

I Know You

by Adam Sifre

On this clean, deceptively bright morning, the storyteller sat on a bench and pretended to ignore the male nurse standing to the side. The park was quiet and like so much in this strange world, felt *thin*. He was at that age where he ached in more places than not. He carried scars instead of memories; forgotten stories written in an alien language on weathered skin.

The storyteller glanced at the man. He was dressed in jeans and a blue sweater. A whisper of a breeze carried the man's smoke away from the bench, but the ghost of clove and tobacco teased the senses. Good tobacco cigarettes were almost impossible to come by these days, especially here. Ironic, as there was a small Indian reservation just a mile beyond the woods. What was left of it. They hadn't sold cigarettes in years, of course. He smiled to himself. *Indians without tobacco and casinos. Who would have ever thought?*

The man smoking the bad cigarette wasn't really a nurse. That much was obvious. He was large, with a smooth-shaven face and an over-muscled body, but there was no meanness there. The storyteller sensed no real danger in him, yet he was not fooled. He knew this man. For years and years the two of them had shared an unspoken accord. He pretended he didn't know the man and the man pretended that the storyteller didn't know anything.

Not long ago in a very different place, the man pretending to be a nurse hid his kind face behind an angry brown, unkempt beard. Back then the man was a hunter by nature. In his youth he either killed his own meat or went without. Later, in the camps, the man went by a different name than the one he used now. Even then, he was not a bad man. But he did bad things. Terrible things.

"I do not hate you," the storyteller whispered. "But I cannot forgive you. I am sorry."

The man turned his owlish eyes to look at the storyteller.

"Excuse me?"

The storyteller didn't answer. He was lost in his thoughts, remembering the girl again. Just a slip of a thing. He had loved her, the small girl who once had a name and a face. How quiet she was at the end, a ghost in silver cloth slippers. Now more than ever.

"It is not my place to speak for the dead," he whispered.

The man said nothing but rested a large hand on the his shoulder. The storyteller refused to acknowledge it, looking instead at his own dappled hands. There was a time, he was almost sure, when those hands had done wonderful things. He remembered painting the most fantastic landscapes. . .

"What an imagination you had," she whispered.

"I remember."

The man gently squeezed the storyteller's shoulder and for a moment he was lost in the pleasure of human contact.

The faint sound of a car alarm reached his ears. On the other side of the small park stood a building, its parking lot crowded with cars.

"Just window dressing. Parked there only for show." He knew that was no car alarm. *Someone is trying to escape.* Hopeless of course, but he couldn't blame them. He'd do the same thing if he was in their shoes. The thought made him smile.

"They won't get far," he mused out loud. Even if they make it to the woods, where are they going to go?

The quiet man from the camps leaned forward. "We should go."

"It isn't so bad at first," the storyteller mused. "He's young, healthy. He has Time and Hope -- two great and steadfast companions. Then one day he wakes up and Hope has fled, leaving only Time. The children stop writing; stop wondering about him. The world moves on and leaves him behind."

The storyteller put his hand over the man's, intending to remove it from his shoulder. It was too much effort, however, and he just left it there, his left arm crossed over his chest, old hand covering big hand. Why not?

"He must have gone stir crazy in there," the storyteller continued. All alone for how long is anyone's guess. Then one day, for no reason

or maybe a hundred reasons — maybe a thousand — the idea of running grabs hold and just won't quit. He worries at it in the small hours of night and soon he can think of nothing else." He sighed and his breath made a brief appearance in cold autumn air.

"There's no wife waiting for him out there. No job. No friends. Nothing. Nothing waits forever. It's the only thing that does, in the end. And he's been there forever, has he not? No, there's nothing out there worth running to, but he's running anyway." A tear surprised him and rolled down his cheek. And even though he wasn't particularly sad, others followed.

"He runs because it is something to do. How terrifying when all the running is done. When he's abandoned everything but the luggage of his thoughts, and there is no strength left to run anymore."

The tears came effortlessly now. He didn't know why. A soft breeze picked up some leaves by the bench, carried them a few yards, then gave up.

"I was a great dancer, you know. I won many trophies, and a few hearts. Patricia used to tell me that a man who can dance gets away with a lot."

Another ghost of a memory caught in his throat and he paused, waiting for it to pass.

"Something like that. She couldn't dance, my Patricia, but she looked just like . . ."

After some time, the storyteller turned his face up to the man, squeezing his hand.

Later, back in his room, he stood barefoot on the cold linoleum tile. He spent fleeting moment after fleeting moment staring at the reflection in the bathroom mirror, waiting for something to happen. After a while, the young man from the park came into the room and sat down on the bed. The storyteller heard him switch the television on. He didn't know who the man was or why he was here, but he knew that he came here a lot. Always alone. He was a big man, but there was no danger in him. He had once told the storyteller that he liked white chocolate. Loved it, actually. The man's mother owned a

small candy store and she used to bring home white chocolate for him every Saturday when he was little...

Still looking in the mirror, he imagined how nice it would be to have a mother who worked in a candy store. Then he thought of nothing in particular until sometime later.

"I know you," he whispered.

