

His Favorite Memory

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The only shame is to have none.
(Blaise Pascal)

PART I

Mike looked around the bedroom and waited. Tom had said he'd be in to talk in five minutes. But that was twenty minutes ago. Mike should have been using the time to book a hotel room, but if he pulled out his phone and searched, he would have to admit that he was talking the first step on a journey he never believed would happen to him. But still, he did not cry.

He stood up to leave, quite sure that Tom had become distracted by the naked young man he had just filmed.

"Mike," Tom called from the stairs, which he took two at a time.

"Bedroom," Mike called but kept his eyes focused on the duvet on the king size bed. He could recall the day, the place and even what the two of them had had for lunch on the day he bought this particular duvet almost five years ago.

"Sorry," Tom said, out of breath as he entered the room. There was silence for a moment. "What's all this?"

Mike took a deep breath. "I'm going to move out for a while. I need to think."

"You're leaving me?" Tom didn't seem surprised, or angry.

"Just for a while," Mike said. "I need a quiet place to think."

Tom opened his mouth as if he had something to say, but only raised his shoulders, arms out to the side, and stared.

"I'm not leaving because I don't love you anymore, Tom. I'm leaving because I have loved you as best and as completely as I

know how for twenty years."

"I thought you were fine with these guys giving me blow jobs."

"I was. I am. I'm not leaving because I'm not enough for you, Tom. I'm leaving because nothing will ever be enough for you." Mike gripped the handle of the suitcase. "You have money now. You're not the frustrated postman who failed *again*. You're a huge success with guys coming from all over the place to be featured in your videos."

"Then I don't understand." Tom appeared as if he did understand.

"What's today's date?"

"October 3." Tom said with a shrug.

"How long has your business been operating as of this coming October 3?"

"Six years."

Mike hesitated and bites lip to keep from crying. "The Tom I met and fell in love with was poor, frustrated and told me I was everything he ever wanted. I remember that Tom very well. Flowers, shared baths, endless hours of us dreaming about what our life together would be like. *That* Tom would have remembered why today is special. But he's not here anymore, so I need to go and wait somewhere else. Somewhere less painful."

"It's painful to be here with me?" Tom's expression changed to one of disbelief. But not angry disbelief, rather disbelief that he would ever hear something like this from Mike.

"To be with this Tom, yes."

"Jesus. This Tom, that Tom," he shouted, running his hands over the stubble on his head. "Just tell me what today is. Please?"

"Six years ago, you decided to leave your dead-end job at the post office and decide to pursue your dream. After months of being turned down by all the banks, I gave you the rest of the money you needed. Not loaned. Gave. Do you remember what you did after I gave you the check, Tom?"

"I took you out to that restaurant where we had our first date, we sat at our table and..."

"I spent the entire evening, at the restaurant and then here in our home, looking at a man I was determined to help become the success I always knew he would be. I spent the entire evening and every day since then doing whatever I could to make you see what I saw."

Tom said nothing. He shrugged.

Mike picked up his suitcase off the bed and fished his keys out of the pocket of his jeans.

"You've benefited from this business too, you know."

"Benefited?"

Tom swept his arms around him. "Who do you think bought all of this? All of the vacations we go on?"

Mike smiled and nodded. "You know," he said as he reached for his wallet. "I've been feeling this way for almost six months, and

I've tried to talk to you about it, but you usually told me you were busy or that it would have to wait. So I waited. And waited. And then waited some more."

"Listen, Mikey--"

"And I was sitting in my classroom at the college when I had this horrifying revelation: what if Tom actually thinks I should be grateful to be living in this house, knowing what goes on in those bedrooms?"

"Will you please--"

Mike put the suitcase back on the bed, by the garment bag, and took out a folded slip of paper from his wallet. "You can let me know if the amount has changed. You kept telling me that you didn't want me to help pay for the mortgage. That very night, after dinner, in fact, you told me that I was the only person you could count on." Mike hefted the garment bag on his shoulder and picked up his suitcase again. "And by the way, during those vacations, I was usually alone for most of them while you were trying to recruit new and undiscovered *talent* for your website."

Tom opened the piece of paper and shook his head. "I don't want this."

"Do you even know what it is?"

"A certified bank draft," Tom said, glancing up briefly. "For your half of the mortgage payments?"

"You would never take them, so I opened an account and put the money in there."

"Why? Just so you could throw the money back at me one day?"

"No, Tom," Mike said moving past him. "Because you told me, on our third date, that you were terrible with money, that it was the one thing that always seemed to slip through your fingers." Mike smiled and chuckled. "And it was true. You were just awful with money. I even had to keep the books for you while you started your website."

"I have an accountant for all that now."

"I know," Mike said. He turned around and headed for the garage. "I hired him for you because you said you wouldn't recognize a good one from a bad one."

"What do you want from me, Mikey?"

"The same thing I've always wanted from you, Tom."

Tom shrugged and folded his arms over his chest. "I do love you. I tell you all the time."

"And if one of these eighteen-year old boys you film *tells* you he gives an amazing blow job, would that convince you? No, of course not, you'd want them to *show* you."

Tom scrubbed at his forehead for a minute and then glared at Mike. "So it is about my website." Tom seemed very self-satisfied if his grin was any indication.

"Of course it is," Mike said as he walked to the back of his SUV and put the suitcase and garment bag on the cement floor. "But it's more than you doing what you promised me you wouldn't with those young men. It's about me being too weak to confront you."

It's about you being too weak to honor what you told me you knew would hurt me. It's about me making a lot of decisions based on the fear of losing you, of not having you in my life anymore."

Tom pointed a finger at him. "We talked about this and I asked you about letting those boys blow me and you said--"

"I know what I said, Tom."

"Then why is *this* my fault." Tom gestured to the baggage by Mike's feet.

"It's not *your* fault, Tommy. It's *ours*." Mike opened the back door and put the suitcase and bag on the backseat. "We used to do everything together. You were my best friend. We used to lie in bed at night and talk about everything. Now? Nothing. I lie in bed, alone, while you edit those clips." Mike closed the door and walked back to where Tom was standing. "At least four times a week, I go in there with a mug of coffee and wake you up because you've fallen asleep."

Tom smiled and stuffed the check in the pocket of Mike's shirt.

"When I find a place, I'll call and let you know."

Tom shook his head. "Nah, don't bother. You're not the person I fell in love with either."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but I assure you that I am the same Mike."

"Let me ask you a question, Mikey: when did you become a quitter? Huh? The Mikey I knew, the one I fell in love with, wasn't a quitter."

Mike looked down at Tom's left hand, at the tell-tale sign that Tom was nervous, in too far over his head, but too stubborn to admit he needed help. He knew that this was the new passive-aggressive Tom speaking. The one who liked to bluff but forgot about his tell, a cocky rookie on the poker-playing circuit who still had some things to learn.

He put his hand over Tom's, the left hand, the one with the forefinger picking at the cuticle of the thumb beside it. "I guess I decided to quit when the other team changed the rules of the game." Mike cleared his throat, holding the strong hand in his, preventing Tom from picking the cuticle until it bled. "I don't have a problem with being called names, Tom. I've thought this through, as I have every other decision in my life."

"Okay," Tom said, wrenching his hand free. "Fine. I guess I'll see you around then, huh?"

Mike allowed the door, of his own home, to be shut in his face. He touched the door and remembered the fun the two of them had had renovating this house, making it the very epitome of their dream home. This particular door had been painted fairly quickly because Mike had promised to do anything if he wouldn't have to pick up a paint brush ever again. Tom had rolled paint on the door so quickly that they both had splatters all over their bodies, which they'd then washed off in the shower, together.

The memory made him smile, but he turned to the SUV and got in.

PART II

Fucking ungrateful prick.

Tom stood on the other side of the garage door and listened to Mike start the engine and drive away.

Forever? Or just until I come begging?

"Fuck if I'll ever do that? I've worked my fucking ass off to get where I am." Tom headed back to the spare bedroom, to say goodbye to the tanned blond nineteen-year old who'd just sucked him off not twenty minutes ago. Tom smiled to himself as he thought of those pink lips wrapped around his dick, the way the blond had impressed him by suckling his dick as he came down from another explosive climax.

"Okay, Eric," Tom said as he turned the corner into the larger spare bedroom. "I'll do my very best to put you in as many scenes as possible." Tom held out his hand and his assistant slapped an envelope with three hundred dollars in it. "It was a great shoot. Lots of good footage. And one of the best cum shots I've ever filmed."

"Thanks," the young blond said, freshly scrubbed from a shower. He took the envelope and jammed it in the pocket of his jeans.

"Sylvia will show you out."

The young man nodded and followed Sylvia, leaving Tom, alone, to tell himself he didn't really care that Mike was gone.

"Connor," Sylvia said when she came back into the room.

"I thought Eric was the last one for today," Tom said. He stopped packing away his equipment and turning off the monitors.

"That was your last session, but his name is Connor. Not Eric."

"Whatever," Tom muttered and finished closing everything down for the night. He stopped suddenly and looked over at the woman who'd worked for him since he'd started his business. "Can I ask you something?"

"Not if you don't want the truth," Sylvia said as she clicked the mouse and tapped the keyboard furiously.

"Have I changed in the time we've known each other?"

"Yes."

Tom opened his eyes wide, in disbelief. "You don't even need to think?"

"No."

Tom shook his head and pushed the keyboard away from her. "Focus, would you?"

"I am focusing, Tom. On my job." Sylvia took the keyboard back and put it in front of herself. "You're not paying me to be your friend or your confidant. This is a job. I show up, I do my job, then I get to go home and feed my children."

"How? How have I changed?"

"You've lost a balance that you once possessed."

"Sylvia?" Tom said reaching for the keyboard again. "Will you just..."

"Look, Tom," Sylvia said as he swatted his hands away. "You've always been very kind to me. After that rat-bastard of an ex left me with nothing but three children to feed, you gave me a chance and I will always be grateful. But do you know why I've never wanted to make any of this personal? Why I've told myself every day for six years that this is just a job?"

"Why?"

"Because two of my three children are boys. Eighteen and Nineteen." Sylvia's eyes flashed as she looked over at the bed. "That boy you told to suck you off? That boy whose mouth you just dumped your load in? That is some mother's baby."

"He's nineteen. He's legal."

"*That* is how you've changed, Tom."

"Why is everyone talking in code today? How? Changed how?"

Sylvia finished clicking the mouse a few more times and then reached down and grabbed her purse. She stood and moved to the door of the bedroom and then turned back to face Tom.

"When you started this, you were younger, thinner, had more hair, a little less grey in your beard. It's no wonder some of those boys came on to you so strong. They were looking for something that you could give."

"Sylvia--" Tom sighed.

"One after the other, they'd offer to suck you off or let you fuck them. And what did you say to every one of them until last year?" Sylvia raised her eyebrows and waited.

"I told them I was married."

"Wrong," Sylvia said with too much satisfaction. "You told them you wouldn't do that because it would hurt your husband."

Tom stared. He remembered those moments, smiling politely, being flattered by the advances but knowing down deep that those young boys wouldn't have looked twice at him if he hadn't been the guy in charge of putting their faces and bodies on the internet. And of course he remembered telling those who offered themselves that he would never be unfaithful to his husband.

It's just business. Good business.

"Do I show up for work tomorrow?"

Sylvia was still standing in the doorway.

"What?"

"Do I still have a job?"

Tom frowned and nodded. "Of course you do. I'll see you tomorrow," Tom said, walking slowly to meet her in the doorway. "In fact, no I won't see you tomorrow because I'm giving you the rest of the week off. I'll do everything myself. It's only Thursday and Friday."

"But--"

"I'll see you on Monday. Go and do something fun with the boys."

"Okay," Sylvia said, still skeptical. "I'll see you Monday."

"Thanks for telling me the truth, Sylvia."

"Is everything okay? Did something happen?"

"Don't worry," Tom said. "Your job is secure."

Sylvia rolled her eyes. "I meant with you, you idiot."

"Me?" Tom said defensively. He didn't really feel like talking about Mike leaving. "Perfect."

"Okay," Sylvia said with one eyebrow raised. "I don't believe you, but okay."

He walked his assistant to the front door and then closed it after watching her get into her beat-up old sedan and drive away.

"That's it?" He muttered as he turned to face the empty house. "I'm a highly sexual person and they're trying to tell me I'm wrong?"

That's not what they said. The thought came from somewhere deep inside his brain. The voice was faint, but he recognized it. It was that same voice he'd heard before, usually just before he was about to make another momentous change to his life. When he'd first met Mike at Pride one weekend, when it was still a small gathering of nothing but men who were fighting for the right to live free and openly. Or when he'd decided to ask Mike to move in with him. To marry him. He used to think it was Mike's voice encouraging him to trust in himself and them. *Do you still love him?*

"And besides, Mike and I discussed it and he told me he would be fine with me becoming interactive with the models." Tom studied the empty rooms. He could still smell his own musk from dumping his load on that young blond's face.

But do you still love him?

Tom walked through the living room and into the laundry room to get the machine for the carpet, the small one that did a pretty thorough job of cleaning out the cum stains.

Why don't you want to think about this?

"Because it doesn't bear thinking about," he said as he checked the solution level and headed to clean up his DNA from the area rug. "I'm not wrong. I was always honest with Mike. Told him I was letting those guys suck me off because I'd gotten tons of feedback from fans of the site wanting to see me."

Ah yes, the great compromise: you'd only show yourself from the neck down. Shirt on, pants around your knees. Just your dick.

Tom nodded and stripped the bed. He tossed the sheets in the hallway and then got to work on the area rug.

But it hasn't just been your dick, has it? What about the three or four times you've kissed some of the models? What about those five who begged you to fuck them, and you did. You turned the cameras off, sent Sylvia on a last-minute errand and fuck those boys to within an inch of their lives.

"They're not boys," Tom yelled to the empty room, barely hearing himself over the hum of the carpet cleaner. "They're all eighteen years old."

True, but does that mean they knew what they were asking for? You're very good at hearing only what you want to hear.

"Fuck," Tom huffed and sat back on his heels. "It was a business

decision. A *good* business decision. Membership went up almost twenty-seven percent."

But what did you lose in that bargain? When was the last time Mikey told you how proud he was of you? Like he used to. When was the last time he looked at you, just the two of you cuddled in bed, with his big brown eyes looking at you as if you'd hung the very stars in the sky?

"He should have told me the truth then, right? I mean, for fuck's sake, I'm not a mind reader."

No, you're not. But you do have a brain. And you used to have a heart. A heart that beat a little faster whenever you saw Mikey, held him, kissed him. When was the last time you kissed him for no reason? When was the last time you told him that he's the only person who ever stuck by you, believed in you?

"But that's not true anymore," Tom bellowed with some satisfaction. "Is it? Huh? Got you there."

Isn't it? Is his disappointment with you or with Mr. Spurtin' Spartan?

"Spurtin' Spartan isn't me," Tom said as he checked the area rug one last time for any missed spots. It seemed like he'd gotten all of them. He left the machine off to the side of the bed. He had two models tomorrow, so he decided to leave the machine where it was.

Then why is he making all of the decisions? Why is he the only face you present to the world now?

"That's just bullshit," Tom said and got off his knees.

After collecting the sheets, he shoved them in the washer, threw in some detergent and set the timer. He pushed the button just as his phone chirped.

He took it out of his pocket and accepted the call.

"Hey, Alonzo. How are you, sweetness?" Tom was hard already. One of his favorite models. *A thirty-five year old model*, he thought smugly. *I launched his career in porn. He's one of the biggest names today because of me.*

"Tommy, baby," Alonzo purred. "I'm in Toronto right now. Downtown. Any chance we can meet?"

"Sure," Tom said, not having to think twice. "Give me about two hours."

"Okay," Alonzo sighed. "I'll just have to watch myself on your website 'till then. I miss you inside me, papi."

"Not for long," Tom said, rubbing his cock through his jeans.

"Westin on Harbour. Room 1513."

"See you soon," Tom growled into the phone. He hung up and forgot all about his troubles, until the voice reminded him of another promise he'd made to Mike.

You would never interact with the models with the cameras off. Never outside of the bedroom, never alone, and you would never do anything other than oral.

"Ah," Tom said, smiling like he'd just won the argument. "He left

me. I can fuck my way across the country if I want."

PART III

Alonzo answered the door wearing nothing. As usual. The man positively oozed sex. He was a little shorter than six feet, tight body, great abs and a dick almost as big as Tom's. But the man's ass was why he'd become an overnight sensation. Within twelve hours of uploading the two videos he'd made of Alonzo from their two-hour session, Tom's site--and phone--had been inundated with calls. Friends, fans, film producers. Everyone wanted to know how they could get Alonzo to do whatever he was willing to do. And Alonzo had thanked him plenty over the years.

Even the second half of their two-hour session, Tom had fucked that boy like they'd both been in solitary for a year. Alonzo was begging for it, pleading with Tom to fuck him like the whore he was. How was Tom supposed to refuse? He was only human after all.

"Papi," Alonzo gushed and threw himself into Tom's arms.

"Baby," Tom whispered against Alonzo's ear and kicked the door closed with his foot.

As soon as the hiss was followed by the click of the latch, Alonzo was on his knees, tearing open the buttons and devouring Tom's cock. Tom stripped off his shirt and put his hands on Alonzo's head, pushing his mouth farther onto his erection.

"Lonzo," Tom sighed. "Still give the best head."

"Only to you, Tommy." Alonzo looked up from under the long lashes. "Fuck, I miss this dick."

"You've had some of the best in the business."

"But they don't all know how to use it like you."

He wants something from you. Just like last time.

"Whatever," Tom said in answer to the voice. He threw his head back as Alonzo swallowed his entire length and then did that contraction thing, like a snake swallowing a mouse. "Fuck, yes, whatever he wants."

There was a time you said that about Mikey as well.

"He left me," Tom hissed as he looked back down at Alonzo's tight bubble ass. "Come here," he said, grabbing Alonzo roughly and pushing him to the bed. "You know what, baby? This dick has missed you too." Tom tore open a condom from his pocket and rolled it on.

He pushed the head of his cock against Alonzo's bare hole and let spit dribble out of his mouth. It landed perfectly just before Alonzo's hand reached around and spread it over the condom and his own hole.

"Fuck me, papi. Show me how a real man fucks."

"Fuck yeah," Tom said. He pushed inside, to the hilt, and closed his eyes. "Oh, yeah, Lonzo. My sweet baby boy." He pulled out, opening his eyes so he could watch himself slam inside again and again.

"Yeah, yeah, fucking monster dick," Alonzo moaned below him.

Why didn't you ever tell Mike about fucking Alonzo?

"What?" Tom huffed as he gripped Alonzo's hips tighter and ground his hips around and around again in a circle.

"Fucking monster dick," Alonzo repeated.

Remember the three days afterward, when you were consumed with guilt that you hadn't been able to stop yourself from breaking your promise to Mike? You'd made the decision to tell him and beg his forgiveness. Why did you never tell him?

"Fucking fantastic feeling," Tom said to both Alonzo and the voice.

"Could do this all night lone," Alonzo panted lowering his head to the pillow, pushing his ass farther in the air.

Maybe you should divorce Mikey. You're not a very good husband, or friend, or lover, or companion.

"I should," Tom said as he felt his balls pull up. "I will," he said as he pulled out of Alonzo and flipped him on his back. He crawled quickly up to straddle the young man's face and then leaned forward. He stuck his cock in Alonzo's hungry mouth and shot his load, the porn star lapping up every last drop.

Do you honestly think you're the best he's ever had? The guy has been fucked, in front of cameras, for the past six years by some of the best bodies, biggest dicks and prettiest faces that money can buy. And you're the best fuck he's ever had? Seriously? I mean, for fuck's sake, you didn't even notice that he hasn't touched himself once. During that two-hour session six years ago, he managed three cum shots for you. And now?

Tom collapsed on the bed. "Come here, baby," he cooed, reaching out for Alonzo. "Let me suck you dry."

"Maybe later," Alonzo said. "We need to talk about my contract."

Told you so.

"What about it?" Tom let go of Alonzo. He was still breathing hard.

"Eagle Studios wants me to star in a new series. Exclusive. Minimum of ten films."

"And?"

"I can't have a valid contract with any other company."

"Your contract with me is up in six months."

"I need out now."

Tom looked at him. "You could have just asked me, you know. You didn't have to go through all of this."

"Oh, papi," Alonzo cooed. "But aren't you happy I did?"

Tom smiled weakly. The endorphins were a nice welcome after the day he'd had. But happy? Not really.

"Okay," Tom said finally. "Consider yourself a free agent. No strings."

"Thanks, Tommy," Alonzo said and hopped off the bed. He grabbed his phone and walked into the bathroom, chatting animatedly with someone named Brick.

Did you think you were the only one who had any power here?

Tom closed his eyes.

Oh, no. This is rich. You honestly thought he had feelings for you, didn't you? Believed all those lies he told in the interviews about him owing you everything and how you showed him that this industry still has real men of character.

Tom ignored the high-pitched cackle taunting him and got to his feet. He tucked himself back in his jeans and left, without saying goodbye. He wondered if Alonzo would even notice.

Heading outside, he realized he had nothing but an empty house to return to. He was alone, at six o'clock in the evening, on a Thursday.

You could call him. Tell him you were wrong to send him away like that.

"Fuck that," he said. A woman passing by glanced at him, gave him the finger.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and opened up the new app he'd installed a couple of weeks ago. He touched the screen at every prompt and was soon looking at a whole host of beautiful faces and great bodies. Every single one of them was there, in the city, within a few block radius of him. The only decision he had to make now was which one was going to be the lucky recipient of his nine-inch dick.

Before he could even really decide, he saw Alonzo's profile come up. Which made sense, considering the app was designed to point out which men, perhaps looking for the same thing you were,

were closest to you.

"Fuck that," he said again, sotto voce this time. "Nothing but a little whore that one."

But isn't that why you liked him? Isn't that what you look for in all of your models? No filter, no hang-ups, no strings? Isn't that what you think about when you come like a geyser in their mouths?

He turned off his phone without choosing anyone and headed to the garage to retrieve his vehicle. Tom had decided that he would go home, have a few beer and then get a good night's sleep before editing this week's videos. He got into his vehicle and started the engine just as his phone chirped again. He took it out and looked at the text message.

Thank you, papi. Xoxo

The message had a somewhat negative effect on him and the surge of resentment frightened him.

Ah, did he hurt your feelings?

"I made that little fucker who he is," Tom said, reversing without looking.

Please. Spare us all. If it hadn't been you, it would have been some other 'talent scout' out to exploit young men for profit.

"I don't exploit anyone." Tom pulled his car onto Yonge Street and headed back north. "There are very long talks so the boys know exactly what they're in for."

Long talks? Is that what you call those? Long talks? Telling some

guy what will be required, no room for discussion. When's the last time you ever took 'no' for an answer without kicking the kid out of your house?

Tom just shook his head and drove home.

PART IV

With the hotel card in his hand, Mike headed out onto Bloor Street, trying to decide how to spend the rest of his evening. It was just after six on a Wednesday evening. There may be house work, cleaning, cooking or even laundry to do, but Tom would be taking care of himself for a while, perhaps permanently. The thought didn't make Mike sad, not really. The only word to describe what he felt at that realization was *pensive*.

Having come up with no better alternative, Mike headed into the huge bookstore that occupied three levels of prime real estate at the corner of Bloor and Bay Streets and headed straight for the fiction section. He'd had enough of reality for one day, wanting nothing more than to find a really good book and get lost for the next few hours.

Mike perused the fiction section alphabetically, trying to remember the name of the author he'd last read. He could remember the first name but not the last, which didn't help him in the slightest. By the time he reached the K section, he gave up and decided to go and use one of the computers that were dotting the aisles, not really sure if they were for employees only.

I guess I'll find out soon enough, he thought as he stood before the closest and studied the screen.

He opened up a browser window and typed in the name of the series and author's first name. Armed with the last name, he went directly to the R section and began looking for any new books by James Rollins. He was surprised to find how prolific this author had

been during the last eighteen months.

You've probably read them and forgotten, he scolded himself.

And it was true. During the academic year, when his course load at the college was completely filled, Mike was usually far too busy to remember much about the books he read for pleasure. The details were quickly replaced with student names, assistants' schedules and faculty meetings details.

He squatted and reached for a particular book, not paying attention when he stood back up.

"Sorry," Mike said automatically when his shoulder hit something. He looked behind him to see a tall young dark-haired man with piercing blue eyes. "Excuse me." Mike felt himself blushing at the smile on the handsome face and took a few steps to the left.

"It's quite alright," the man said. "I probably should have warned you that I was in your space."

Mike nodded and flipped the book over, trying to read the synopsis. Like all of the novels in the series, this story promised to be another thrilling adventure featuring some of Mike's favorite characters. He tucked the book under his left arm and, not really seeing any other reason to linger, searched for the nearest place to pay. He began walking when he felt a hand on his elbow.

"I'm sorry," the same man said. This time the man's cheeks flushed pink. "I know this will sound cliché, but don't we know each other?"

"Well, have you ever been a student at Ryerson?" Mike smiled and looked at the dark stubble, the cleft in the strong chin and the full bottom lip.

"No," the man said, shaking his head. "I went to U of T."

"Well, then, I guess I just have one of those faces." Mike looked down at the book in his hand and prepared to say goodbye.

"No," the man said, his eyes becoming hooded. "No, you don't. That's not a face you confuse with any other."

Mike raised his eyebrows and felt the heat rising up his neck and settling in his cheeks. "Ah," he said. "Well, thank you, but--"

"I think I remember," the man suddenly said, glancing away and wincing. "Oh, man, I shouldn't have said anything."

Mike furrowed his brow as the man began to fidget with the paperback in his big hands.

"You're Tom Spartan's partner, aren't you?"

Mike nodded.

"Well, color me very red," the man said. "I was one of his first recruits."

"Ah," Mike said, finally understanding why the man was so embarrassed. "I'm not involved in the business in any way, so I wouldn't have seen your video if that's what's worrying you."

"No," the man said. He kept touching his hand to the back of his neck, a nervous tic. "That's not it. I just remembered that when I first got there and saw you, I was really hoping that we were going

to be doing something together. On camera, I mean."

It took a few seconds for it all to register, but Mike blushed even harder.

"I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I made a complete ass out of myself." The young man put his hand on a shelf and leaned in. "I actually asked Tom if I could do a scene with you."

Mike flinched slightly at the thought of asking to sleep with another man's partner. "I'm sorry, but I'm feeling a little uncomfortable about this."

"I know, and I'm sorry," the man said. "Please forgive me."

Mike nodded and turned away, walking as quickly as he could to pay for the book so he could leave the store.

It wasn't the first time he'd come face-to-face with one of the many men Tom had recruited over the years, but it was the first time any one of them had said something inappropriate, yet seductive. Despite being gay, Mike had never really had much to do with the gay community and all of its labels: bears, twinkles, daddies... It all seemed a little too reminiscent of high school; a man belonged to one particular group and his value based on that classification.

After paying for the paperback and refusing a bag, Mike stuffed the receipt in amongst the pages and headed for the food court next door to the bookstore. He chose a sandwich, did accept a bag this time and headed outdoors to the hotel.

When he and Tom had first been introduced, Mike had had very little knowledge about life as a gay man. He'd been out for years,

even at work, and had been in relationships of varied lengths with three different men, but he'd never attended a Pride parade nor had any knowledge that being gay meant more than just preferring men to women. The early nineties was the time of "Angels in America" and "Philadelphia" and the American Medical Association openly opposing a 'cure' for homosexuals.

Mike had not come out to take a stand or to be controversial. He'd come out because he had honestly believed that his worth as a human being had to be tied to more than the sex of his sexual partners. No one within his circle was surprised and no one seemed to care more than to ask if he was being safe. Overall, the process--which had worried Mike a great deal--turned out to be a non-event.

He'd been young, a recent graduate with a Masters degree in Mathematics and a great job working at Ryerson University. There was the occasional party or date, but Mike was not looking for one-night stands or circle jerks or anything of the other horrifying things he'd heard about when he first ventured out to see what being gay really meant. In the end, Mike was a little disappointed to discover that the only thing that really interested him was finding a good honest man, buying a house and being happy together.

Mike had never had any problems finding dates, or even offers for one night of this or that, but he did find himself growing frustrated at the sheer number of men who were not looking for a monogamous relationship. It was as if being gay, to most men, meant they were free to become selfish and excessively hedonistic. It wasn't something Mike wanted to be a part of, but he still found

himself at social gatherings from time to time. And one particular social gathering, Mike noticed a tall bear of a man sitting on the railing of the backyard deck. He had a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Black hair parted on the side, not too long and not too short, a well-maintained beard and just enough muscle and fat to make him appear normal.

Despite wanting to, Mike did not approach him. He convinced himself that a man like that could not possibly be single. Or, if he was, he was capitalizing on such good looks to get as much tail as he possibly could. But later on in the evening, when Mike was having difficulty starting his car, Tom approached him to offer his assistance.

They chatted about how neither of them really knew anything about cars, and about how neither was bright enough to buy a membership to CAA. Mike was enchanted by the bright blue eyes, the smile, the muscles that rippled along Tom's forearms and his disarming lack of pretension.

"I think it might be the battery, and I don't have my car here. Otherwise I'd give you a boost."

"That's okay," Mike had said. "Thank you for trying, Tom."

"Let me see if someone inside can help us out."

The way Tom had said *us* had sent little tremors all along Mike's spine. The man was beautiful, articulate, far too insecure about himself and had not hit on Mike once. In fact, by the time Tom had returned, Mike had himself convinced that Tom was actually straight and only at the party because he came with a friend or was

the host's brother or some such similarly simple explanation.

Once Tom located the keys for the host's SUV, Tom had worked alongside Mike to get the vehicle going again. In all, the entire adventure had taken no more than thirty minutes, but it had been the best thirty minutes of the entire evening for Mike. And he told Tom so.

"Me too, actually," Tom had said, his cheeks turning red.

"May I drop you somewhere?"

"What if we're on the 401 and it stalls on us again. It's supposed to get much cooler tonight."

Mike had laughed and leaned a little closer. "We could cuddle for warmth." He'd surprised himself with how bold and bawdy he was being with Tom, who didn't really seem to mind at all.

"What if it doesn't stall? Can we still cuddle?"

Mike had laughed at that. "I'd like that, I'm sure."

"I *know* I'd like that," Tom had said before disappearing to return the jumper cables to the host.

An hour later, they lay on Mike's queen size bed, naked and sweaty, their bodies entwined, their breathing slowly returning to normal. Kissing lazily, enjoying the feel of each other's bodies, learning everything that most people know about each other before they slept together, Mike realized that his life and his dreams would always feature Tom Spartan.

PART V

Tom finished editing this week's clips and checked the time. Just after ten in the evening. He thought briefly of seeing what might be available for an evening hook-up on Scruff or Grindr and then he saw the ancient folder on his desktop. It was the folder that only appeared with his log-in name. No one who worked for him had access to these particular files.

He clicked on the one marked with the year 1993 - 1994. Tom had always been an avid photographer and loved wandering around the city, early in the morning, snapping pictures of scenes that caught his eye. This particular folder also happened to be the one that contained all of those early images of a cold Mikey, a sleepy Mikey or Mikey in the kitchen fixing them the kinds of meals that had helped Tom gain twenty pounds since they'd been together.

Mikey never did mind the weight gain.

"It makes you even sexier," Mikey would say as he undid the buttons of Tom's shirt and caressed his growing belly. "It looks good on you."

Tom smiled at how that conversation had ended.

You two used to fuck like bunnies in those early days.

Tom frowned. The voice was back.

Who said I ever left? I wasn't really interested in commenting while you were editing those videos of you sticking your dick in some teenager's throat.

"Why the sudden change? You've got an opinion on everything else I do."

I'm supposed to. I'm you. The you Mike fell in love with. The you Mike couldn't live without. The you Mike used to look at with awe and wonder. The you who used to look at him that way.

"Go ahead and say it, for fuck's sake. The you that would never have looked twice at someone like Alonzo when Mike was at home and waiting."

It's true.

"I know," Tom muttered as he pulled up the first folder.

Did you just agree with me?

"What happened to me?"

Tom opened the folder and clicked on the oldest picture of Mike and him. He'd explained to Mike about liking to venture out early in the morning and take pictures. Mike had smiled and said that he found the idea charming and romantic. The next thing Tom knew, they were headed to Tom's place in that menace of a vehicle to retrieve his Nikon.

Three hours they spent walking around downtown Toronto. Parks, museums, schools, trees, animals, other people. Tom snapped picture after picture, astonished when Mike would point something out to him and it turned out to make a better picture than anything that had caught Tom's eye.

You fell in love with him that day, didn't you?

"Yeah," Tom sighed and continued opening pictures from the same folder. "One of the best days of my life."

You should call him.

"No," Tom said, closing the folder and shutting down the computer. "He left me."

Do you understand why?

"Doesn't matter," Tom said, picking up his smart phone and pulling up Scruff. "He doesn't want to be with me, then I'll find someone who will."

Tom saw the list of men nearby, checking their photographs and feeling like a kid in a candy store.

Right away, he received a message. He checked the profile, but it was for an older man, not very attractive, who just typed *Wanna fuck?* and nothing else. He ignored the message and returned to surfing. Tom was looking for his type. Young, blond, hairless, a kid who liked to be fucked by a thick-dicked daddy. Some little twink who would moan and writhe underneath him and call him *Sir* and do whatever he was told to do.

You do realize that's a fantasy, right? You do realize that any eighteen-year old who's willing to give that to you is not really looking for a date to the prom.

"Not looking for a prom date, thanks."

What are you looking for?

"Someone I can fuck the shit out of and then get some sleep."

Why does it have to be a teenager? That first guy seemed attractive.

"Too old. Too fat."

You do realize you're old and fat, right?

"I got an ace in the hole. No pun intended."

Oh, right. You're a big-time producer.

"And performer. Fans write all the time saying they want to see my big dick getting sucked off."

They also write that they'd like you to show your face. Why don't you ever show your face?

"Same reason I don't shoot anywhere upstairs. Promised Mikey."

You also promised him you would never kiss any of the models, or sleep with them.

"Jesus," Tom said, throwing down his phone onto the surface of the desk. "That was a business decision. Mikey said he understood."

What did you expect him to say? He loves you, would do anything to help you.

"If he doesn't have the stomach for it, then maybe he should have left a long time ago."

And where would you be if he had? You'd still be at the post office, schlepping letters all over that route in Etobicoke if you hadn't met Mikey and fallen in love with him.

"Your opinion. I would have figured it out on my own. Eventually."

Eventually?

"You're making it sound like Mikey is the reason I'm successful."

Isn't he? Isn't he the reason you finally stopped dreaming and did something? Isn't he the reason that a thirty-nine year old mailman finally had the balls to see himself as more than just a middle-aged government employee?

Tom shook his head and picked his phone back up, staring at the screen.

Come on. Call him. Tell him you'd like to have coffee. Use some of that same wit that got him in bed an hour after meeting you.

"Not everything is as easy as that."

No, actually, everything else is easier compared to you, Tom.

"Me? What's so complicated about me?"

You're obviously unhappy right now and you and I both know the reason. It's because Mikey has lost that captivating zeal he once felt whenever he looked at you.

"Yeah, well, that doesn't mean I'm calling him. I didn't do anything wrong."

We're going in circles.

"Then shut the fuck up."

A message popped up on his screen. The kid was tall, blond, loved sucking big dicks and was asking him over. He typed in *On my way* and headed out the front door.

He followed the map on his screen and found himself at an apartment building. He quickly texted the blond, alerting him and was soon buzzed into the building. A follow-up text led him to the fifth floor and then he saw him. The kid was standing there, at his door, completely naked.

"Joey?"

The blond nodded and walked into his apartment. Tom followed.

No sooner had Tom entered the apartment than the door was closed and Joey was on his knees, clambering to get inside Tom's jeans.

"Oh fuck," Tom hissed when Joey's full lips wrapped around his semi-hard cock.

Joey pulled the jeans down to Tom's ankles without missing a beat. His tongue was doing amazing things and his hands were finding every single one of Tom's sensitive spots.

"Yeah," Tom sighed as he looked down. He brushed a hand over the soft blond hair.

Joey batted it away.

"Fuck," Tom hissed and reached to pinch Joey's left nipple.

Joey pulled off long enough to find Tom's two wrists and hold

them against the door. Then he returned his considerable talents to sucking whatever Tom had left after Alonzo.

Tom couldn't be sure just how long he was in there, but it was long enough for sweat to form between Joey's palms and his wrists. The heat and the smells did what they always did to Tom.

"Gonna come," Tom called out.

Joey stayed where he was, sucking Tom like he'd never been sucked before.

"Gonna come, Joey," Tom repeated.

Joey's grip became firmer on his wrists. He doubled his efforts to make Tom explode in his mouth.

Tom closed his eyes and did just that. He called out, a long string of expletives, until the waves subsided. He was still in Joey's mouth. When he was softer, Joey pulled off, tucked him back inside the jeans and then zipped him up. He dodged Tom's attempt to show affection by stroking his belly or reaching to get him off as well. Joey put a hand behind Tom and pulled open the door.

With Tom once again in the hallway, and not having said a single word, Joey closed the door to his apartment.

What the fuck was that?

Tom shrugged and walked back to the stairs.

And why wouldn't he pull off? Is he trying to kill himself?

"I don't know," Tom barked as he made his way down to the lobby. "Why don't you ask him?"

So? What was it like to live every guy's fantasy?

"What fantasy?"

Being used just for your body. No commitments, just send a gusher down a willing throat and then go home and sleep.

"People have that fantasy?"

You didn't?

"No." Tom entered the lobby and headed back home. "At least with the models, there's some intimacy. I know them. I know something about them before we do anything sexual."

Know something? Please. You ask them if they're gay, straight or bi. You ask them about when they started sucking dick and whether they enjoy it. And then you ask them if they want to suck you off. You never asked Mike any of those questions before you two ended up in bed together.

"That was twenty years ago."

Mike's favorite color?

"Blue."

His favorite movie?

"Where the Red Fern Grows."

His favorite book?

Tom paused for a moment. "Fiction or non-fiction." He didn't bother waiting for the answer. "'The Boys', a story about a group of boys who survived the atrocities of the Nazi death camps and

reunited as often as they could afterward. And 'How Green Was My Valley', because it was his mother's favorite. He read it to her every night after she had her stroke."

Tom was at the gate to the house, his hand resting on the latch. He could see the two of them, Mike and his mother, in the spare bedroom, lit only by the lamp. Mikey would have his hand over hers as he read to her. Mikey had been like that with Tom's mother too until she passed away. Mike's mother had suffered a stroke and lingered for only a couple of more weeks. But Tom's mother had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's years before she passed.

And yet through it all, Mike was the one that she could depend on. Makes sense that Mike's mother would rely on her son, but Tom's mother?

He loves you. Cares about you. If you were sick and dying right now, he'd be right there beside you. And you know it.

"Then why did he leave me?"

Was he the first one to leave?

"Well, you didn't see me walking out of the house with suitcases now, did you?"

You're talking literal terms while I'm speaking metaphorically.

"I left him? Even metaphorically that's not true."

Are you sure?

"How did I leave him?"

Favorite restaurant?

"Fionicci's on Third."

They closed down four years ago. Owner died. Remember?

"La Trattoria?"

No. Very poor service. He hated that place. What did he cook you for your first dinner at his place?

Tom smiled. "Freshly baked pumpernickel with spinach dip. That bread was still steaming when I pulled it apart."

You liked that you could use your hands. Even made some stupid joke about being willing to lick his fingers clean if he got too filled up on bread. Lame.

"He laughed, though. God that was a magical night."

And you enjoyed the roast chicken with vegetables too.

"Not as much as dessert," Tom said as he finally released the latch and walked up to unlock the front door.

Which you had, if memory serves, near midnight?

"It was his fault," Tom laughed as he went inside and tossed his keys on the hall table. "He was the one who said we should eat with our fingers."

That's right. So, how come you can remember all that, but you can't remember anything for the past six years?

"What? You're crazy. I remember everything for the past six years."

What was the vehicle he had before his SUV?

"He had a Ford Taurus," Tom said smugly as he went to the master bathroom. He turned on the water and then stopped. "Or was it a Acura?"

Neither. His SUV is ten years old. And he bought it new.

"So what? That doesn't prove anything. He left me."

Enough with the going around in circles. Just admit you cut him out of your life when something better and more exciting came along. When you finally discovered a way of getting into teenaged boys' pants.

"That's disgusting."

But even as Tom said the words, he knew the voice was right. The idea to get involved with the models had turned him on like nothing had before.

What's your favorite memory of him?

"Easy one. I saved for an entire year and on our two-year anniversary, I surprised him with that cruise to Alaska he'd always wanted to go on."

Remember the look on his face when he saw those orcas swimming alongside the ship?

"Yeah," Tom said as he got under the water and washed himself from head to toe. "He was like a kid during his first visit to Disneyland."

Remember the way you made love each night? Slow and steady, pleasing each other until the two of you--

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

Do you know his favorite memory of you?

"Good night."

PART VI

Mike left his office just after five in the evening. He had two apartments to see this evening, some notes to revise for Monday's lectures and a stack of pop-quizzes to correct. He was busy, but smiling. Hopefully, within the last two days of finally standing up to Tom and embarking on a life of his own, Mike would have a new place and some peace and quiet. He hitched his briefcase a little higher on his shoulder and noticed someone leaning against his SUV.

It was Tom. Tom was leaning against his SUV.

Panic set in right away. "Is everything okay? Is it your dad?"

Tom shook his head. "No, Mikey. Everything's fine."

"Did you change your mind about the check? For my half of the mortgage payments, I mean."

"No."

As he approached, Mike slowed his pace and furrowed his brow. "I don't understand."

Tom took a folded sheet of paper out of his shirt pocket and held it out for Mike.

Mike took it. "What's this?"

"Read it."

Mike opened it and saw the welcome page for Tom's website. "It's your website."

"Halfway down."

Mike scanned the page and saw the announcement: "Spurtin's Spartans will be closing down, permanently, by the end of the summer." He read it out loud. "Why are you--"

"What's your favorite memory of me?"

"What?"

"My favorite memory of you is when I surprised you with that cruise to Alaska," Tom said as he took his hands out of his pockets. He took the briefcase off Mike's shoulder and put it on his own.

Mikey was confused, but smiling. It was one of his favorite memories as well. "Tom? Is everything--"

"Please? Just this one question and then I'll leave."

Mike started blinking rapidly, the tears coming far too quickly.

Tom moved closer and put an arm around his shoulders. He didn't utter a word.

"Just before you launched your website, after your mother passed away..."

Tom didn't rush him. He was stroking Mike's shoulder.

"You would come home from work and we'd eat dinner together. You'd kiss me and tell me how good it was, like you always did. And then you'd sit out in the backyard for hours with your father." Mike sniffled and wiped at his eyes. "I would look out at the two of you. You would have your arm around him comforting him." He tried to stop his chin from quivering. "It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen you do."

Tom kissed his temple.

"I have been a prick lately, haven't I?"

Mike stared at him, confused. "What is this about, Tom?"

"I realized you were right, as usual," Tom said, bumping his hip against Mike's. "And I was hoping that you might see your way clear to forgiving me."

"I never wanted you to shut down--"

"I know," Tom said, taking Mike's keys and unlocking the doors. He threw the briefcase in the backseat and then handed the keys back to Mike. "And I never asked you to take care of my mother for all those years, but you did anyway because you loved me."

Mike held the keys tightly as Tom kissed him softly on the lips. "Love you still."

"Thank you," Tom said as he took a step back. "I didn't realize how much I missed what we had until..." He waved a hand in the air. "Just... Thank you."

"Where are you parked?"

"Took the subway."

Mike hesitated too long and Tom started to walk away. "May I drop you somewhere?"

Tom turned and laughed. "What if it stalls while we're on the 401?"

Mike grinned and walked toward Tom. They had a lot to talk about, but Mike hadn't felt this kind of hope in years.

Tom tilted his head to one side and offered a sincere smile.

Mike put a hand on his chest. "We could cuddle for warmth."

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