

The Distance of Advice

by Adam Strong

The wipers on my Honda are in rough shape, squeaking sickly across the windshield as I make my way through the twisted turns of NW Glisan Street a few months after the breakup.

My eyes sting and the view of the street blurs into a slippery tear-filled tableau. I see her standing on the corner, wearing a burnt-black jacket, staring into my eyes as she twists the iron phone cord around her fingers. She's grinning maniacally, becoming a snake charmer to my psyche as I see her around town, in places she can't possibly be, under circumstances that don't make any sense.

A few things about me: I own a small comic book store in Beaverton, specializing in smaller, independent titles and graphic novels. The titles keep the little kids away for the most part and there are enough people in the Portland area interested in the graphic arts to keep me in slip covers and back-boards. It was a quiet life, until Sharon came into the picture.

She stormed in unannounced, slamming her purse on the counter. She had just been robbed, mugged right outside the shop. She's rifling through her bag when the tension breaks and she finally has to say something.

"Goddammit, they took everything."

"Can I help you?"

"Well, la dee da, hahahahahaha."

And she didn't stop laughing for two minutes after getting her bearings and realizing where she was. She calmed down a bit, then started walking around, looking at the merchandise while I finished the inventory.

"Are all of these for children?"

"None of them are for children; they're called graphic novels. You know, for adults."

I peered through the racks to see her thumbing a reprint of Robert Crumb's "Zap" (third reprint, to be exact, published along with the movie tie-in, circa 1994).

"But they're not all for adults, are they? I mean, look at this one. They're all in tights." Her accusatory finger pointed out a copy of Howard Cheykin's "American Flag" (1983 to be exact).

Moving toward where she was standing, I couldn't help but laugh. She was putting me on, teasing and pretending it was a kids' store. She had a gleam in her eye that spelled trouble as much as it was alluring, coming across like someone who was eternally in detention throughout school and probably most of her adult life.

I moved even closer to where she was, her back to the life-size poster board of an "Optic Nerve" promotional display. The character on the display had horn-rimmed glasses, a few splotches of acne and stood in front of a personal library containing all of the comic books he owned. I always admired the artistry, but now I saw it as something else — a badge of courage, a reason for me being here in the first place, a mirror image of someone I used to be when I first started working here, just out of high school.

Now she turns to look at me, still smiling with this "I cannot believe I am still standing in this creepy place" look on her face. Behind her is this beautifully rendered poster containing the image of who I used to be, and I laugh confidently, because I'm looking at myself earlier and now, with this beautiful brunette with soft brown eyes and a nose that gently discloses itself from her darkened-red hair.

She laughs again and then she really gets confident. She stands in front of me, luscious merlot lips winking at me, and plants a kiss just like those in every clichéd film noir scene. She's a killer. There's a word for her, and the characters like her: a vamp.

She also went by the name Valerie, but only her rocker ex-boyfriend called her that and, after he wrote a song about her, she could never quite handle being called Valerie again. I find all this out before she makes a phone call to the cops.

She makes the call and we wait to file a police report. We talk while the cops take their sweet time in arriving and I feel like I've been set up, but there's that look in her eye that even the most experienced actresses couldn't pull off.

We talk about plot lines and she talks about her life, and her job, where she sells insurance, and she's high-power, in control. She sells cell phones in the mall on the side and makes a killing, taking advantage of her looks.

She has a mercenary way of doing business and she's pretty shrewd. I make her stand outside to smoke her cigarette. I stay inside watching her stance as she violently tugs at the barrel, tearing every ounce of smoke out of it, then stamping it out as I wonder why is she here, why did she pick me?

Before I can answer that the cops arrive. They tell her to stay where she is for the time being, because they've had other reports in the area and can she stick around until later, just in case they need to interview her again?

We order take-out and talk about the world for a few hours. I ask her, in a paraphrased way that says I'm indifferent, why she picked me. She laughs for a moment and stares straight at me, her eyes letting me in.

"Because, I knew you'd help me."

We dated fiercely for a few months before finally moving in together. The arrangement is hammered out in bed, shortly after sex and the completion of a \$200 sushi bender — paid for, as is everything else, by her.

It was a loaded question, asking if we should move in together, and it got the answer I was looking for. But I was surprised when she said that she wanted to move into my place, a tiny little apartment purchased back when prices were still reasonable. She wanted to be closer to me and figured this was the best way to do that. Gone were the luxurious nights spent in her Pearl District condominium, but she would move into my cozy little place and make it cozier.

At times she appeared distracted and would disappear for hours at a time. I would panic, call everyone on her rolodex (she kept one at her side of the bed; it felt antiquated) and collapse on the bed, still awake when she'd stroll in at two in the morning, poo-pooing all of my paranoia.

One day she didn't come back.

I came home after a robust day of sales. Sharon had all sorts of strategies for increasing volume at the store, all of which were quite successful and resulted in the arrival of brokers, along with the shallow-tipped money that followed. Turns out they couldn't wait for the new titles from the publishers and they increased sales by the just-enough-to-realize-60-percent it took to generously land in the financial category of black.

Ben,

It's been fun, honey, but we both knew it wouldn't last.

I'll think of you more often than you'll ever know.

— Val

But I never knew she was a writer. I learned this eventually, as the latest issue of a title that nobody reads, "Tales for the Dumped Volume Seven," was released a month after the note. Volumes one through six didn't sell at all and I had to send all but one copy back to the distributor. (My ex-girlfriend borrowed the lone issue which I subsequently had to purchase.)

The whole story was chronicled in those tales: how, seemingly by accident, she wandered into the all-male dive that was my store and how she was trying on a different outfit, one where she dated "heartfelt guys," as she put it, and decided momentarily to "step down from the high-profiled corporate types."

There was even an image of me, which closely resembled the poster that still hangs on the wall of my shop.

Looking back, it seems fitting — like she was sent along to pluck me out of my daily existence just long enough for me to understand how slow my life was up to that point.

And I still see her, or at least I think I do. The panels of "Tales for the Dumped Volume Seven" make it seem like I wasn't the only one.

But sitting there, in the Honda and watching her coil her finger around the iron telephone cable, I wonder who she's calling.

Is it a customer who unwittingly will be scammed out of overage fees? Or a future lover, ready to become another episode in a series that continues not to sell, mocking me from that area in the back of the store, where we first met, while staring at my mirrored reflection?

