

ONE-NIGHT-STAND

BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN

It is the winter of 1998. I am in Rochester, NY visiting friends for the weekend. A frigid January has descended. Ice sparkles and cracks on the sidewalks while dirty snow lines the roads. The sky is blue and the sun shines brightly, glaring off the white barren landscape. The air is clear ~ cold, brutal, jolting ~ but any water vapor has long since crystallized to the ground. It is a day of sunglasses or squinting, so I bide my time until the night.

At 22 years old I have already had my share of heartache ~ torrid affairs with both men and women, meaningful and meaningless relationships long and short, and a hefty catalog of worldly experience to buffer any blow. Or so I think.

Night arrives. In the old Club Marcella's the music is pounding. It's early. No one is dancing yet, but a few bodies test the floor and twirl in the disco lights. I am drinking a white Russian out of a plastic cup, talking and laughing with my friend Gina. On a trip to the bathroom I see him. He is not my usual type ~ dressed in overalls and a baseball cap – two looks that never registered on my fashion radar. But his smile is sweet, and his eyes are blue. We exchange heavy glances, but I am not drunk enough to talk to him. I manage a smile and return to my friend, making the mistake of pointing out the cute guy to her. Within a minute she is talking to him and I am gulping down cheap vodka and milk in a last-ditch effort to retain some dignity, or at least be semi-unaware of it having been taken from me.

"Alan, this is Patrick," Gina says as she pulls him next to me, "Patrick, this is Alan. I'll be going now."

And yet we do talk easily. It's a bit embarrassing and awkward at first, but when two people want the same thing the need for relevant speech and unnecessary banter dissipates quickly. He writes his name and number on a cocktail napkin. I think it is the most romantic thing anyone has ever done. I will cherish that napkin, unfold and re-fold it many times, stare at the handwriting and hastily scribbled number, think back to that night and wonder if it will be the beginning of my happiness.

The night is closing in on us and it is time to go. There, at the club, we kiss. My drunken tongue probes his mouth, he kisses back mightily, and neither of cares who is watching. An ex-boyfriend of his interrupts us and rudely introduces himself to me. I am too naïve to know yet the look of jealousy, and too earnest to believe I could ever be perceived as a threat. There is so

much I do not know, and I hide it all with a cocky nonchalant aloofness that soon becomes my trademark. Perhaps the ruse works too well. Gina returns and we say goodnight.

The next day I call him. Knowing nothing of the waiting game, or how best to entice a prospective suitor, I believe wholeheartedly in honesty and blunt affection. Fortunately, my weekend stay permits such forwardness and he invites me to the Avenue Pub later that night.

Is this what it is like? I wonder. Is this how real people function and have relationships? It feels deliciously giddy to think so.

On this cold Saturday night in January the bar is crowded and dark ~ a warm pulsing womb of men who watch as Patrick and I make our way to a barstool. It seems as if everyone is watching the out-of-towner get played by the local playboy, but I do not notice this then. I only care to look into the eyes of the man before me. I think he looks back and smiles, but it is dark and I cannot be certain.

I rest my hand on his knee. This is not like me. I do not touch people usually. It is a big moment. And it goes unnoticed and unheralded. He puts his arm around me – a show of camaraderie or affection ~ I'm not sure which, but my heart leaps regardless.

I follow him to his house. We sit together on the couch and talk a bit. His roommate won't leave and time drags on, but I don't mind. Just being next to him is enough. Finally we are alone. He pulls the couch out into a bed and turns the lights down. Gray light settles comfortably around us and we hurry under the covers to find warmth. His baseball cap has come off, and I notice he is losing his hair. A pang of pity, followed by quick remorse at my superficial judgment, and then his vulnerability so beautiful, so delicately revealed and laid bare for the thrashing of the world ~ my world, which has entered his, as I so much want him to enter me.

* * * * *

It snowed during the night. The ticking of ice flakes against the window and roof made a pleasant background din, a muted soundtrack to our breathing and heartbeats. Wind rushed against the window pane and I held Patrick tighter, clinging to him and trying not to fall. I broke my cardinal rule and spent the night.

The harsh light of morning bounced off freshly fallen snow. He was awake early, walking his dogs. I ordered him in my facetiously demanding way to wipe the snow off my car. Without hesitation or question he pulled his boots back on and did just that. I couldn't believe

someone could be that nice. Looking back, I wish he had scoffed and told me to just get the hell out. It would have been that much easier. How can you hate someone for kindness?

Later that day I called to say goodbye, and wanted to make plans to see him again. It didn't matter that I lived in Boston and he lived in Rochester. All that mattered was our night together, the connection, the end of loneliness. But he was not with me. His voice was hesitant; his life had no room for me and the riot of my life. I didn't understand this at the time, and all I felt was devastation. Patrick didn't want me, and I was powerless to change his mind. For him it was a simple one-night-stand. Fair enough in hindsight; right then I felt my heart break.

I didn't have the nerve to ask if it was just a one-night thing. He hedged, and I really didn't want to know. As long as there was the smallest bit of hope, it would be all right. I could live on that hope, I could survive on that alone. It wouldn't be much, but it would be enough. I had no choice. We were both wrong.

Later – years later – there would be hearts that I broke, messy nights where I was the one who looked distantly away, avoided an earnest gaze, and closed the door on anything more than a few hours of passion and fun. I knew the sadness and regret in the eyes of certain men, the choke and panic when the impossibility of “true love” impressed itself on their minds, and I smiled it away. In my smile was a little bit of Patrick and every other man who didn't love me they way I loved them. It was wrong of me, and I see that now.

It wasn't Patrick. Aside from a nice smile and a streak of kindness, he wasn't altogether special in his own right. It was a need to be loved ~ my need ~ the need and desire and want for something always so elusive, always beyond my grasp, that drove me to such despair and torment.

How to explain this to anyone? How to fully convey the torrent of feelings and emotions, pent up for so long and unleashed so terrifyingly? Part of me wants to keep it secret, to keep it sacred and safe and close to my heart, shielded from prying eyes and nosy neighbors. And part of me has to release it, to shout it from the very soul of my being and let it all out.

An irrevocable agony will always remain ~ hidden and deep and lonely ~ and it's something that no one can ever truly know – not my friends, not my family, not even Andy ~ the loneliness of my first one-night-stand. I would never be the same again.
