

Perfect Match

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I had outgrown my parents' dreams and was toddling toward my own when I met Blowy John Twist in Memphis. He was the perfect confidant, the avid listener with lustrous dark eyes. His rapt stare, diverting only to catch the waitress' eye, encouraged me. His gaze surrounded me, held me in place while romantic illusions struck against my imagination and ignited my 20-year-old heart. I experienced a physical lightness, as if my lungs were filled with helium. Elation: a sensation I had experienced only once before, with Barry. Barry Silverstein.

I was eight and he was ten. I remember him clearly, how I envied his hair, thick brown ringlets, and his deep secretive eyes always shining through some fantasy. I remember a late-summer afternoon in our small Tennessee home town.

We are giggling. I am finishing the dousing of Mrs. Hanley's prize white tulips—the smell of gasoline delicious in the air. Barry tells me to hide the can. I leave and return without the evidence.

He is holding a book of matches in his hand, tapping the cover with his thumb. We are carrying out a sacred mission. Barry spits into the flower bed and I spit after him.

"May the spirit of Red Dog be avenged," he says. He lights a match and holds it before his face. I see the flame reflected in his eyes.

"May the spirit of Red Dog be revenged," I say.

"A-venged," he corrects, not looking at me but staring at the burning match.

"A-venged," I say.

"Get back," he says. I go and stand on the sidewalk in front of the white fence in Mrs. Hanley's yard. Barry steps back a few feet, tosses the match and the flower bed bursts into flames. He runs to join me on the sidewalk and we stare into the fire. We do not feel wicked. The conflagration redeems us.

Mrs. Hanley peers out of her kitchen window. She appears again, seconds later, running out of her house. Hateful Mrs. Hanley with her crow voice and her flapping broom. Mrs. Hanley poisoning poor Red Dog, saying that he shat in her tulips. Crazy Mrs. Hanley, screaming at Barry, pounding her broom on the blazing flowers.

Barry and I have moved to the street. Sirens are screeching through the air, neighbors running out of their houses. Mrs. Hanley is yelling and crying at the same time, spitting out the words that freeze Barry's eyes: "Christ killer, Christ killer, Christ killer!"

It is late night. I've been spanked and sent to bed without supper, but I'm not hungry. I sit looking out my window watching a white pickup truck stop down the street. Three men get out and take something big from the back of the truck. It takes two of them to carry it.

I see them take the thing to Barry's front yard. It's hard to see what they are doing, but they soon leave without the thing and drive away. A few minutes later, they are back. The pickup pulls in front of Barry's house this time and one man gets out and runs into Barry's yard.

Suddenly the whole lawn is lit. There's a giant cross burning in front of Barry's house and the flames are beautiful against the darkness.

Two days later and Barry's family has moved to New Jersey, and Mrs. Hanley is sitting in our kitchen, sipping alfalfa tea from one of Mother's good china cups.

"I know it wasn't none of her doin'," the old woman says, pointing at me. I'm sitting across from her. I have already apologized. I am thinking about connecting the brown spots on the backs of her hands with my orange crayon, but I'm connecting the dots in my picture book instead.

Blowly John loved to tell that story about Barry and me. He'd describe the tulip fire to our friends in terms of cosmic righteousness (he claimed to love justice), and he'd always admonish me (at the end of the story) for my apology. I would remind him that I was only eight at the time of the incident, but he'd already have plunged into his adamant philosophy of remorse as a cancerous growth.

"It sucks your vitality," he'd say. "And it reduces the effectiveness of the act you're apologizing for. If you did it, you must have meant it." I didn't believe he trusted those notions. I believed in his affectionate side, and his radiance. Like the way he carried the sun in his face in Mexico.

We are stretched out on the sand, the air from the bay clearing our heads. We're watching the dark-skinned woman as she walks barefoot and balances a wicker tray of watermelon slices on her head. She glides through the sand on hard-muscled legs, haloed against the powerful sun, passing by us like a floating mirage.

"This is where I belong," Blowly John says. He sits up and brushes the sand from his legs. We've been here only two days and he's already tan. I'm covered in protective lotions, turning medium rare, poking the flesh on my arms and watching it turn white where I touch.

We meet few English-speaking people, so we think of ourselves as being invisible. Blowly John says we can be like God; seldom seen but sometimes flaring up like the burning bush. He makes it our game.

Sometimes he stands on a corner, grabs his chest and screams, "Heal me, heal me!" I rush up to him and lay my hands on his head. He goes through a series of violent convulsions, then he picks me up in his arms and carries me away, screaming, "I'm saved, I'm saved!" This we do in front of shrines.

Or sometimes he puts on his sunglasses and goes inside a restaurant. I go in a few minutes later, run up to him and make a pretense of fawning over him. I hand him a pen and paper and he gives me his autograph. Within minutes, other people in the restaurant are bustling around him, shoving pens and pieces of paper in his face. When the game is played just right, we get a free meal from the owner. After we've eaten, we hit the street and become invisible again.

Bananas, oranges, pineapples, tangerines, fish frying copper in the skillet over a campfire on the purple evening beach. This is our usual supper eaten while the day cools. We take a swim

and dry off on our sleeping bags. The beach is deserted now, we are undressed and turning toward each other.

Blowy John kisses me. "I like making love here," he says. "I never want to live with walls again."

"I love you," I say. He pulls me to his chest and I can see tiny grains of sand among his chest hairs. I close my eyes as his hands stroke my back very lightly. I tilt my mouth toward his and he kisses me. My eyes are open, his are closed. His body has a salty smell, his skin is warm from the sun.

I move as close to him as I can and his arms tighten around me. "This is what it feels like to be alive," he says. The waves against the shore sound like explosions.

Later, we go to watch the divers. We sit on rocks at the bottom of a steep hill, huge rocks slippery with spray and moss; the waves splash over our dangling feet.

I'm dreaming in the cool evening, swaying with the rhythmic water, watching the diver kneel before the shrine on top of the cliff. He poses himself on the edge and leaps headfirst into the dusk. There's a year of silence while he drifts through space; even the waves hold their breath.

He is a perfect sweep of form in the air, a Brancusian bird. I think he will not fall into the bay but soar into the cloud-streaked sunset.

No. He is unable to maintain perfection and disappears under the water.

I think of Mexico a lot now. Especially during the winter months, when everything is snowy and white and the wind raises red marks on my face. I walk down the street with my coat closed tightly around me, and I tuck my head down and try to imagine myself in warm climates I've known. I remember being invisible in Mexico. I turn up the walkway to the small white house where I live with Blowy John. I turn my key in the lock and hesitate before pushing the door open. He's been staying home less and less and I'm reluctant to discover his absence.

I go inside and am greeted by silence. I turn on the television, the news, but the flat noises of monotoned voices don't hold me. I think about cleaning his room to surprise him. I like to do this, to get involved with his belongings. When I hang up his clothes, I feel closer to him. I put on one of his shirts sometimes or wear his socks. Dressed in his garments, I can pretend he is dependent on me, that there is no pain in our sleeping in different bedrooms.

I was opposed to the idea, but he said he felt cramped, needed space. "If we share the same room, we only have two walls apiece," he said. "I need at least four of my own or I feel trapped.", At first, he would come to my room to sleep every night. Gradually, he began falling asleep on the couch, in front of the television, or reading in his room. He began staying away in the evenings, coming home late or not at all.

When I question him, he reminds me of my freedom. The last time we made love, he didn't even put his arms around me.

I find his shirt and a pair of jeans on the bathroom floor. The tiles are still wet and I know he's left recently. I throw his shirt into the clothes hamper and walk down the dim hall to his room carrying his pants.

The door is locked. I push against it, but it doesn't budge. I notice that under the doorknob, a new silver lock sparkles on the old wood.

I hold his jeans against my face and bite down hard into the denim. I'm willing to break my teeth to keep the tears back. A piece of paper falls out of his back pocket. I pick it up and read the writing on it. It's a note about a party at a hotel downtown. It's tonight.

I've followed Blowy John to the party. He's seated on a couch across the room with another woman. She is gesturing obsessively and he is consuming her with his attention. He doesn't see me. I sit down on a bench near the champagne table.

There's a huge dance floor at one end of the room. The rest of the room is carpeted and lined with couches and leather-cushioned benches. Guests are dressed in a variety of costumes, some formal, some casual, but all very fashionable.

Some of them make cozy-looking circles. A man is standing by the table smiling at a smooth-looking lady in a strapless floral chiffon. She's running her fingers across his wide beige lapel, while a man standing on the other side of her explores her buttocks with a blue sports-jacket-sleeved arm. Next to him is another woman in a long black hugging knit with a sequined mushroom on each bosomy bulge. One mushroom is pressed into the rib cage of the man in blue, while a beige arm slips slowly down the back of her black knit.

At the end of the table, there's a tall, slender young man in a bright-red shirt. It appears to be made of satin, the way the light dances off it. He's leaning against the table, striking matches one after another and watching them burn down, almost to his finger tip.

I watch him for a few minutes, volleying my attention between him and Blowy John. Red Shirt's jeans are new and cling tightly to his long legs. He's wearing black and white tennis shoes.

Another young man, with wide hair and rocky-red eyes, sits down close to me on the leather-cushioned bench. The bags under his eyes are dark and layered and seem to be looking through me. I consider going over and joining Blowy John and his new friend, but I know that would prove him right—that I'm dependent on him to fill in too much of my life. I decide to introduce myself to Red Shirt. I stand up and take a cigarette from my pack. He doesn't see me approach.

"Can I get a light?" I ask. He moves a match to my cigarette and I inhale. Our faces are very close and I can see the flame reflected in his eyes. I pull back a little, take another drag off my cigarette and glance around to Rocky Eyes back on the bench. He's still watching me. I can feel his look in my stomach. Red Shirt says nothing.

"Do you know the host?" I ask. He strikes another match.

"No," he says.

"I don't either," I say.

His hair is black and shiny and curly. He looks innocent and somewhat removed from the party. We stand together for a few minutes and I listen to the many voices drumming in the air, catching tones but none of the words. I see Blowy John is still listening to the woman on the couch. Her lips are moving rapidly and, for an instant, I think I'm watching a silent movie. I see Blowy John's eyes towing her closer and I remember how easy it is to flow into him.;

"Did you come here alone?" I ask Red Shirt. I'm hoping Blowy John will look this way and see us talking, that if he does, it will make some difference.

"Yes," he says. The last match in his book has burned out and he throws the empty matchbook to the floor. For the first time, he looks into my eyes. "I work downstairs in the kitchen and I just got off."

"Oh," I say.

"Yeah," he says, his eyes flashing. "I'm just a gate crasher. You going to tell? He smiles for the first time. His teeth are very even and he looks more innocent when he smiles. He knows this and draws himself up to his full height to look more powerful.

I shake my head. "What else do you do?" I ask.

He studies me for a long moment, as if he's trying to ascertain my zodiac sign or something. I return his look with sophisticated and studied steadiness, a look I learned in charm school in tenth grade. We seem to be engaged in an undeclared battle.

"I'm an arsonist," he says. He is not smiling now. Our eyes hold, in contest.

"Oh, really?"

"You don't believe me," he says. I smile and shake my head. My eyes are looking at the floor where I am stepping on my cigarette.

"It's OK if you don't believe me," he says. "It's better for me if you don't.": He reaches into his jeans and pulls out another book of matches, which he begins to light one by one.

I've returned my attention to Blowy John, who now has his arm around the woman, when Red Shirt interrupts my thoughts. "I try to limit my outbursts to once a year," he says.

"Yes," I answer. "I guess that's the best way."

"Look," he says, holding a burning match straight up in front of me. "Can you see the three colors in the flame? See, on top it's a bright yellow, then kind of shaded, then blue. Notice how the flam is thin and deep at the same time. See how it halos itself as it burns down, separates on either side of the match, leaved the match glowing red?"

I stare at the match, seeing all that he tells me to. The movement of the flame is graceful, almost liquid. Occasional streaks strike out from the main body of the flame but are quickly drawn back to it. Suddenly, the head of the match starts glowing red and pushes up through the flame like a sunrise. I am surprised by how suddenly the flame dies out.

"Sometimes," he is saying, "I do it more than once a year." He strikes another match and frowns at the light. For the first time, I notice how the match flame fills his eyes with color. The intensity seems familiar.

“Sometimes,” he continues, “it builds up faster, the need, you know, and before I can stop myself . . . whoosh! . . . I’m watching some dump go up in a blaze.” He smiles. “It’s great. Release a lot of stress.”

“Yes,” I say, picturing it in my mind. Thousands of matches burning together, thousands of match heads glowing. “I guess it must.”

Suddenly, a small gust of sour air snuffs out the match. It’s Rocky Eyes from the bench. His wiry hair seems to flame out of his scalp in long, thick spirals. He leers at me, his face now inches from my own, as if blowing out the match were a secret initiation rite. I take a step back, but he moves in close enough to brush my arm.

I look across the room for Blowy John and see he now has a hand on the woman’s thigh. “You want to get high?” Rocky Eyes asks.

Blowy John has just made the woman laugh. Her head is thrown back on his arm and rolls close to his shoulder. I look to Red Shirt, but he is stuffing the matchbook back into his jeans.

“Excuse me,” he says. He walks between Rocky Eyes and me and heads off by the dance floor.

I offer my hand to Rocky Eyes and say, “Sure.” He leads me away from the party, down a dimly lit hotel corridor.

His gait is not too steady, his hand feels clammy and his shirt is stylishly unbuttoned, baring a hairy chest. A coke spoon hangs from a chain around his neck. He squeezes my hand.

He stops in front of a door, opens it and I go inside. It’s a storage room, small, filled with folding chairs and metal carts. Before I can question, he has followed me inside and shut the door. It’s dark now and I turn around, thinking he’s too smashed to know where he’s going. He’s blocking my exit.

“I like you,” he says. His voice is low. His hand is stroking the side of my face and down my neck.

“Thanks a lot,” I say, talking his hand gently away from me.

He doesn’t get the hint, his hand goes back to my neck, a clumsy finger scrapping across my Adam’s apple. He bends his head over till it touches mine and giggles. His other hand is slipping over my breast and I squirm a little. “Be still,” he says.

I try to push him away so I can get by him. His breath is hot and whiskeyed. I need air.

He shoves me against a cart and a small cry escapes my lips. I feel his breath get closer and a second later he is pressing himself against me, using his knee to separate my legs. “I want to ball,” he says.

“No,” I say, grabbing his arms with my hands, pushing him back. He recovers his balance, breaks my hold and leans into me.

“Relax,” he says.

I feel the edge of a cart cut into my back as he puts his lips against my neck. Violent images of myself as a rape victim pass through my head. Should I talk? Fight? I don’t remember

him being unusually large, but he feels like a giant now. He begins licking my throat, leaving little wet places on my skin.

I turn my head to get away from his breath and squeeze my arms up under his to guard my breasts. He forces my hands away by grabbing my wrists and spreads my arms apart. I feel exposed. He kisses my nipples through the nylon cloth. I twist sideways, shoving my shoulder into his chest.

“I just want some love,” he mumbles. “I don’t want to hurt you.” I hear him groan and feel his tongue flicker across my eyelid.

“Stop it,” I say.

“Baby, baby . . .” he moans. He’s rubbing my thigh, going up slowly. I feel my skirt riding up with his hand.

I beat on his back with my fists, trying not to break into tears. My eyes feel hot and greasy and his unshaven jaw is scratching my cheek. He’s everywhere on me at once, hand on my breast, my leg, his body shoving me harder against the cart, causing sharp pains in my back.

Suddenly, he grabs my hand and tries to force it to his zipper. I twist, using both of my hands against one of his. He lifts my arm and pushed it back of my head till it hurts.

“Look, baby,” he sneers. “This isn’t entirely my idea, you know. Blowy John said you were *looking* for company tonight.”

I freeze. An image of the match flame flashes before me in the dark, then disappears. I begin to beat his head and kick at him. One foot makes contact against the bone of his leg and he yells. I kick him again and feel his body edge back. He bends down a little. I feel strands of his hair tangling in my fingers and I pull. He winces and tries to duck his head, but I hang on, pulling harder. “Bitch!” he growls. He’s trying to grab my arms and legs all at once. I keep snaking my body out of his holds, continuing to hit him wherever I can. He slaps my face and I knee him in the balls. He yells and falls back. I get past him and out the door.

Several people are gathered around the door to the ballroom and I stop running when I reach them. I go inside and see Blowy John and the woman standing nearby. She has her shawl and purse in her hands; they look ready to leave. Blowy John sees me walking toward him and waves me off with a flex of his wrist.

“Listen,” I say, ignoring his gesture.

“We were just leaving,” he says to me. He kisses me on the cheek and the woman smiles politely. “It’s a nice party,” he says to me. “Enjoy it.”

I watch them disappear through the door, but I don’t have time to reflect on their coattails; Rocky Eyes is coming into the room. I weave in among the guests and hide behind a column on the dance floor. I wait until Rocky Eyes is distracted by the champagne table, then I make my way to the door.

The elevator is too slow, so I take the stairs down the ten flights. Blowy John and the woman are in the white-carpeted lobby, talking with another couple. I ignore them on my way out to the street.

It's chilly out, though it's early fall, but the fresh air feels good after the stuffy party atmosphere. I realize that I've forgotten my coat, but I don't want to go back for it.

I walk like I'm in some kind of daze. I cross a street without looking at the light and cars honk and flash their high beams at me. I am strangely light, like a piece of cotton blowing in the wind. I don't feel unhappy. I don't feel love. I stop walking, wanting to get a fix on my weight, hoping that by standing perfectly still, I can hold on to myself. People begin shouting at me to get out of the way, so I move.

I am beginning to be aware of an ache. It's coming from that unprintable part of me that is inside and outside me at the same time. It hurts in a most peculiar way—it's a kind of burning that swells in and around me. My fingers are stretched wide apart and the muscles in my arms are taut as they swing by my sides. I am reaching for something to grab hold of, but there is nothing.

My stride has become vigorous and controlled as I continue walking. I walk past shop windows and cafes and suddenly I see a bit of bright-red color standing before a restaurant window. I focus on it and I recognize my new friend. He's watching steaks broiling over a fire in a pit just inside the window. I walk up to him and stand next to him.

He can see my reflection in the glass. He nods to me. Inside the restaurant, the cook looks up and smiles at us, choreographing his turning of the steaks just for our entertainment.

It feels good to stop and catch my breath. I barely know this man, but I put my arm through his anyway. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't stiffen either. We watch the steaks for some minutes without talking.

"You ever start a fire?" Red Shirt asks calmly.

"I helped once," I say.

"Did you like it?"

I'm watching the flames curl around the meat. "Yes," I say "I loved it."

I feel him hug my arm against his side. He's slim, but I feel strength in his muscles. I look into his eyes and see the pit fire reflected in them, dancing.

The ache that propelled me down the street has not subsided. I feel it leaping around me like the flames leap around the steaks. I'm beginning to understand what it is.

"I know a great dump," I say. He turns to me, examines my face, then nods.

Everything is taken care of quickly. He leads me to his car, we stop at a service station for a can of gasoline and I give him the address.

The ceremonial dousing of the small white wood-frame building takes only a few minutes. There are no lights on in any of the windows, but Blowy John's car is parked in the drive.

Red Shirt has struck the match, but I take it from him. This fire is mine. I toss it, and the gust from the burst of flames forces us to jump back. We hold on to each other and watch. The night is so brilliant, I feel we're invisible.

He begins to tug me, trying to get me to go to the car with him. I shake loose. I want to stay. I'm nearly overcome by a desire to warn Blowy John, to tell him I'm sorry. Then I

remember his philosophy about remorse and the desire melts into a kind of peace that has seem unattainable until now.

“I did it,” I tell myself. “I must have meant it.”

“We have to get out of here,” Red Shirt says. He takes my hand and tries to pull me to the car. The sound of sirens is beginning to fill the air, getting louder and closer.

“Come on!” he insists. I want to stay, afraid that the feeling of peace will go away if I leave, but he has a strong hold on my arm and is almost dragging me to the car. I get in.

We are driving down the parkway, the windows are all rolled down and he is speeding. He beats his thumb against the steering wheel s he drives.

“Was it OK for you?” he asks, after a while.

“Yes,” I say, unable to release the image of the burning house. “It was perfect.” I slide next to him and put my arm through his, only this time I feel him stiffen.

“And did you know the people?” he asks. He doesn’t look at me.

“Well, of course,” I answer. He drives a mile or so, slows down and pulls onto the should. He gets out of the car and shuts the door. He leans on the window.

“Don’t keep the car too long,” he says. “It’s stolen. Always remember to use a stolen car.”

“I don’t understand,” I say. “Where are you going?”

“Look,” he says. “It’s different for me. It’s just the fire for me.”

He crosses the parkway and starts to walk down the highway. I watch him for some time, until I can no longer see him. I move into the driver’s seat and clutch the steering wheel tightly. I’m afraid I’ll blow away if I let go.

I am beginning to be aware of an ache.