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THE NIGHT I MET ME

BY STEVEN GILLIS

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One night, as this particular story goes, I sat beside me at a bar. I was having a quick drink, and there I was, eating fish and pasta on a yellow plate. I was much older, with hair thinned and ears large, a few spider veins on my cheek and hands. I'd come downtown to give a reading, and was surprised to find me there.

The old me finished his drink, and when the bartender asked if I'd like another, I told him, "I would, but I shouldn't." My hand shook as I gripped my fork and brought small bites of food up to my mouth. My fingers were thin and long. I noticed the wedding band I now wore was missing. I sipped my whiskey, glanced at my watch, leaned over and said, "Excuse me, but you look familiar."

"Do I?" The older me glanced up from his plate. My voice had not so much changed as worn away, like the grooves in an old vinyl record run down over the years. There was a slight trace of sauce at the side of my mouth which I wiped off with the back of my hand. I had an old man's habit of keeping my jacket on, despite the warmth inside, my arms extending out the ends of my sleeves, exposing large bony wrists.

A copy of my new novel lay beside me on the bar. I had marked the pages I intended to read, used post-it stick 'ems and a yellow hi-lighter. My reading was across the street, at Binnder's Books. My second novel, 'Tyner's Last Stand,' had just been published by H.L. Ravine, an independent press. Unlike my wife's writing, the New York houses weren't interested in my work. My wife is the poet, Nan Ferris. You may have heard of her. She's the one who's poem, 'Parish Extreme,' caused a twenty second blackout when performed by the rapper L'il Big Britches during the Grammys last year. Despite generally kind reviews, my first novel tanked, my writing said to lack a marketable hook, neither subversive nor mainstream enough to turn a profit. Chin up, my friends insisted it didn't matter, that I had integrity and screw the big houses. Sure, yes, screw 'em. I had what again? "Integrity!" they shouted.

The older me ate his fish. I stirred the ice in my glass. I liked to drink now before I read, a few shots to put me in the proper frame of mind. I didn't used to do this. When my first novel came out, I read stone sober and dreaded the experience so much that I decided loosening up a bit could only improve my performance. When my wife read there was dancing and music, the anticipation of unexpected things to come, a crowd pushing inside the doors, rooting her on.

I introduced myself and the old me said, "I think I remember you." He smiled and I moved closer, curious to know what I was doing here. I hadn't expected to find me like this and asked, "What have I been up to?" I looked again at my bare ring finger and inquired about Nan. Six years ago the University hired us together. Nan had already published several

poems in top journals. A major house had signed her to a contract, while her PhD on the anti-Stalinist poet Anna Akhmatova won awards. I was the player thrown into the deal and not the one they wanted. That I wound up with tenure then instead of my wife was a consequence of desperate measures and back door maneuvers on the part of our department to keep Nan from leaving.

My wife was a lightning rod. Just last month she accepted a major prize wearing an abaya and reciting a sound poem, "Mr. Bush bombs Iraqi babies/All the live long day," to the tune of 'I've Been Working On The Railroad.' Initially, my wife's eccentricities were considered part of her charm. Her personality produced a popularity which, in turn, reflected favorably back on the school. As she began missing meetings and deadlines however, dodged and ignored administrative requirements, cancelled and re-scheduled classes, her reputation began taking on water. She was warned and eventually given probation. Then her book came out and was named a finalist for a dozen national and international awards. In an effort to insure Nan did not jump ship, while otherwise not compensating her for a poor academic performance, I was promoted. My wife was amused by this, the calculated conspiracy all too obvious. Whenever we quarrelled, at certain times, not often but strategically, she'd remind me, "Your gravy was cooked in my pot."

The old me cut the last bit of fish on my plate. He answered my questions indirectly, said "I'm here because of your reading."

"I appreciate that, but I've had other readings and haven't seen you there."

"Tonight's different," I said.

"Is it?" I thought at once that maybe something fantastic was going to happen with my book. Such wishfulness was never far from my mind, though I had few opportunities to make this happen. My publisher set up only the most minor tour, with stops at shops that briefly carried my book. Now and then I was invited to serve on a panel, or appear at a store or festival. I flew off then with high hopes of being discovered by a new audience, and came home like an old tire deflated. I touched my elbow, asked "Is something going to happen?"

"Of course. Something always happens."

I scratched my head, checked my watch again, signalled the bartender for my bill. Across the street, my photo was taped to the front door of Binnder's. I paid for my drink, picked up my book and started to leave the bar. The old me was slow to follow and so I stopped and asked if he was coming. He did this thing with my hand, got the bartender's attention, laid cash by my plate and put away my wallet.

We crossed the street with the old me shuffling alongside. Many of my friends were already at Binnder's, though I didn't see my wife. Nan was unpredictable. That morning she mentioned my reading twice. By the afternoon I'd not heard from her, and when I left to go downtown she'd not come back to our apartment or returned calls to her cell. I tried not to make too much of this. For a while now we'd fallen into a pattern of cooperative separation, Nan's celebrity creating a fuzzy dynamic between us. We met at Syracuse, in a workshop where Nan was drafting the first of her Manny Ferril poems. (In her early publications, my wife wrote a series of poems from the perspective of her alter-ego, Manny Ferril, a sexually charged Kerry Blue bitch who lived in "a one room flat/licking splinters off the cat./Pussy willows/and wails for more.") I was working on stories, trying to find my voice. Nan groaned at the urgency of my prose, told me to calm down. "You write like you're being chased."

The first time she kissed me, standing in my kitchen, she put her hands on my head as if to keep me from moving. I didn't know what to do with my own hands, and when I slid them finally onto her back and lower, she sighed into my mouth and went limp against me. The experience,

while never repeated with quite the same intensity, gave us something to shoot for. We lived together six months then married. During our second year of teaching, Nan was finishing her first collection, was on deadline, experienced rough days, mood swings and serious bouts of depression. She locked herself away, missed classes and meals, shouted at me from behind closed doors, said she couldn't write, that the words were in her head gnawing but would not come out.

As I was in love with her, I sat outside the door and whispered back, offered encouragement. Sometimes she'd let me in. Other times she'd smack the door between us, curse and cry and swear there was no way a person like me could understand.

Twice that year Nan crawled into bed and stayed there for a week, her arms folded over her head, refusing to talk, to shower and worse. I would clean her, would feed her, would get her back to where she had to be. Both times, she resumed writing and produced her best work. Her mood would lift and she'd want to go out, would call others to come and party. When asked, she'd laugh and say her work was going great, exactly as planned and deny all rumors to the contrary. She spoke this way even when we were alone, dismissed her difficulties as if I hadn't been there. "It's your story, not mine," she'd swear to this, how she was fabulous, completely under control and didn't really need me.

I greeted my friends who slapped my back and offered me good luck. We were a tight knit group, a collection of mostly writers with a similar level of success and failure. Sincerely fond of one another, our internal rivalries kept in check, whenever one of us had a brief taste of triumph, the rest of us cheered, drank and danced and kept our envy hidden. I introduced everyone to the older me. My friends joked about the resemblance, how I could only wish to look as good when I was my age. The old me patted the underside of my chin, my well worn face a confluence of lines and creases, the cartilage in my nose and ears having grown wild as witchgrass. I did some tricks then, told my friends things about themselves, amazed them with portent and prognostications.

A bell rang and my reading started. The old me found a chair and sat down. There were about 40 people at the store, a good crowd but then this was my home base; I would not draw as much again in total for the rest of my tour. Nan came late, slipped in as I was halfway through and stood in back. I looked up and let her know I saw her. Others took note and stirred.

I was reading a part of 'Tyner's Last Stand' where my protagonist was watching from a window as his young wife walked through a park, disappeared behind the trees. A central theme of my new book was the fear of going quietly into that good night. I'd been thinking about my own mortality of late, now that I'd shot past thirty and could pretty much see the road I was on. The thought of disappearing without a ripple made me nervous, and I'd recently started discussing again having kids with my wife.

I continued to read. The older me remained sitting off to the side. When Nan came in, he turned and looked. My expression changed, my composure compromised. Nan had jet black hair, so dark it seemed to shine. The old me was still watching Nan as I finished reading. I saw the way I stared, my old mouth opening and closing like a fish. I thanked everyone for coming and people applauded. A line formed and I sold and signed some twenty books. My wife came up and kissed my cheek, did not apologize or explain her late arrival. Friends had organized an after reading celebration and we went back to the bar for drinks.

I made sure the old me came along, brought him over and introduced him to my wife. At the rear of the bar was a dart board and one of those long narrow tables where players slid silver disks back and forth. I had another whiskey, played a round of darts and spoke with my friends. When Nan and the old me finished talking, I went back to where I'd left them. The old

me was sitting in a chair further toward the front of the bar while Nan was on her cell. She hung up as I came over and asked her, "So what did you think of Henry?"

She was drinking Glen Flagler bourbon. Nan liked to smoke when she drank. She ran laps at the indoor track, swam in the pool, came home and smoked and drank and wrote poems in the spare room we'd converted into an office. There was a folding table and two large cushioned chairs in her room. Nan wrote in longhand, the floor covered with books and pads and paper scraps. Our apartment had another room off the kitchen where I did most of my writing. My room had no window, was small as a closet, with just enough space for a single chair and desk. When Nan wasn't home, I sometimes took my laptop into her room and sat in one of her chairs, facing the window. My writing had a different feel when I worked in her office, was less self-conscious and more reckless. On my wife's table were additional notecards and pens and the journal she kept. Whenever I worked in Nan's room, I'd stare at her books and pens and the cover of her journal.

She finished her drink and asked me then, "Why did he look familiar?"

"You mean Henry? You've probably seen him around." I wondered what they talked about and Nan answered, "You." She was wearing a black sleeveless top and cream colored slacks, the kind where the pant legs ran down to the middle of her calf. Her sandals were leather, her toenails painted pink. I waited for her to say something else about me, but she didn't. Her cell phone rang again and she answered it. She laughed and looked back toward the rear of the bar.

One of my friends was now chatting with the old me, and I was pleased to see I wasn't alone. My wife took out a fresh cigarette, pretended to wait for me to light it although she knew I didn't have a match. Nelson Fere came over and shook my hand. "A great read," he said and clicked his empty glass against my whiskey. Nelson taught comparative literature, had written a novel a few years ago that managed somehow to catch fire. There was nothing particularly wrong with Nelson's book. The plot was sturdy and the prose adequate. How his novel managed to separate itself from the herd was more a matter of timing and his landing with a publisher not afraid to grease the wheel. At one point, Nelson was part of my inner circle of friends, but then success had spoiled him, caused him to forget the function of our group, his company causing an uncomfortable strain. He put his empty glass on the bar, offered "Congratulations again," squeezed Nan's hand and said good night.

The bar was loud and Nan had to lean toward me to speak. We chatted for a minute. Nan asked how many books I'd sold tonight and when I told her, she smiled. She'd read an early draft of 'Tyner's Last Stand,' and didn't know why I wanted to write about a man past his prime with faculties failing. 'Tyner,' she said, was the book I should have written thirty years from now. I finished my novel just the same, then turned to new stories, each done in a modern voice, elliptical in narrative and with characters expressing a deer in the headlights feel. Despite my effort to impress my wife, at the core all my new writing was the same, involved issues of separation and the insecurity of longing. Nan saw through this, said my new work was, "Just Tyner at thirty. Really, Henry, when did you get so old?"

She glanced down at her phone again, said "Listen, I'm going to go."

"Now?"

"I really should."

I was disappointed and told her so. She handed me her glass, reminded me of all the readings and after parties of hers I missed. The comparison wasn't fair. Even between books, my wife was invited to read, her success providing endless chances for her to travel, to appear at conferences, seminars and conventions. I couldn't keep track let alone hit them all. The year

Nan's collection came out, we drove to Chicago, Baltimore, Philly and New York where her readings and parties ran together. I made the effort, was there for support, mingled at receptions and didn't bail until the final leg when I went to watch the Knicks in the hotel bar.

Nan found me and asked what I was doing. I told her I was catching my breath and she laughed and wanted to know, "From what?" Perhaps if I was more demonstrative, if I had a bigger ego, or drank too much and shouted, "What the fuck?" we could have had huge romantic fights, could have injured and recovered, fallen apart and come together, been the sort of couple I think at times Nan wanted. Instead, I was tolerant, willing to bend in order to make things work. I liked to think when Nan flew off for panels and had drinks and dinners and came home extolling the genius of her newfound friends, that it was simply this, the excitement of being caught up in it all. When we made love and she had me whisper other names, and asked me to whisper back in turn, I tried not to think anything of it, our imagination being so much a part of who we are.

"Enjoy yourself," Nan said. "Stay out late and have a good time."

"Wait an hour," I offered to get her a fresh drink. "Let's play darts."

"Henry, I can't," she left me then. The old me watched as Nan walked past. I went over to see how I was doing. "She can't stay," I said.

"No," my expression grey. We stared at the door before I said, "She seemed in a hurry."

"Yes, well, she likes to write at night."

"She has her habits."

"No doubt."

I looked at me and gave my head a shake. More of my friends came over and asked the old me to make predictions for them again. That I knew about their work and relationships impressed them, everyone assuming I was the one to have tipped me of. The things I said were all harmless, with no great setbacks or tragedies revealed. My friends proposed we all have another drink, but the older me was tired, and so they returned to the rear of the bar where they cheered over darts.

I studied my face, the color washed light in my eyes. I wondered again about me, about what had happened in the years to come, how I might rise and fall, but when I asked, "What am I doing here?" the question came out oddly and the old me smiled. "That is the riddle."

I wore brown shoes, ancient leather polished over and tied with thin laces. I decided to be more specific, and pointing again at the missing ring on my hand, asked "What about that?"

The old me touched my finger. I put my hands in my pockets. I looked tired, though when I answered there was a trace of something else in my voice. "That wouldn't fit me now," I said, and noted the swell of my knuckles.

I laughed, relieved. The old me turned away, glanced again at the door. I waited a minute, until I began to feel uncomfortable and followed up with, "But what about more recently?"

"You mean when I was younger?"

"Right."

The old me thought a minute about what he wanted to say, then answered with, "When I was younger I wrote a book about my wife. I was your age then."

"This was after 'Tyner?'"

"Yes."

"And the book?"

"Turned out to be pure fiction."

I tipped my head to the side, tried to keep track, was confused still and admitted as much. "What has any of this to do with now?"

"It has everything to do with now."

"What you wrote about?"

"That's right." I stroked my arm, my fingers finding the soft skin inside my elbow. I started over, reminded me of what I said earlier about the reason I was here tonight.

"I've enjoyed myself," the old me replied. "I'm glad I came."

"But wasn't something supposed to happen?"

"Something always happens."

"What then?"

"That depends."

"On?"

"What happens."

I still didn't understand, and frustrated, wanted to know, "If you're here now, hasn't everything already happened?"

"That's not the way it works."

"How then?"

The old me rubbed my wrist, said "I should be going. It's late. Tell your wife when you see her, I'm glad we had the chance again to talk."

I went outside. I asked if I needed a ride, but I said no, that I could walk from here. The night was warm, with few visible stars in the sky. I looked down the street. My apartment was six blocks away. We stood facing that direction. There were more questions I had, things I needed to know, but I remained quiet for several seconds, unsure where to pick up the thread. We continued looking off toward my apartment. I massaged the skin on the back of my hand then asked, "What about you? What are you going to do now?"

"Me?" I said. "I suppose I'll go back inside with my friends."

The old me nodded his head, turned to face me, his expression consoling, a sharp sweet nothing. "That's what I did," I said.

Once I was gone, I stood outside for a minute, then went back into the bar and had another drink. I spoke with my friends, played a round of darts, all of this until I understood finally and left the bar to walk home.

There was a chapter in 'Tyner's Last Stand' where my protagonist looked back on the middle years of his life and wondered how he made such a series of foolish decisions. He thought of how different things might have been had he simply done this instead of that. The ease of it all, reviewed in hindsight and from a distance, amazed him. How sad it was that perspective was so easily lost in the immediacy of each moment.

I entered our apartment building with my main key, came up the stairs and unlocked our door. The lights were off and Nan wasn't there. I went into her office, came back out and looked in the bedroom, then went back to her room again. She was supposed to be writing, but there was no sign that she'd returned after leaving the bar. I checked the time, went to the window, walked around her table then stood between the chairs. I thought of the old me coming home hours later, after staying at the bar, how I'd have stumbled in and found Nan back in bed. I pictured her pretending to be asleep, how she wouldn't stir even as I tried to wake her. I saw myself slipping off my pants and crawling down beneath the sheets, laying very still in order not to disturb her any more than I had.

I touched my ring, read Nan's journal, wondered how long after this the old me found out. I tried to imagine what I went through when I did finally know, how foolish I must have felt about the book I wrote, the one I called now a pure fiction. I stood there for several minutes, unsure what to do. I considered phoning my wife on her cell, thought of sitting there and waiting. The apartment felt more empty than it ever had before. I saw myself living there alone, or in some other smaller place where I'd wind up. I thought how this was the thing that happened and wondered what to do with it. I couldn't answer and realized then how little I knew about me. How little I wanted to know, all the questions I asked notwithstanding. What a strange night it was. I went so far as to wish we'd never met. "Old man," I said. I put Nan's journal back on her table, exactly as it was before. A car horn honked from the street below, followed by a deep impenetrable silence. I turned off the lights and went back to the bar.

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Steven Gillis is the author of the novels, *Temporary People*, *Walter Falls* and *The Weight of Nothing*, as well as the story collection *Giraffes*. A member of the Ann Arbor Book Festival Board of Directors, and a finalist for the 2007 Ann Arbor News Citizen of the Year, Steve teaches writing at Eastern Michigan University, is the founder of 826 Michigan, and the co-founder of Dzanc Books in

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