

## **He Picked Me Up; Then He Picked Me Up Again**

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I had set aside that weekend for a one-night stand. I would be done with my grueling, six-week French course at McGill. It would be my last weekend in Montreal before going back to life in New York. I had been unable to meet anyone unless I was out of town. This would be my last opportunity for a while. Friends who wanted to visit that weekend were told that I already had plans.

At 1 a.m. on Saturday morning, I sat amidst the bright lights of the Rue St.-Denis, nursing a headache. All thoughts of a one-night stand had been set aside for the moment, not least because no viable candidate had appeared, though I had kept an eye peeled throughout an entire day of strolling, window-shopping, and café-sitting. I was at a coffeehouse where a man with a guitar was crooning a song which rhymed “parapluie” and “paradis,” and I had stepped outside between sets. I sat on a large ledge in front of a bookstore next door to the cafe, throbbing head in hands, my face completely obscured under an immense, glamorous black hat.

As I massaged my temples, I heard someone step onto the ledge next to me. The book display was small and rapidly scanned, but I felt the presence linger. I heard a voice near the edge of my hat brim.

“Are you in mourning?” a young man said in French.

I lifted my head and laughed long.

“I have a headache,” I said.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

My questioner was slim, with curly black hair, blue eyes, a high forehead, and a soft voice. His name was Jacques. He sat down on the ledge, and we talked about New York and 9/11. He told

me about the movie he had just seen and about his studies. I looked at his lips as he talked. I said to myself, *he'll do*.

I extended my stay in Montreal for a few days. The afternoon before I finally took the night train south, I tried to persuade Jacques not to come to New York.

"I don't want a long-distance relationship," I said.

We were sitting in a park, watching swans gliding across a murky pond.

"If I'm with you in New York," he said, "it won't be a long-distance relationship."

"My ex-husband came from another country to live with me in New York. I've done that," I said. "I don't want to take care of a foreigner again."

"Two people who come to the same city don't necessarily do the same thing," he said, sounding like a Chinese fortune cookie.

Toward evening, I took the sheets out of the washing machine in my sublet and hung them up to dry for the last time.

I said, "I'm starting a new job. Long hours. I won't be able to come up here for several months."

He came by Greyhound about once a month, tapping at my door just after dawn. Later, he would let himself in with the key and join me in the loft bed. As he pursued his gentle, persistent courtship, I wondered: Should I let this go forward?

Jacques was 10 years my junior. He was doing graduate work in philosophy. People I barely knew saw fit to tell me that his was not a field rife with opportunities for steady, remunerative employment. Neighbors encountered in the elevator thrust phone numbers of eligible men at me. Jews tried to fix me up with Jews so that I would not marry out. On New Year's Eve, my mother sent me an e-mail that left my sexual history and love life from age 17 up through Jacques shredded like so much Kleenex on the carpet. Her missive ended ominously: "Think about what you are doing."

A year after our one-night stand, when we had been living together for some months, we took a trip to Montreal, where we stayed with his mother in her three-story walk-up. One morning

when they were out and I was moving somnolently between bed and closet, something ripped into the left side of my chest like a knife slipping between my ribs up to the hilt. Standing up winded me. Rolling over in bed caused stabbing pains. I could not speak above a whisper. Jacques came home and got me to the emergency room.

After ruling out pneumonia and doing an X-ray, the doctor determined that my left lung had collapsed. Simple to fix, she added, as she set out her implements. A bevy of nurses clustered around my bed, stroking my forehead and talking in low tones to Jacques, whom they had decided was my husband. Then they all went away somewhere behind the curtain drawn around my bed, leaving us alone. I tugged at his tattered red plaid scarf, and he leaned down toward me.

“Will you marry me?” I croaked.

He looked as if he had been startled out of a reverie.

“*Mais, bien sûr!*” he said, as if it had all been settled long ago.

A moment later, a nurse pulled back the curtain, came in, and began daubing my left side with something cold and malodorous.

Where Jacques and I disagree is that he insists that I proposed *after* I received the morphine injection, while I am certain that I did so *before* I had been given anything which might cloud my judgment. There is no doubt that at some point I did receive morphine, which made me throw up in excess of a dozen times that night (I lost count after 13) into a basin which he held and emptied and washed so many times that no doubt he, too, lost count.

Back at the apartment the next morning, I was too weak to walk up the three flights of stairs. Jacques, thin but muscular, gathered me in his arms and began the ascent. I protested, fearing I might end up in a heap on the landing. I prepared to nip his shoulder, the nearest accessible part of him, so that he would put me down. But—I felt secure. I retracted my teeth.

“Am I very heavy?” I asked, after some time had passed.

“Like a feather,” he grunted. “A wet feather.”

I recovered speedily and nearly forgot about the episode. No one at the hospital in Montreal had provided any explanation for the collapsed lung, and I did not seek one. It seemed a fluke and was, I assumed, a one-time occurrence.

Six months later, my lung collapsed again. This time I had an operation, a six-week convalescence, and a diagnosis of a rare and incurable disease called lymphangioliomyomatosis. It was degenerative and possibly fatal. I might be dead within two years of diagnosis, as happens not infrequently, or I might hang on for 40 years, also a common outcome.

I wrote out the name of the condition on a Post-it note that I stuck above my desk. It took me a week to learn to pronounce the name. As I mastered it, syllable by syllable, I tried to understand how this disease would change my life. No more skiing or cycling. And, more important, no childbearing, as that could hasten the day when I would need an oxygen tank around the clock and a double lung transplant.

“You don’t have to marry me,” I said to Jacques. “It’s not too late to change your mind.”

“I am marrying you, not shopping for a deal,” he said.

As soon as I had recuperated from the surgery, I went into decline, becoming weaker and more breathless. Near the beginning of this downward trajectory, Jacques and I got married, our wedding presided over by a rabbi from Montreal who performed the ceremony in a mix of French, English, and Hebrew.

All of this—the diagnosis, the wedding, the ban on childbearing—happened jumbled together within a few months. Jacques continues to work at his doctorate in philosophy, having transferred to a university in New York. He has taken on the chores I can no longer do: vacuuming, grocery shopping, cleaning the kitchen floor. I go to work, panting as I haul myself up the stairs from the subway. I struggle to support us and to hide my condition from my employer, who has yet to give me a permanent contract with health insurance or a disability clause. When my earnings do not cover the bills, low-percentage credit card offers take up the slack. I dwell resentfully on the fact that Jacques is not contributing financially. We talk often about what will happen if and when I

become too sick to work. In our best-case scenario, that happens *after* he finishes school and finds a decent teaching job.

Recently my mother has taken to saying, “Thank God for Jacques.” During a late-night conversation at Thanksgiving, my father told Jacques that he and my mother are “grateful” to him for taking care of me and, I suppose, for marrying me. (Dear souls, they still think we met *inside* the bookstore, in the broad light of afternoon.) Forgetting for a moment, as I often do, that I am sick and getting sicker, I wonder if I am such a lousy catch that my parents feel that they must thank my husband for taking me on. If only they knew that our particular version of in- sickness-and-in-health was born in a one-night stand.