

A Gift For Amber

A short story of Boston romance

by Doug Shepardson



I

Tyler sat at his desk, looking through the mail. Gas bill, electric bill. The large windows in his top floor flat afforded a glimpse of the Charles, but they were hardly energy efficient. And what was this? A fat, cream-colored envelope. Tyler gently ripped at the big square of colored paper. A wedding invitation from Lila. She was getting married next month. October, in Denver. Tyler slumped in his chair and stared at the calendar over the desk. *October, October.* He leaned forward and flipped the pages to the month of October. *Jeezuz. October. It will be Amber's birthday, again. How old will she be? Twenty-five? No, twenty-six.*

Tyler counted on his fingers. A grinning jack o lantern stared at him from the calendar. *We've known each five years. Wow. Half a decade.* Here was a relationship milestone that deserved commemoration. But what to get her? Perfume was out. Same for earrings. Too ordinary and at the same time, too intimate. Tyler pushed the pile of mail to the side of his desk. He needed to find just the right gift for Amber - a task that might require a certain amount of time and energy. The boutiques in Harvard Square - that would be a good place to start. Hopefully, the perfect gift would magically manifest itself.

Tyler grabbed his worn leather jacket and jogged down to Charles Street and caught the next subway over the river into Cambridge. He looked out the window as oarsmen in slender sculls pulled their way back to the boathouse as an orange dusk descended over the blue-grey waters. Tyler closed his eyes as the train bounced along the tracks and rushed into the black hole on the Cambridge side of the river. *You haven't seen Amber in over a year,* he told himself. *So why do you need to buy her a gift? Sure, you still exchange messages every now and then, but so what? There are no longer any real conversations. It's just "hello, what's new?" Your relationship died at that last lunch, a long ago on Newbury Street. So why a gift? Because, because. Because the truth is, you still think about Amber. A week doesn't go by without her entering your thoughts.*

Tyler let his mind form images of those earlier nights he and Amber had shared as lovers. The softness of her skin. The curve of her hips in candlelight. Tyler sighed. *It would be nice to rekindle the romance,* he thought. But the romance was gone. A small gift would have to do.

The subway jerked to a halt with a hiss. Harvard Square. Tyler vaulted the steps to the street with a certain athletic grace. In high school he had been on the junior varsity wrestling team, and he took pride in

keeping the resiliency in his legs. The autumn air was warm and the crowded Square was full of smiles and laughter. Soon there would be winter winds and patches of frozen snow and it would be too cold for conversation, too cold even for preachers in the pit. But tonight, nice. Tyler rounded Brattle Street and stopped in front of the Village Theatre. *Casablanca* was playing. Tyler stared at the poster of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman.

“You two will always have Paris,” he mumbled. “But me and Amber - we’ll always have Lime Street”.



II

Tucked away at the foot of Beacon Hill, Lime Street was a narrow way sheltered on both sides by tall rows of dignified Brahmin brownstones. It had been an interesting place to live. Inside Number 19 were three floors of high-ceilinged studio apartments, five flats on each floor. Tyler’s flat was on the second floor. It was there that he found solitude and sustenance after dropping out of college at the close of his sophomore year. A choice that had not gone over well with his parents. His father immediately flew out from Wisconsin and stayed a weekend, trying to make sense of Tyler’s decision to leave school. Tyler met him at the grey concrete airport Hilton and they took a taxi to a stylish café on Newbury Street that specialized in Mediterranean dishes served on colorful plates of blue and red and yellow.

“Where do you go from here”? his father had asked. “Why do you want to give up after two years?”

“I need a break to get my head together”, Tyler answered. “The dorm was killing me. My last roommate listened to Metallica twenty-four hours a day. And the other one - his big achievement was building a pyramid of beer cans in the living room. About every two weeks someone would wash the dishes”.

“Ok”, his Dad had replied. “I understand dorm life can be rough. But look at the big picture - what about your future, some sort of career direction?”

“I don’t know”, Tyler sighed. “I want to enjoy my life for awhile. What’s the rush? It’s not like I can’t go back to school. In the meantime, I’m ok. I got a job at the library and I found an apartment on Lime Street. I just need a break. The future can wait a bit”.

The next day Tyler showed his father where he lived and they walked to the *Cheers* television pub and drank cold beers and then they walked across the street to the Boston Gardens. The sun was warm and the Swan Boats paddled around the pond with their cargo of soft tourists while students read in the shade of the great, green willow trees.

"I forgot how nice Boston is," his Dad had said. "Let me ask just one last time - are you sure that dropping out is the best thing to do?"

Tyler patiently justified his decision with philosophical phrases about finding one's true path in life. But the truth was actually more simple. He was tired of late-night cramming for exams in subjects he cared little about. He was tired of the lack of privacy in the dorm, the faint smell of vomit and urine in the shared toilets. He had discovered more pleasant things to do in Boston – the thumping music of the local nightclubs, the dark bottles of warm red wine, the soft laughter of flower-scented women. These things required a considerable amount of time and energy on their own. Tyler promised his father he would seriously try to return to school in the fall.

"I trust your decision", his father had said to him as they parted at the airport. "Thanks for showing me where you live. It's quite charming. I'm sure you have lots of wonderful neighbors."

Ah, yes, the neighbors, Tyler thought. *If you only knew my neighbors*. Upstairs and two doors down was Harry, slick-haired saxophonist who coasted through the hallways perpetually stoned, the sweet smell of marijuana drifting from under his door day and night. Harry collected classic jazz on old vinyl LPs.

Thousands of the discs in their colorful cardboard sleeves were arranged alphabetically on his bookcases. Down the hallway was Mr. Bob, part-time piano teacher, part-time out-of-the-closet cross-dresser. No one seemed to know his last name. Or care. Directly overhead had been Barbara, a freshman art student. Tyler knew little of Barbara other than she was a cherubic blond with a page-boy haircut who always chirped 'hi!' whenever they passed on the stairs.

"Big news about Barbara" Jim called to Tyler one afternoon as he headed out to the movies. "Stop in for a second". Jim was Tyler's neighbor who lived directly across the hall.

"What's up?"

"Barbara's big adventure away from Cherry Hill is coming to a close. Her family has some kind of financial problems. She's heading back to New Jersey."

That afternoon, a moving van had pulled up to Number 19 and loaded Barbara's few possessions. When Tyler came home she was gone. It was Amber who then moved into Barbara's third floor flat.

III

On the night of Amber's arrival to Number 19 many of the windows were open wide to welcome the warm air of early summer. Tyler was sitting on his bed, headphones on, playing a video game. He was unaware of the boxes of belongings being carried up the stairs at the end of the hall. Jim stepped through the open doorway and tapped on the wall.

"Did you see the new girl?"

Tyler removed the headphones. "No, what's she like?"

"Not bad. Junior at B.U. I helped her carry her bed and stuff up the stairs."

From the hallway came the cheerful crystal sound of glassware gently tapping together. Bruce, the shaggy-haired veterinary student from the end unit, shuffled by with a bottle of burgundy and some wine glasses on a faded metal Coca-Cola tray.

"Good evening, gentlemen", he said. "I have a fun idea. Let's all go up and salute the arrival of the new girl with a glass of wine."

Amber greeted the three young men with a smile and invited them in.

"Please, gentlemen, try to find a place to sit. I apologize for the mess!"

Amber had dark green eyes and shimmering waves of mahogany hair that bounced on her shoulders as she glided barefoot back and forth across the floor. Tyler noticed that she wore a tiered turquoise peasant skirt and matching tank top, and not the dingy blue jeans and t-shirt combination favored by almost every other college student in Boston.

Jim was right, he thought. She's not bad looking.

"We've come to offer greetings of wine and help with the unpacking," said Bruce in a dramatic voice.

"First things first," she replied with a laugh. "We need some music to go with the wine". Tyler helped Amber dig through a jumble of boxes to find some speaker wire. They plugged together the components of a small sound system and played U2, Springsteen, then some ancient Les Baxter island instrumentals. Tyler relaxed in a soft chair and absorbed the tropical sounds and looked around the room. There was a guitar leaning against the wall, stacks of shipping cartons, three faded red backpacks, the smell of newspapers and mothballs. Amber busied herself hanging decorations that she unpacked from the cartons. There were wind chimes and hanging beads, an oriental tapestry and a large round light bulb of heavy green glass on a long white cord. This she hung in front of the ceiling-high windows. When the green globe was turned on, the night sky behind it magically became deep purple in color.



"Look at that"! whooped Bruce. "The green light makes the sky change color!"

They all turned to stare at the illusion. Amber sat on her colorful Indian bedspread. She lit a cigarette and rolled her eyes dramatically and smiled.

"God! Look at us! You would think we were all high or something, just staring at the sky and not saying anything." She leaned back and laughed easily.

And so they shared wine and talked about the sky and school, about Boston and the weather, about politics and world problems, about why they were all there at this moment in their lives. A relaxed feeling of friendship filled the room, a good feeling, and a second bottle of wine was soon empty. Bruce looked at his watch and excused himself and went down the stairs to his apartment to sleep. Amber shuffled to the small kitchen to open a third bottle of wine and Tyler noticed her purple painted toenails as she passed. Jim playfully poked Tyler's arm and smiled at him with narrow animal eyes.

"She's mine" he hissed softly. "I'm gonna make a play for her".

Tyler stared back. "No way" he replied. "She's my destiny. I can almost feel it."

Their gazes locked.

"Last man out wins".

Both of them knew the unspoken rules; whoever was the last to leave would be the one with the first right to try and claim her. Amber returned with the wine, and Jim and Tyler quickly downed the contents of their glasses. By the time the third bottle was finished, so was Jim, slumped over half-asleep in his chair. Amber and Tyler helped him stand and guided him out the apartment door. Tyler smiled and inwardly rejoiced at his victory. He was the last to leave. He could claim his prize; a chance to try and hook up with Amber.

Hell, he smiled, grinning with a good wine buzz. *It was practically his birthright.*

IV

Over the next few days Tyler and Amber quickly became good neighbors and better friends. They watched TV together, began having dinners together. Tyler found Amber attractive; there was a certain chemistry between them, an inner heat waiting for the right moment to bubble to the surface. Their dinners became more elaborate, with liberal dashes of cinnamon and cloves, then frantic with garlic and rosemary, wines red and white. Soon the dinners were followed by long embraces and longer kisses, then more wine and more kisses; the chemical reaction had begun. Buttons on blouses came easily undone; Amber and Tyler were lovers.

"So", asked Bruce one day. "Is this it? The real thing? Any wedding plans for the two of you in the near future?"

Tyler sat in one of Bruce's rickety wicker chairs while Bruce folded laundry.

"Let me put it like this. We're not just hooking up for a few nights. It's not just a summer affair. We have a real relationship. But we're also trying to be sensible about it. That's why even though we spend most nights together, we're keeping our separate apartments. We keep our personal space that way. Also - it makes more sense if her parents to come visit. Amber thinks they believe their dear daughter is still a virgin. She wants to protect their feelings."

Bruce laughed. "Very considerate. Honesty - or a reasonable facsimile thereof - always the best policy with the old folks."

It was a warm July morning, the trees outside thick and heavy with green, the sky cerulean blue. Tyler sipped coffee at Amber's small round red table while she cooked a breakfast of bacon and toast and scrambled eggs.

"I want to share something with you," Tyler said. "Remember your first night here -- how we were all talking about stuff? And I mentioned I was dating a flight attendant from Air France who lived up on Joy Street? Did you ever wonder about her?"

"Not really" replied Amber with an edge of coolness in her voice.

"Well, anyway, the morning after I met you, I broke up with her. I felt terrible. Really terrible. I told her I couldn't see her anymore. It was weird. But, I just knew -- I *knew*, inside, that I wanted to be with you. As soon as I met you. True confession."

"It's that faithful dog inside you that I like so much" Amber smiled, putting plates of food on the table. "And this poor French girl -- how did she take the breakup?"

"Never mind" said Tyler. It's Sunday. Not the proper time to dwell on the misfortunes of others".

Later they walked over to De Luca's market on Charles Street to replenish their stores of wine and cloves and Milano cookies.

"Ok, now I have a confession for you," said Amber, gently taking Tyler's hand at the entrance to the store. There's another man in my life."

"Of course. Dr. Fleming".

Dr. Fleming was the therapist that Amber saw religiously once a week. She was reluctant to talk about their sessions and described him only as tall, silver-haired, and distant. Her parents in Bethesda sent monthly checks to pay his considerable fees. Tyler was skeptical. "Do you really think Dr. Fleming does anything good?" he had asked. Amber replied that he helped with hidden issues that could have a negative impact on her life. *Whatever the hell that means*, thought Tyler.

"No, not Dr. Fleming" she replied as they walked by the wine displays. "Does the name Cliff Garrett ring a bell?"

Tyler grimaced. "Ah -- the folksinger who used to play down at The Plough and Stars -- with a CD that maybe eleven people have bought?"

"He's in Canada now. Actually, he's more popular up there than here".

"Good" said Tyler sharply. "Let someone else warm his toes in Toronto."

Amber ignored Tyler's comment and turned down the frozen food aisle.

"The point is - what I want to tell you is -- we were dating seriously before he went away. And someday - he may come back. Please remember that."

“Wait a minute. I thought we had a certain -- harmony. You. Me.” Tyler tried to stem the wave of anger building inside. “What are you trying to tell me? That if he comes back, that you’ll want to see him again, while we’re still together?”

“I don’t know”, Amber sighed. “All I know is, that I just don’t know.”

But Cliff Garrett did not come down from Canada, and it was a long time before Amber ever mentioned his name again.



V

Summer settled in, heating the red brick rows of Beacon Hill. The hot August nights grew longer and Amber and Tyler grew more deeply entwined as lovers under the magical green lantern. One morning Tyler awoke with an idea percolating in his head -- he should share some of his happiness with his parents. Why not? It was time to tell them about Amber. He returned to his flat and sat at his small desk and opened his laptop and began typing.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I've met a very special person. There is something different about her. Something that separates her from other girls I've known.

Her name is Amber, and I find myself wanting to be with her all the time.

Tyler quickly erased the text. *Shit. That sounds dumb. Mom will start asking; When is the wedding date? When can we meet her?*

Tyler sighed. What was so attractive about Amber? He started typing again. *Ok, let's be logical. Let's make a list.* Lines of words quickly began to form on the screen.

*Wine is sweeter with Amber.
Laughter is louder.
Feel more relaxed.
Her spirit of warmth and openness.*

Tyler paused and thought about the last sentence. It was something he had noticed that very first night when everyone had crowded into her apartment. Amber was always the gracious hostess who offered guests a glass of wine or a cup of hot tea. A small thing, but he had never met anyone quite so thoughtful as Amber. His fingers began typing again.

She loves children. She delights in the spoken word.

It was true - children's watercolors decorated her apartment walls. There were volumes of poetry that were actually taken from her bookshelves and read.

*She loves music. She laughs. She cries.
She "just doesn't know."*

"What do you mean?" Tyler asked, after hearing Amber use this phrase several times. "What do you mean; *you just don't know?*"

It was late at night and they were lying in bed discussing Bruce's off-again, on-again relationship with his girlfriend, Carol. In the middle of their talk Amber had suddenly sighed and said "Well, I just don't know."

"Wait a minute" Tyler had said. "You can't just end our conversation with '*I just don't know*'."

But Amber only smiled and said nothing. It bothered Tyler whenever she ended a discussion this way. How could she just *not know*? She was pulling a 4.0 in Chemistry *and* Childhood Development, and she *just didn't know*? Impossible! But whenever Amber spoke this phrase, Tyler would nod his head in silent agreement, and the discussion would end. If Amber didn't know, he certainly didn't know either.



VI

"You seduced her", said Jim to Tyler one night over beers at the Silvertone Bar and Grill. He slurped another steamed clam and wiped his fingers on his napkin. "You seduced her, but now she is seducing you. What she sees in you I'll never know, but what the hell". Jim raised his glass of beer in a toast. "Here's to the two of you -- all my love!"

Later that night Tyler looked at Amber as she slept on the narrow bed beside him. He studied her long, dark eyelashes, her slightly parted lips. He gently brushed a strand of hair from her face and imagined he was an artist, sketching her curves on a great sheet of gray paper with a piece of charcoal. She slept so peacefully. Where were those expensive demons that Dr. Fleming was trying to extract? There

was no hint of trouble in her slow breathing, the gentle rise and fall of her soft brown nipples. *Oh, to be an artist, to try and capture the essence of those brown nipples forever and ever with sacred paper and dark holy ink.....*

But Jim was right – Amber was also his teacher. Tyler wanted to know more about life than what he had learned in the safe confines of his parent's suburban Madison split-level, more than what his teachers had recited in dull classrooms. What he wanted was someone to show him the *truth*. The big truth, with a capital T. As the days of summer passed, Tyler listened carefully to everything that Amber said; he drank her words thirstily, savored and tasted them, memorized them, tried to make them a part of his self. At times Tyler found himself reciting some of Amber's comments and observations as if they were his own. He was conscious that a certain essence was missing, but Tyler spoke her words anyway, with charm and confidence, because Amber had spoken them, and they were *Truth*.



VII

Boston was simmering under an early September heat wave. The high-ceilinged flats at Number 19 Lime were charming, but they were not air-conditioned. Bruce found a listing for a small cottage down in Harwich Port for a good rate and rented it for two nights. Tyler and Amber and Bruce and Carol piled into Bruce's battered red Saab and left Boston for the cooling breezes of Cape Cod. By mid-afternoon they were rolling to a stop on a narrow gravel driveway in front of a faded yellow beach house on Sea Street. They ate lobster at Captain Smiths, walked on the beach, and returned to the cottage to choose bedrooms and unpack their belongings. The sea air was damp and cool so Tyler built a fire of driftwood in the fireplace. They shared two tall bottles of red wine and laughed and passed around one of Bruce's bud-filled joints and played charades. Finally, they grew quiet and watched mesmerized as the burning wood crackled and popped and sent up small fingers of green and blue and yellow flames.

"I know", Carol suddenly said. "Let's interpret each other's dreams! Who had an interesting dream lately?"

Tyler smiled. "I had one last night. Let's see if I can remember it. Ok - I was in an elevator with some other people. These people are all familiar to me. I seem to know them, although I can't recall from where. The doors close.

Suddenly, the elevator starts to fall. Really fast. The sensation is frightening. Everyone is sure we are all going to die. Everyone looks at each other, faces frozen with fear, silent screams. But me – I'm cool and calm. I know the elevator will come to a safe stop. Which it finally does. The door opens and we all exit."

Carol smiled. Bruce shrugged his shoulders and sank further into the faded sofa. "I have no idea, man. I'll pass on that one."

Amber leaned forward and took another sip of wine. "I think" -- She paused, and licked her lips. Tyler focused on the shimmering flames reflected in her eyes.

"All the people in the elevator are you. And the falling sensation is the fear of separation. The sensation goes way back, maybe to the fear of being born, of being separated from your mother." She laughed softly. "Everyone falls out of the womb, sooner or later, right? But the other people in the elevator? They're all you. Different aspects of your personality. And right now, they're afraid. Because a change is taking place in your life. Because of this change, some parts of you feel like they will be abandoned and die. But there is a stronger element of your inner self. And this part of your self assures your whole self that everything will be all right. And it is."

Tyler felt like he was floating in space. How did she know these things? He turned from the flames and gazed at Amber. *Amber, Amber, Amber.* A wave of chemical love washed thru his bloodstream, drowning him, pulling him under. It wasn't just that she was charming or challenging or a confidant or playful in bed or knew which wines were best. It was because she was also after *the truth*, the big truth, with a capital 'T'. She had a fierce desire to know *why* people were the way they were; what the *real reasons* were behind everything that people said or did. And in his most desperate heart, Tyler wanted to know these things, too.

The next morning while Bruce and Carol snored in their white iron frame bed Tyler and Amber walked down to the beach. A thin mist moistened their faces and the low tide washed lazily toward their feet as they walked across the grey sand.

"What about school?" Amber suddenly asked, stopping to remove her sandals.

"What about it?"

"You're a clever person, Tyler. But - do you ever think you're just going to waste, just working at the library?"

"And your point is?"

"You told your parents you'd try to enroll for the fall semester. But now it's too late for that. Are you going to enroll for classes starting in January? I mean -- when are you going back to school? What I really mean is - what are your plans for the future?"

Tyler shrugged his shoulders. "I hadn't thought about it lately. And the truth is, talking about it right now is making me just a tiny bit uncomfortable."

"It's not too late to register for some evening classes. Take some classes at night. Then you could go back to school full-time the next semester."

"I don't know. Next year seems like a long ways away". Tyler picked up a smooth stone and skipped it across the low waves. "And who can predict the future?"

Amber laughed. “Don’t dodge the subject with some metaphysical bullshit. It’s up to you. You need to take control of the future. Of your life.”

“Yeah, but it's easier for me when I don't think too hard about the future. I'm just trying to enjoy my life at the moment.”

“Ok,” said Amber. “But you’re setting limits for yourself. Limits that don’t have to be there. Think about the possibilities. About where you want to go, and who you want to be.”

A line of shallow surf nudged Tyler’s toes and then retreated with a long sigh. *She’s right*, he thought. *Of course she’s right*. A white seagull arched overhead, cried out, and then turned North toward the distant red brick citadel of Beacon Hill.



VIII

Tyler squirmed in one of the hard plastic chairs at the registration office and filled out forms for evening classes. The selection wasn’t great. He chewed on the end of his pencil and finally scribbled in the codes for three subjects: *Developmental Psychology*, *The Hero in Ancient Chinese Literature*, and *Astronomy for Non-Astronomy Majors*. I can just sit and look at pictures of Saturn’s rings and still earn credits, Tyler mused. Look out, universe, here I come.

When classes began, the Friday nights of clubbing with Jim came to an end. The consumption of a bottle of wine with almost every dinner fell to an occasional glass of red, replaced with cups of strong coffee. Tyler would sit hunched over his small desk reading about Lu Tung Pin and his magic sword as darkness descended on the other side of the tall windows. The heat pipes hissed and Tyler imagined himself thrusting a weapon at ancient dragons. The long languid hours of lovemaking with Amber also became more infrequent.

“How’s astronomy class?” Amber asked one night as they lay in bed and watched the first flakes of silver snow fall from the frozen black sky.

“It’s pretty easy so far. We spend a lot of time looking at pictures of the planets. Then we talk about the chemistry and stuff behind all the images. Did you know that the rings of Saturn are mostly small bits of ice?”

"I'm glad you're doing what you are doing", Amber replied. "But I'm also a little frustrated. We don't spend as much time together as we did before".

"Tell me about it. I'm stacking books at the library all day, then freezing my ass off waiting for the stupid trolley so I can go to classes. Then I'm waiting for a streetcar again at ten o'clock so I can come home and do homework. There's just not as many hours in the day as there used to be."

"Cheer up", said Amber, as she curled her warm body closer to his. "Spring will be here before you know it".

IX

At the end of January Amber accepted a student teaching position up in Salem as part of her graduation requirements.

"I hate winter," she said one night as she rubbed a buttery cream into her hands and then her ankles and her feet. The low sky had been dead grey cold for two weeks straight. Stubborn mounds of stone-hard brown snow lined the curbs of Charles Street. "The frikkin wind is ruining my skin. And waiting for the train to Salem every day is a waste of time." Amber's voice became soft and serious.

"I've been thinking about this a lot, Tyler. You know what I think? I think I should move to Salem. I really need to live closer to this teaching job. I can complete a lot of my other class stuff on-line."

"I don't think moving to Salem is a good idea. Right here -- Number 19 is your home. Right here."

"Oh come on. My home can be anywhere. This teaching assignment is part of my degree. It's part of my future".

"Ok," Tyler said later as they hugged in bed. "You're right. School must come first. But I am not happy about it. Not at all. If you move, everything will come crashing down. Our lives will spin into different orbits, and then --"

Amber pulled him close under the blankets and slid her hands down his thighs. "We'll still be together," she said in a voice that was meant to sound cheery but only made him feel sad and alone. "And when spring comes, we can ride the ferry boat back and forth to see each other. Won't that be fun?"

Tyler didn't reply. And in the darkness, Amber could not see the sudden tightness in his lips, the sullen resentment in his narrowed eyes. *The planets were going to come crashing down. He just knew it.*



X

Tyler had played the good-bye scene in his mind a thousand times, how Amber would leave Number 19 Lime Street. He would help her pack her things. Carefully wrap her framed prints in layers of newsprint and then seal them with wide strips of tan masking tape. There would be a warm embrace at the door, and tearful promises to see each other as soon as possible. But her actual departure - the sharp swiftness of it all came as a complete surprise.

The day before the big move was to take place Bruce had trooped over to Tyler's with a bottle of burgundy and some glasses on his Coca-Cola tray.

"Dude - tomorrow's her last day. Let's go up to Amber's and give her a proper send off with her hard-drinking housemates."

"Give me a second - I just got in from work" said Tyler, brushing his hair and tucking in the blue Pendleton shirt that Amber had given to him as a Christmas present.

They climbed the stairs and walked the short hallway to find the door to Amber's flat half open. They called her name, but there was no reply. Tyler pushed the door open. The soft chairs, the warm bed, the children's drawings on the walls, the magical green glass light -- everything -- was gone.

"Jesus f-ing Christ! She's gone!" said Bruce.

"No shit, Sherlock".

"Hey - look at this. A note for you".

There was a sheet of drawing paper on the kitchen countertop on which Amber had scrawled a message in purple marker.

*Tyler
sorry!!! sorry!!
Change of plans!
The parents got involved -- you know how that is.
They paid the deposit on the apartment in Salem early --
but didn't tell me!*

*rental clock was ticking and they called the movers for me.
I'm so pissed!!
What a frikkin madhouse!
And phone battery dead! no way to call you!
remember –
here I am -
345 Washington Street, Salem!
give all my love to everyone (except Bruce ha ha)
see you soon!
xoxoxox
e.*

“Shit!” said Tyler. “She’s gone.”

Bruce placed the tray with the bottle and wine glasses on the empty kitchen countertop. “Anyone for a glass of wine?”



XI

Amber would faithfully ride the 4:15 commuter every Friday afternoon to spend her weekends with Tyler. They would meet at Park Street station and then hug and laugh as they crunched small shells of shallow ice as they walked across Boston Commons. The heat pipes at Number 19 Lime pumped and hissed in steamy counterpoint to the long sessions of sweaty sex that inevitably followed.

The feeling of love is back, stronger than ever, thought Tyler.

And so it was.

Until. The message in March.

It was a Friday afternoon and a surprise storm had just dumped three inches of wet snow on Beacon Hill. Tyler was standing in front of De Lucas market and had just texted Amber - *should I get red, white or both?*

Tyler kicked at some snow, waiting until the screen glowed with a reply.

please go home and read email. important.

Important? What did that mean? A second text from Amber abruptly appeared.

Im sorry Tyler. I am so sorry. so sorry.

What the hell does that mean? Tyler pulled off his gloves and punched in Amber's number and listened as her phone rang over and over. There was no answer. Tyler stood in the swirling snow until he started to shiver and then slowly walked home.

*Tyler - it's important that I share these thoughts with you.
I want to believe that I know what I am doing in my life and then
something happens - and then, you don't know how these things happen.*

In the instant that his eyes scanned the next word in Amber's email, Tyler knew how the message would end. The next word was 'Cliff'.

*Cliff came back from Canada and needed a place to stay.
To make a long story short, he moved in and now we're living together. Can you
understand this? I can't.
You deserve better than this and I am so sorry because I know I have betrayed you,
and myself, and our relationship.
I'm sorry to hurt you like this. Jesus this is terrible just to write this to you.
I still love you, Tyler. I really do. We had magical nights together, yes?
But there is someone else. Or maybe that someone else was always there. God. I
don't know. Can the human heart love more than one person at the same time?
I just don't know. All I know is this crazy mess is not your fault.
And I cherish all the time we spent together. Every moment.
That's why I hope -- we can still see each other sometimes.
Yes? Please? My dearest friend. Please.
So sorry. All my love
xoxox
E*

XII

Tyler slumped at his classroom desk and listlessly looked through his astronomy textbook while *Simon & Garfunkel's Greatest Hits* wallowed in his ears. It was two weeks since Amber dumped him, and he was waiting for the next session on the dance of the planets to begin.

*Time, time, time -
See what's become of me
As I look around for my possibilities*

A girl in paint-stained farmer's jeans sat down next to him. The two of them were early; no one else had arrived yet for class. The girl was asking him something.

Tyler pulled his ear buds.

"Is chapter 7 really that bad?"

"It's not the book. It's just everything else in the universe. Hasn't been a good month."

"Sometimes when I get down, I meditate. Helps me clear my mind," the girl replied.

Tyler noticed that her nose was pierced with a small gold star. Curls the color of amaretto sunlight framed her face.

"I'm Lila". She smiled and extended a slender hand. *She has beautiful teeth*, Tyler thought. He smiled back. "I'm Tyler".

Lila was an art major who lived in drafty second-floor flat in East Cambridge. She used the empty living room for a studio, leaning her half-finished canvases next to the large rain-streaked windows. Her fingers were stained in shades of Sennelier hues and her faded shirts always smelled faintly of turpentine and Columbian incense. She baked her own bread and enjoyed salmon grilled in a dark sauce of brown sugar and soy oil, a specialty she prepared at least once a week.

"Did you ever wonder what dreams mean"? Tyler asked Lila one night as he mopped the last bits of fish on his plate with a crust of warm bread.

"There's no point in trying to figure out dreams" she laughed. She lit a small roach and carefully sucked in the smoke. "Why try to analyze them? Waste of time. Dreams are just movies in your mind. Something to enjoy while you sleep. Popcorn not included."

Tyler had quickly taken up with Lila after their first meeting in the empty classroom. He enjoyed the sanctuary of her cluttered flat, the way she pulled him onto the pile of twisted sheets on her bohemian bed, the scent of incense and turpentine on her fingers, the willingness of her smooth legs to open so easily. Lila lived in the moment of now. She found Tyler worldly, wise, and charming. She never analyzed why anybody did anything or tried to figure out what the real meaning was behind something that someone said. Tyler found Lila to be immensely likeable. But then, he still missed Amber. When home alone again at Number 19 he found himself calling her at least once a week. But Amber could never talk; Cliff was always nearby. *Always*. Didn't this guy ever have to go to school or to a job?

"I'd love to get together with you, but this isn't a good time", Amber would apologize through the telephone. Tyler could hear a guitar being softly strummed in the background.

"How about next Tuesday for lunch?"

Amber replied in a business-like tone, as if she was confirming a date with her manicurist. "Yes, an appointment for next Tuesday would be fine."

XIII

In the warm weeks of early May the two began to meet for occasional afternoon beers in cafes on Newbury Street. Tyler took a selfish pleasure in listening to Amber expound on topics in the news on that day, her humorous complaints about the coolness of Dr. Fleming, the child-like emotional demands of Cliff. When later alone at Lime Street Tyler found himself at times going through a not unfamiliar mental exercise whenever he faced a decision. *What would Amber think about this? What would Amber do?* He still wanted to see the world through her eyes; still believed in her logic, her choices, her truths.

One of the truths that became apparent from their Newbury Street rendezvous was that Amber didn't care for Lila.

"Why are you going out with this girl?" Amber had asked in an artificially sweet voice as she dipped a piece of pita bread into a small dish of olive oil. "I mean - why you are *really* going out with her? Even if she has some success as an artist – which I doubt - what kind of career choice is that? I'm sure she's very nice, but she's so laid-back, so - *simple*. Do you think you could really develop a long-lasting relationship with her?"

Tyler did not reply, could not reply. For the rest of the day, Amber's words echoed in his head, clouding his thoughts.

The next night Tyler was at Lila's, sharing a bottle of burgundy in her mismatched coffee mugs.

"Listen to this mix," said Lila, turning up her dusty Bose 901s. "I think you'll like it".

Mars Lasar, Anita Baker, Elton John, nice sounds, thought Tyler, settling back into the sofa. A wandering piano faded in and then quickly morphed into the crunching guitar opening of - what was this? *Locomotive Breath?* Tyler laughed sarcastically. "Oh, wow. Dinosaur rock."

Lila quietly leaned forward, pushed a button on the sound system, and skipped to the next song. "Sorry" she said. Her eyes were downcast and when she leaned back she was further away from Tyler.

Tyler was angry with himself. He actually happened to like the ancient, rough-edged Jethro Tull tune. It was Amber who couldn't stand it.

"I'm sorry" said Tyler, pulling Lila closer to him. "I wasn't myself for a second." *Fuck Amber* he thought. *Fuck Cliff and his stupid guitar*. Tyler decided to finally to accept the truth. Amber was gone. They would never be a couple again. It was time to free himself from the subtle hold she had on his thinking.

XIV

The trees in the Gardens were flush with moist green buds that rustled softly in the June breeze. The sidewalks were full of women in summer shifts, young men in shorts and t-shirts. Tyler sat at a street side table at a Greek cafe and waited for Amber. It had been a month since their last lunch together. Then he saw her, moving briskly in his direction. She was wearing a white smock top and a dark blue peasant

skirt with silver trim. Her skin was luminescent and her silver bracelets sparkled in the lemon sunlight. Her hair was different too, cut much shorter. They hugged and smiled.

"God, you look good!"

"So do you! You cut your hair. Looks good!"

She laughed and kissed him on the cheek. "I missed you."

"Me too."

They were both in a festive mood and drank imported beer and ate spicy dolmathes with their fingers.

"How are you and Cliff getting along?" Tyler asked.

"What you mean is; am I tired of him yet?" Amber smiled. "We're doing ok, I guess. He's like a cuddly puppy that grew into a big, clumsy dog. I know I shouldn't keep him around, he'll just mean trouble later on. But he's just too loveable to put back on the street. Speaking of romance, how is Lila?"

"Lila's in Denver," Tyler replied. "There's an art gallery there interested in representing her. Isn't that great?"

"That's great." Amber frowned. "But I still think that the two of you are not -- never mind. I'm sorry. I don't want to spoil our lunch by telling you again how I feel about Lila."

Tyler tapped her beer bottle with his own. "Apology accepted."

"I didn't say I was apologizing."

"You know what I think? I may not be as wise as Doctor Fleming, but I think I detect a bit of female jealousy."

Amber said nothing, but Tyler could see the petulance building in her face. The server came by and asked if she could bring anything. "Two Sambucas, please" said Tyler.

Amber took a deep breath and leaned forward, resting her chin on her hands, her expression now serious.

"Ok, let's change the subject. Tyler - I want you to tell me what you think about something. I need some of your words of wisdom."

"Ok. What's the problem?"

"Sometimes the whole scene is played before you, but you don't really know the characters or what they mean."

Tyler broke a breadstick, releasing a small cascade of crumbs.

"Which means what?"

A pigeon wobble-walked to their table and eyed the breadcrumbs as the small glasses of Sambuca were delivered.

"Which means I went to see Dr. Fleming yesterday. It was a very intense session. Afterwards, I walked to my car, but I couldn't find my keys. I thought - I must have left them at his office. So I went back inside, but the receptionist wasn't at the front desk. I tapped on the door to his inner office, but there was no answer. So I thought - I'll just step in to get my keys. I pushed the door open -- and -- Dr. Fleming was already in session with another person. He was *furious* at the interruption. Really angry. I apologized, but he was shouting at me. He said I intentionally left my keys in his office. He said I was using them as a symbolic gesture of my dependence on him. I saw my keys on the side table. So I grabbed them and left. "

"And you're still upset by this incident?"

"Of course I am. Because -- I honestly don't know if I left my keys intentionally or not. I don't think I did. I just forgot them. But Dr. Fleming is my shrink. I have to trust him. I have this huge knot of fear inside, this whole dependency issue. But then I ask - why did he get so upset over a small thing like forgetting a set of keys?" Amber paused and nervously smoothed her hair. "What do you think?"

Tyler settled in his seat and swallowed some Sambuca and smiled.

"Amber, I wish I had a dollar for every time you lost something at Lime Street. You were always losing some scrap of paper that had something important written on it. We even laughed about it sometimes, remember? Forget about it. Doctor Fleming was just embarrassed. Why? Because you made it look like he couldn't control the privacy of his own office. That's all".

For a long moment Amber was silent.

"I don't know," she finally sighed. "I *feel* Dr. Fleming is wrong. But he's my guide. Now I have this huge conflict inside, and I'm starting to panic. The problem is this -- if Doctor Fleming is right, I'll feel like I don't know myself at all. My vast ocean of self-awareness will amount to nothing more than a thimble of spit."

"And if he's wrong?"

Amber sighed. "If he's wrong, the hundreds of hours I've spent with him over the past two years -- and God -- the thousands of dollars my parents have paid him --- will be wasted. Because it didn't mean anything. Wrong church, wrong pew, wrong everything."

Tyler leaned forward and gently squeezed Amber's arm. "Amber - listen to me. Listen carefully. There is nothing wrong with you. You forgot your keys. That's all. When we were together -- I always wondered why you even went to a shrink. Maybe this is bitter medicine for you. Maybe you don't want to hear this. I'm trying to help you here. But you don't need Doctor Fleming. You don't need the confusion he causes in your thinking."

Amber pulled away from Tyler's touch.

“You're sweet, but you don't understand.”

“What you mean is -- you think I lack the self awareness to understand how your dark, inner wheels turn. Only the great Doctor Fleming has this power.”

"That's not fair!" Amber replied sharply.

Tyler drained the rest of his Sambuca and set the glass back down on the table and took a deep breath. "You want my opinion? Ok, here it is. I loved you once, Amber. I loved you with all my heart and soul. And now something has happened. So before all this fades away, I'm telling you, from my heart, that Doctor Fleming is wrong."

Amber shook her head in disagreement.

"Your precious Dr. Fleming is *wrong*," Tyler said again, his voice becoming louder. "He's not a god. Can't you break free of his damned interpretations of reality, just once?"

Amber's eyes filled with tears. She shook her head and pushed her chair back and stood up.

"Sit down" Tyler said quietly.

Amber shook her head again and wiped her tears and looked at Tyler.

“Sit down!” Tyler hissed, determined to make Amber see the truth, *his* truth, the truth that was part of the big truth with a capital ‘*T*’.

Amber dropped her napkin on the table and turned her back to Tyler and quickly walked away without speaking another word.

Tyler stared at the pigeons, stared at nothing. "I'll see you never!" he said loudly to no one in particular.

Later there would be a reconciliation of sorts, phone calls and emails between the two, polite conversations where nothing was really said. But Tyler did not actually see Amber again for a long, long time.

XV

Tyler wandered in and out of the Harvard Square shops for over an hour and found himself standing in front of an antique store at the end of small side street. And there it was - *the perfect gift*. A pale white vase, decorated with delicate blue lines of lacy flowers, gleaming in the center of the window display. Tyler leaned toward the glass and studied the shining container, his palms suddenly damp. A

small card read 'Nineteenth Century Chinese Porcelain' and stated the price. *It's pretty expensive*, Tyler thought. He rubbed his palms against the rough insides of his pockets and entered the small shop.

"You're just in time," said the grey-haired Asian saleswoman. "I was about to close." She took the vase from the window and carefully placed it in a box filled with pink tissue. "It's a very beautiful piece," she said dreamily. "Someone is going to be a very lucky person."

Tyler nodded in agreement. *The ancient alchemy had worked -- the perfect gift had been found!* He pulled a handful of 20's from his wallet, and then some 10's, then another 20. *It's expensive*, Tyler mused. *But what the hell. True friends and true wisdom never comes cheap.*

Tyler rode the Red Line back to Beacon Hill, carefully cradling the box in his lap. He studied the reflection of his eyes in the dark window as they crossed the river. He imagined he was looking at two magic sapphires burning in a pool of dark water. *Thank you, Amber*, the two stars seemed to say. *You showed me to see and appreciate things that are still a part of me now.* Tyler chuckled softly. *In a way, you helped me find the perfect gift.*



The next morning Tyler carried the vase to the florist shop on the other side of the Hill. A young man with one earring and a hint of eye shadow was behind the counter. Tyler carefully explained that he wanted a large arrangement of flowers added to the vase. Something romantic, but not too romantic. There should also be flowers that expressed the sentiment of 'thank you' -- thank you for a wonderful friendship. Price was not a problem. He would return in one hour to collect the arrangement. The young man with the earring nodded his head and said he would take care of it.

XVI

Tyler held his gift tightly as the mud-streaked streetcar squealed to a stop at the T station just beyond Brookline Village. He stepped down and crossed the street and stared up at the towering grey residential complex. Was he doing the right thing? He thought it would be easy to come out here and see Amber after all these months, but now he wondered if this wasn't just a little bit crazy. Tyler entered the condominium lobby and noticed the smooth white walls, the polished floors, so different from the faded brown brick of Beacon Hill. *So clean, everything so clean and new.* He carried the box with his flower-filled vase through the lobby into the courtyard and sat on the low wall that circled the reflecting pool and texted Amber. It had rained all night and small clumps of low clouds still scudded against the sharp edges of the towers, gently dropping drizzle into small puddles that dotted the courtyard pavement. Then he saw her, coming through the glass doors of the lobby. Before he knew it, Tyler was on his feet and walking swiftly, almost running, toward her.

“Amber - I -- “

“Tyler - my God!”

Suddenly she was pressed against him, holding him in a fierce embrace. Tyler breathed the perfume scent from her neck and felt her softness, her warm surrender. He closed his eyes and imagined that he was in another time, another place, lying beneath a green lantern hung in a purple sky. Amber laughed, and then her hands gently pushed him away.

“Tyler, so nice of you to stop by! My God - how long has it been?”

She laughed again and Tyler saw there were tears in her eyes. He clasped one of her hands and sat on the stone wall and pulled her down next to him. He was breathing hard and for a moment he didn't know where to begin.

“Amber - did you know - it's your birthday in two weeks? Of course you do! I didn't want you to think I'd forgotten about it. And - also - did you know - we've known each other for five years.” Tyler now spoke slowly, forming each word carefully, so she would understand the importance of his statement.

“I wanted to get you something for your birthday. But, also -- something to commemorate our friendship. Happy fifth anniversary”.

Tyler lifted the vase from the box on the low wall and placed it in Amber's hands. For a moment she said nothing, gently running her fingers over the rich abundance of pink and white and red flowers.

“They're gorgeous, Tyler. Just gorgeous. And my God - what a beautiful vase!”

“I'm glad you like it. Look - I'm not going to stay. It was probably crazy coming out here. I hope seeing you doesn't cause any trouble for you and -- ”

“Paul. Of course not.” She spoke softly, looking down at the flowers. “These are so beautiful. You were always so good to me, Tyler. No, there's no trouble. You know - I should tell you -- Paul and I are engaged. He wants to get married next summer. After he finishes graduate dental school.”

“Yeah, well. All the best to the two of you. I mean it.”

Tyler swallowed hard and stood up. “Look - I'm gonna go now. But it was really great to see you again. Really great.” Small tears welled in his own eyes. He hoped that if Amber saw them that she would think it was only the mist falling on his face.

“So long, Amber. See you -- sometime”. He reached the lobby door and pulled to open it.

“Tyler!”

Tyler slowly spun around with a tired wrestler's grace, dignity in defeat. Amber was still sitting on the low wall, leaning forward, hugging the vase with the flowers tightly, as if it would fly away like a party balloon if she released her grip.

“Thank you!” she laughed, her bright eyes filled with tears. “I love you, Tyler.”

Tyler smiled and softly whispered, “love you, too”. Then he stepped into the lobby and passed through the outer doors and returned to the world outside.



XVII

Tyler sat at his desk and watched through the tall windows as the gas streetlamps below began to glow as dusk descended over Beacon Hill. The ringing of his telephone suddenly interrupted the slow rhythm of his thoughts. Amber's excited voice pulsed through the handset before he could even say 'hello'.

“Tyler – the flowers you gave me today! Do you realize your bouquet included lots of white carnations, along with the pink lilies and the pink and red roses?”

“I didn't know there was any special significance to white carnations.”

Amber began laughing at her end of the connection. “White flowers are what you give when someone has died. God, I hope this is not a secret death wish from you, because I'm getting married!”

Now it was Tyler's turn to laugh. “Amber, Amber. It's not a death wish. The flowers were just a way to say ‘thank you’. Thank you and -- good-bye. You're taking your life in a new direction, and I'm going -- somewhere. We had some great times. It was nice. It was special. But now --”.

There was a silence on the line, and then Amber finally spoke. “Oh, Tyler. I don't know what to say.”

“You don't have to say anything. All of the things you ever said to me, everything you ever shared with me - these will always be a part of me.”

Tyler tried to keep his voice from becoming too emotional. “Thanks, Amber, for being a part of my life. Even for just a little while. Maybe sometime, I'll see you around.”

Tyler hung up the phone and stared out the windows for a full minute. Then he took a deep breath and quickly turned to the desk. He lifted a pen and wrote '*respectfully declined*' on Lila's wedding

invitation, sealed the return envelope, and tossed it aside. He grabbed his worn leather jacket, stepped through the door, glided down the stairs, and with a wrestler's grace, walked into the warm embrace of the night. From somewhere, the music of the nightclubs beckoned. And somewhere, inevitably, there would be a bottle of wine and a smiling, flower-scented women waiting for him. These things required a certain amount of time and energy on their own.

end

Copyright © 2013 Doug Shepardson All rights reserved