room, and out into the hallway light. Halfway down the stairs she gave up again, slumped nearly out of my hands and

down the stairs. I caught her against the wall, pinned ourselves there for a moment and for a moment I almost panicked, wanted my mom there for a moment, wondered if she was there for a moment, but held on tight to keep us both from falling. I buried my nose in the smooth skin behind her ear and above her neck, smelled her skin, and recalled for a moment the flash of years and events that brought us here, saw the cause and effect, saw my move with her from stranger to brother-in-law to stranger to brother-in-law again, to savior that night. And then I picked her up, carried her over my shoulder down the stairs and out into the cool night air, Los Angeles in summer, down the cracked sidewalk to my truck parked in the street. My truck. My right hand man. And I hoisted her up into the dirty, travel-weary cab and drove. I don't remember much of that drive. Don't remember if I was wedged into my parking spot and had to maneuver out, or left the curb straight because no one had parked in front of me. I remember there was no traffic and I remember a dim recollection of a hospital a few blocks away, to the east of the freeway, and I remember figuring she had no insurance. I remember pulling into the ambulance bay, remember a lot of people around but no one to help as I lifted her from the truck, falling forward on top of her once, then stepping one foot into the truck, lifting her from that position and carrying her in my arms, like the Pieta, through the big automatic doors of the ER and into the waiting room, pausing to look quickly at the night time ER, the lineup of the sick and bored, the smell of waiting, victims twice, the TV on high above, and then walking straight through the middle of it all into the ER ward itself, where I laid her on the nearest gurney.

Someone who worked there approached. A woman. I said only, "Suicide attempt," anticipated her question and added quickly, "some kind of painkillers I think." My mind raced back to the bedroom. "There was vodka too."

The nurse was all business, vaguely routine and vaguely annoyed, not anywhere near the frenzy that I was spinning in. She took Toni's pulse, asked me her name, then stopped. She looked up in thought, preoccupied, scanned the room with her mind for a second, then looked me in the eyes and said, "Wake her up. Keep her awake. I'll be back in a minute." And she was gone.

I froze again, near panic again at seeing my work wasn't done, seeing in an instant that this was a city hospital on a Saturday night, and that her life was still in my hands. And my voice.

I called her name. My voice sounded weak and strange. I called her again, more loudly, more firmly, conscious of my voice in the ward, and conscious of it blending in with the other noise in the ward, which was considerable and which I hadn't heard til then. I reached down and pulled her to me and called her name again, letting my anger rise. "Wake up!"

And, "WAKE UP!"

She was groggy but soon I got through. She wanted to sleep, fought against my hold and by instinct I let her win a bit, let her fall back a bit, then pulled her back up. I tried to make her angry, to raise her temper and so raise her will to fight, kept talking, tried to keep her awake. She drifted in and out, would try to fall asleep against me and I'd push her away. Would try to fall back and I'd pull her up. I kept talking, whispering at times, yelling at other times. I'd gain momentum and lose it.

Lose my confidence and find it. Kept it up because no one came and I had to.

Accepted the task like a lousy job I needed, and I didn't think I was doing too well til finally a doctor and two nurses came and I realized an hour and a half had passed.

And she was still alive.

They fed her charcoal and she threw up black.

I watched. Detached. Exhausted.

I looked around and saw for the first time the old drunk on the next gurney, curtain around him partially drawn, head and knees bleeding, who'd been cursing anyone that passed near, demanding to leave. He'd been shouting away from deep within his fog while I'd been shouting at Toni's within ours, neither of us more than peripherally aware of the other. And then the other patients, who I could hear but not see. And all the comings and goings of staff. And the smells: rubbing alcohol, latex, blood and vomit. And I thought about what a cliché this whole scene was. I mean, the old drunk yelling "Let me the fuck out," and kids crying, and the hospital lighting, and the urban sprawl of it all. I couldn't help but think that this wasn't all real, that I wasn't really here, that this wasn't what it was.

But then I looked back at Toni, the doctor checking things, the charcoal going down, and I knew that this was no cliché or story, knew this was no dream or nightmare. I was here. With her. For this.

And I watched as they removed her shirt and pants. She wore no bra and I saw her breasts. And they grounded me from the electric strangeness all around, stayed in my mind after the nurses covered them with the hospital gown, and connected me to the person I knew, lying there, even as everything else around was

working overtime to objectify and clinicize her as just another patient, just another suicide, on just another Saturday night at a Valley ER.

The doctor, an alert woman my age who was trying hard to see me and Toni as real people, and not as extensions of her equipment, which we were, told me Toni would be fine, but I had to keep her awake a while longer, told me I had to feed her more charcoal, and told me, with her eyes and expression, that people were still dying here and Toni's life, stable now, was up to me. Again.

So I did.

Through the night. Force-feeding her crackers at times. Holding her close. Letting her throw up all over herself and me. Constantly talking. Yelling at her when she began to drift. Other times telling her stories of my recent days. Catching her up on my talking to Eagle, catching her up because I had been away and had returned, and she was as sick and defeated and as alone as I'd ever seen her, as I'd ever seen anyone.

Sometime after 8 AM they told me she could sleep.

I still had the doctor to talk to, and psych, and the billing people. The following morning she would be transferred to another hospital in Hollywood, which was where a Psych Ward was that would take people without insurance. But before then, later that morning after Toni had slept a few hours while I sat at her bedside and read a newspaper and did the crossword puzzle, she woke up and, with her groggy consent, they admitted her and brought her to another room upstairs. Doctors I can't remember talked to both of us, where they said it would take another few days for her stomach to heal, and so she would have to go to Hollywood, and

they tried to get her to check herself into an institution for a longer stay, which she angrily rejected, and so they tried to check her in by force, and she stopped talking to the doctors, said to them only, "Let me the fuck out," and she tried to leave, and they tied her down, and when the doctors weren't around and only I was around she begged me to support her, to tell them I would take responsibility for her, promised me she'd never do it again, promised me that she'd begin again, go to school, quit drinking, find a stable place to live, find a stable job, go to outpatient care. And of course I thought it was bullshit, which it was at first, and of course I did it anyway, later, after a few days in Hollywood. I lied and cajoled and convinced the doctors to let her out, signed her out against their advice, because I could see that a mental hospital for her was rock bottom, lower than death, and I couldn't stand to see her suffer like that. Not after Jeff. Not anymore.

All of this lay just ahead. But when on that early Sunday morning the beautiful woman doctor, who was my age, who if I'd met at a dinner party of a friend I'd be trying to get to know, came to me and said Toni could sleep for a while, I said only "Are you sure?" And I didn't try any longer to separate myself from the destitute, desperate, or simply poor and sick carnival of humanity in the ER around me. Toni was *my* patient then, and I released her only when assured by the doctor, who I trusted despite her long absences, that she was gonna be okay now.

I walked through the waiting room and out to the ambulance bay, the telltale charcoal and vomit smeared across my shirt, the few who could and bothered to look up probably wondering if I had been a suicide try. I didn't care. I went to my truck, which I'd expected to be gone but which was still there, seemingly in

someone's way, but still there, the door I had left open closed by someone else, and I got a cigarette from the dashboard. And I sat on the loading dock and smoked.

The sun was up without haze and it was already hot. Exhaust and donut smells wafted to me from across the street, mixed with the trash in the dumpster and urine in the alley smells of the hospitals backside, and swirled around me like old friends, city friends.

The sun felt good. Soothing.

In the time that has passed since that night and morning, Toni has kept her promises, I think, not that I remember them all. She's in school though, still has job at the supermarket, saw a therapist for a while. In many ways she's stronger now because of this, more grounded, wiser, more aware. She's probably happier. It's amazing and strange.

Smoking that cigarette that morning though, I thought back for the first of many times to the way I had found her that night. To the way things connected. To the warnings I missed before I left for Oregon, warnings so easy to see in hindsight. It is this part of the story that I keep going over and over in my mind, and it is the specific set of memories and images that I'm sure I will lug through the years. It was there on the dock, sucking tobacco in the hot morning air, that I first began to really see the things that happened. How the way she let me into her world so easily, from the hitchhike pick up, through the desert, to living in her apartment, had been part of her surrender and part of her cry for help. It had been the cry I certainly should have heard, recognized, made us both aware of and made us both respond to in a conscious way. How going through Jeff's things and getting rid of so much was a

good thing until I myself left shortly after, making it a bad thing, at least for Toni, leaving her with nothing. I had gotten involved with Toni's life, made myself important, even vital, and I had been too pre-occupied, too self-absorbed, to see it.

When I'd gotten back to the apartment that night, around eight, having driven straight through the day after the whole previous night, the place was dark and I thought she was gone or asleep. I was happy. Not for her but for me. After the long drive I wanted to be alone. I wanted to sleep.

I didn't look around and find Toni but fell immediately asleep on my couch. I woke up with a start a short time later knowing that something was wrong, something familiar. It had happened twice before, with Jeff and my mother. It's hard to describe, and I don't really need or want to, but I knew in a flash, without a shadow of a doubt, that she was dying.

I went into her room and looked in. The light from the living room illuminated the bed in the room, and her lying on it, her feet on the floor, her head raised towards me by the pillow. There were pills with the clothes on the carpet and a vodka bottle on the nightstand.

I called her name and her eyes shot open and looked directly at me. It was not normal consciousness. Her eyes were wide and wild and scared. They were familiar and strange, still alive and already dead. They did not look through me but somehow looked directly into me, into my soul or something. I swear that it was some god or angel that stepped in, that opened both of our eyes to the signs we'd both ignored. Just in time. I've seen nothing like her eyes that night before or since, and thinking of them now still makes me shiver.

She didn't move at all but held my gaze for a moment or two, til her eyes knew they had me, and in a hoarse whisper she said, "Help me."

That's when the rest of it happened.