

Same As You

by billy robinson

Whenever Gina and I watched videos on her couch she would squeeze up against me as though we were the perfect fusion of flesh. Her feet would squish under my thighs, her head heavy upon my chest, and she'd hold onto my hand as if they were affixed by super glue. Her perfume, a mixture of lemon and lavender, would sink into my bronchioles, and strands of her hair—long, black, and twisty—occasionally made it into the recesses of my mouth, caught somewhere between tonsil and tongue. None of this bothered me until closing in on a year when I figured she was probably going to want to know what future plans I had in store for us. Frankly I didn't have any. The setup wasn't so bad maybe—movies, dinners out, the frequent if untantalizing sex---but lately I'd been wondering if this was it. It felt more like a friendship than anything, and nothing like the love affair that Corinth and I had when we were University of Syracuse sophomores. Or maybe this was all an excuse. Maybe I just wanted out. They say you can always find a reason.

So just before she popped in a movie one night, I was about to lay on her the speech I'd been working on---the good about her, the bad about me, and the ugly I was afraid we'd turn into if we stuck around to the end---when the phone rang. She took it in the kitchen, and after five minutes of staring at the blank screen, I started to get antsy. I even contemplated blowing off the whole thing and leaving a note, something short and sweet like, *Seasons change. People don't. No hard feelings?* Then she came out of the bedroom, her face ashen.

“What is it?”

“It's Josh. He was killed in a car accident.”

* * *

Among Gina's boyfriends, Josh was her most serious, seven years before I ever came into the picture. Still, twice a year, she'd get a call from him, an update on his life and whereabouts. They had been

going to get married, or they could have married, or something like that, was how she told it.

Gina sat on the couch in a daze, and I even held her for a while. It did seem strange, though, consoling her for the loss of an ex-boyfriend, someone who was basically a distant memory. After laying her head on my shoulder for more than half an hour, she bolted up, wanting out of her apartment. I suggested we head down to the steam room at the gym where we held a joint membership. Clear your head, was how I put it, which was just short of saying I needed to do so myself.

The gym was closing in an hour, so we were lucky to have the steam room to ourselves. We sat wrapped in towels as she filled me in a bit about Josh, about his split from his wife and their young son, but then a cloud of steam blasted into the white-tiled room for a minute and she had to wait. When the unit shut off, she said, "You'll go with me, right?"

"Where?"

"To the funeral."

Truthfully I considered other plans. I knew of a guy who broke up with a girl half an hour after she got news she was diagnosed with Bell's palsy. If I ended our relationship at that moment, I didn't think this was like that, or at least that's what I told myself.

"Isn't he in Wisconsin?"

"Yes."

"Kind of far, don't you think?"

I couldn't see her expression on account of the steam, so I didn't

know if she was giving me a look or her eyes were welling with tears. All I heard was, "Well, we'll fly, then."

* * *

Flying made me queasy. Reminded me of the times my dad dumped me on a plane to visit my mom after she moved to Sausalito with the guy she'd been cheating with. Once I stayed an entire week, but every other time she sent me back after a day or two, and this always pissed my dad off no end. They'd fight on the phone about it, and even though he knew she was going to send me back early—she had a new family, new kids to take care of—he'd do it anyway. Calling it an ugly divorce was an understatement. They dragged me in and out of court, testifying to their common accusations of physical and emotional abuse, and whatnot. In the interim, my dad brought home various women companions, old and young and pretty and not so, and they stayed one night, a week, moved in, stole cash, crashed his car.

Gina got a tad stomachy from flying, too, but for different reasons: the threat of terrorism, the certainty of bad food, and how a two-hundred-ton aluminum bird defied all logic. Probably why she said the moment we plunked into our seats, "I'm getting drunk. You joining me?"

"Didn't we just have two beers at the bar?"

"And your point is?"

She went ahead and ordered a drink from the flight attendant, then another. She flipped through the in-flight magazine, looking at the expensive items that no one ever bought for themselves.

"You know what I just realized?" she said, smacking her magazine down on her lap.

"What?"

"If I'd married Josh, I might not be here right now. I might have been

in that car with him, and that semi could've jack knifed and crushed me, too."

"Umm," I said.

"Now play it out a bit. If I'd married him, then you and I never would have met....and we wouldn't have ever dated....and we wouldn't be flying on this plane right now." She sat back and rattled the ice cubes in her plastic cup. "It's all so strange. Don't you find that strange?"

"I guess so."

As the lights extinguished and the plane pulled away from the terminal, I got quiet, and because I guess I was staring blankly at the seat back in front of me, she said, "A million dollars for your thoughts?"

I smiled halfheartedly at her. "It's nothing."

Which wasn't all true. It did cross my mind, now that she'd brought it up, that maybe she was beginning to do some thinking about us, starting to reevaluate her life, especially the part that pertained to me. And perhaps, too, she was slowly beginning to see the folly of our relationship and figure out a way to break the subject to me, for Josh's accident had opened her eyes. I slid back in my chair, relaxed in the notion that maybe I wouldn't have to say a thing; soon enough, she'd beat me to the punch.

But just then, as the plane's engines roared alive and we bumped along gathering speed, she suddenly grabbed my hand and said, "Don't you dare let go of me."

* * *

After we landed at Milwaukee's General Mitchell International, we rented a car and got directions to the City of Oshkosh, about ninety

miles north. Gina drove (as per request, "to keep my mind distracted"), which made me think maybe she hadn't finished contemplating the advantages of a short happy life with Josh versus a long, nebulous one with me.

The leaves on the trees along Highway 41 were sparse and the fields, although wide and long, the color of brown turd. I attempted to lighten the atmosphere by saying, "What are the chances that a Josh lives in Oshkosh?" This got Gina to crack a smile, so I added, "Do you think Josh shopped at Oshkosh B'Gosh?" Now she was laughing, though probably giddy from fatigue. Still, I couldn't stop. "Do you think Josh washed his posh Oshkosh B'Gosh?; I wonder if Josh liked to mosh?" None of these were side-splitters, and soon enough we realized it, slipping into silence amid the drab scenery.

Gina had chosen the hotel, Hawthorne Suites, with its kitchenette and two TVs, which was more than I was ever going to bother with. From her purse she pulled out a couple of those airplane mini-sized bottles of Beefeaters she'd stashed away while I flipped around on the TV. There was nothing on, unless one counted the movie Freaky Friday, which starred Jamie Lee Curtis and Lindsey Lohan. Gina plopped stomach side down on the bed right next to me, and took a gulp from the bottle. "Is this another one of those movies where the child switches places with the parent?"

"Yep."

She took another swig. "Okay, so on what planet does that ever happen?"

At the moment Jamie Lee and Lindsey bonked heads, hoping for some metaphysical "turn-back-the-clock" transformation, Gina mounted me. All of a sudden my tongue was in her mouth, our teeth banged around, she bit my bottom lip, and made me grab her black frizzy hair and pull. When I wasn't following her instructions properly, she whispered, "Harder."

Afterward, she lay across the bed in a deep, welcomed sleep while I went outside and smoked a cigarette. In the distance was the highway, rain slashing across the pavement. Trucks rumbled by while strong gusts knocked the few leaves still clinging to the trees. Luckily, I stood under an overhang, so the rain and wind were kept at bay. And I liked that I could stand out of the way while everything was getting churned up. I felt distinct, but involved at the same time, as though I was watching the world from behind a screen door.

When I got back to the room, Gina was still out cold. She got what she wanted, or needed, which was basically a sympathy fuck, or a fuck to prove she still had a pulse. What was I going to do, anyway? She had enough on her plate. But I was hit with a double whammy, feeling like a heel, that while she was climaxing I was wondering how long I had to wait before we ended it. One week? Two? A month? The truth was I already had my eye on someone who worked a couple of floors above me in my office building. Looks-wise, maybe a cross between Kate Hudson and Diana Krall. I hadn't spoken to her yet—we'd only traded glances in the lobby—but she seemed like someone I'd be interested in knowing better.

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Rain piss poured down the next day, with a little snow mixed in. (The funeral service was called for 1:00 pm.) "You know, everybody's entitled to beautiful weather on this of all days," I said, on the way to the funeral. "God's got to give you that," to which Gina nodded respectfully. We pulled into the large asphalt parking lot at 12:37 p.m. The church was a large stone building spread out on a neatly-clipped lawn sprinkled with manicured flowers and perennials. Gina found a spot and turned off the ignition. Then she took a deep, wobbly breath. "You okay?" I asked. She didn't answer. She was getting a load of the big black hearse in front and the line of shimmering black limousines behind it, antsy for the trip to the graveyard.

There were a lot of people going in. Men and women in black garb, heads down, walking hand in hand, sunglasses covering, I presumed, swollen eyes. Finally she opened the door and got out. I trailed behind her as we nodded at a few suited-up men at the door.

We walked into the liturgy, candles, the whole bit. The pews were filling up, and we made our way into the back. Those around us Gina hugged, shook hands, kissed. She didn't know any of these people, though this mattered little. She fit into any event seamlessly, situations that were dire or uncomfortable for me. I was always uncomfortable.

I took a seat and gently nudged Gina forward. I watched her walk to the front and lean down to hug people, people I presumed were Josh's ex, his twelve-year-old son, his parents, maybe hers. Two huge vases of carnations bookended the casket draped in a white shroud, and off to the side, on a tripod, clearly visible, sat a huge portrait of Josh, something I should have expected but nonetheless was shocked to see. What surprised me even more was that he had aged so noticeably from the last photograph Gina had shown me a few years ago, with his curly brown locks now peppered with gray, along with his bushy eyebrows. I was snapped out of my reverie when wails rose and ricocheted off the high walls. Gina walked over and stood at the open casket. She didn't take a quick look at death and turn away. She lingered. And I did wonder what her heart was whispering to him. I always loved you? We could have been good together? And when she did finally turn around, I was struck suddenly by how vulnerable she looked.

A tubby guy, bald, his face seamed, and already sitting in my row, leaned over and whispered. "A shame, isn't it?" I nodded, gave him the rumpled eyebrows. I turned back, but felt him staring. He leaned in again and said, "You know, you kind of look like him." Luckily, Gina was on her way back. The guy gave her one of those customary condolence nods before sliding back to his wife.

Gina settled in next to me as we listened to Scripture and several family members speak. The pastor started it off, then the ex, then a friend. They mentioned a few things people might not have known about him: he was exceedingly shy even though he happened to be a motivational speaker; he won a scholarship to play college basketball at Michigan. Listening, it all made me wonder, *What would people say about me? He was immoderately adrift. Maybe pathologically narcissistic. A shame he dumped Gina, the best he ever did. In essence, a man-child.*

When Carson, Josh's twelve-year-old son, was mentioned, a wail went up in the hallowed halls, again, this time echoing off the stained glass and settling under my skin like a knife. I knew I couldn't be much comfort to Gina sitting here. I told her that I needed air, even though what I craved was a cigarette. It was still a hard cold rain when I got outside, so I moved under a tree and smoked. Twenty minutes later, the doors flung open. I moved toward the steps as people flowed out into the parking lot. Car doors closed with a thud, engines groaned. I glanced at Gina, who was hugging some dark-haired man while looking at me over the man's shoulder. Someone else grabbed her, and she turned away. Just then the guy who'd sat in my pew came over. "So, how did you know Josh?"

"I didn't," I said. "I was walking by and heard all the laughter."

I thought I was breaking the thick air of tension, but he looked at me with narrowed eyes, as if to say, Yup, I figured you for an idiot.

* * *

We pulled out behind a line of black limousines, Volvos, BMWs and whatnot. I drove (Gina was now too distracted to drive) and queued somewhere toward the tail end of the procession.

"Pretty nice things they said inside," I said, as we rode swiftly

around traffic.

I turned to look at her, but she was looking down at her lap. I glanced back just as the light changed to red and slammed on the brakes.

"What are you doing!?"

It was too late. Cross-traffic had rushed into the intersection.

"You're not supposed to stop," she said.

In my rear-view mirror I saw ten or so cars behind me. "It was instinct."

When the light turned green, we debated which car was the one we had lost. I thought it was a Honda Accord, while Gina was sure it was more like a Cadillac. "Turn here," she said.

"You sure?"

"No."

And she wasn't, because she sent us right down a cul-de-sac, as blatant a metaphor if there ever was one. The worst thing about it was all the cars followed right behind us so that we couldn't even turn around. We were stuck.

"This would be funny if it weren't so tragic," I said, but Gina was looking out straight ahead, as if in a daze. I was about to roll down my window to motion the cars behind us to back up, but she said, "I know what you want to do."

"About what?"

Now she looked at me and I wished at that moment that we were still in the steam room when I couldn't see her face.

I fell back in my seat and turned away. "When did you figure it out?"

"Does it matter?"

"No, I guess not." I looked at her now, and she continued staring her blank stare. She said, "I'm not going to fight about it, if you were wondering. I mean, I can't save you. You know that, right?"

What she was saying was true. You have to do it yourself, of which I was neither capable nor ready. Eventually the cars behind us maneuvered back and forth incrementally like some kind of video game, until one by one we were set free. Another car took the lead this time. What we had been in the lead of we were now at the very end of. At the cemetery, neither of us spoke another word. And neither did we on the way to Josh's house. The only thing she said was, "I didn't love him....if you were wondering why we never married." A couple of times I felt words trying to come out, but my lips acted like an involuntary gate. I wasn't even sure what I wanted to say anyway. When we got to the house, I parked behind a row of gun-metal-colored cars and watched her get out and walk away, to the front door, where she shook some hands, rubbed a back, kissed a cheek. She was a good girl. Absolutely nothing wrong with her. I sat motionless and felt my ears ringing. I watched her disappear inside.

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At some point it had stopped raining. Now there was just this gray sky, like a thick wool blanket thrown over everything. I decided not to go into the house. Instead I went around the patio and into the backyard, where I found a shed. I went behind that and lit up a cigarette. It was cold, so I hopped from foot to foot. Halfway through the cigarette, I heard, "What's up, man? Can you spare it?" It was Carson, the dead guy's son. He was dressed in a suit, a red tie, a pseudo miniature man. He was pointing at my cigarette.

I stood there shivering, my lips pursed, blowing smoke out of my nose. Watching him at the cemetery, standing erect, head up, I'd first thought of a brave soldier. He hadn't even cried.

"If you're not going to, don't make me stand here. Just say so."

"No, here," I said. I sort of held to the philosophy that things that are available lose their attraction. Besides, I didn't want to deny him on this of all days.

He held the cigarette between his index and thumb, looked it over, then sucked on it. The smoke got caught in the back of his throat, making him cough. He handed it back to me. "See ya."

I thought he'd go back into the house, but he turned toward the gate and lifted the latch. Then he looked back at me, raised a finger to his lips, and slipped through onto the other side. A few seconds later, he pushed the gate back slightly and eyed me. "You're not going to squeal on me now, are you?"

I glanced toward the house, then at him. "I don't even know what you're doing."

"Good." He slipped out of sight again, but a few seconds later his head popped back through the gate. "You wanna come?"

"Where?"

"Down thataway." And he pointed down the block.

I hesitated a second, then snubbed out my cigarette into the frozen crab grass with my shoe. I realized afterward that leaving with him instead of convincing him to go back inside was probably a mistake. But the truth was I didn't want to go inside myself, and to stand

there in the cold wasn't an option. Besides, if he was planning on running away or something, I could inform the others where he'd run off to.

We walked down the middle of the street, side by side, my collar pulled up to my chin, hands in pockets. The car thermostat had read 38 degrees, but it felt a lot colder. It didn't seem to bother him, though.

"Where are we going?"

"You know anything about buying pot?"

"You're buying pot?"

"What are you, the cops?"

"How do you know I'm not?" I said, in a jokey way.

He stopped walking. "A cop giving a kid a cigarette?"

He had a point there. We kept walking, and in another half a block I said, "We're not just planning on walking forever, are we?"

"Wait a second," he said, and stopped again. "Are you planning on doing that?"

"What?"

"Talking. Because I don't mind you coming along as long as you don't do a lot of that."

"Okay," I said. "I'm cool." I then fake zipped my lips with a gloved hand.

We started again, and then he stopped again. "And if you're going to

start telling me how everything is going to be okay, everyone loves me, you can turn around. Because I hate that shit."

I shrugged. "What do I know?"

"Good," he said.

I followed him as we cut across some lawns, climbed a fence. It was already late afternoon. The sun was going to set in another hour or so. We ended up on a street lined with tall oaks and sprawling properties. He then stopped in front of what looked like a narrow path hidden between overburdened shrubbery. He pulled back some of the branches to clear a way through. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Look for yourself," he said, and started to go.

I had to squat and shield my face with my hands to avoid getting pricked by an errant branch. I thought it was going to be some kind of special view on the other side, but it was just a wide expanse of lawn, at the end of which sat a pricey Tudor home.

"So?" I said.

"See that second floor?"

"Yeah."

"See that room with the light on?"

"Ah-huh."

"That's Julie Harris's bedroom."

I then looked at him and thought, my, my, what a little pervert. "You

think you should be looking in someone else's window?"

He shrugged.

"Well," I said, and began to slide back into the bush. "I'm out of here."

I turned around and started walking back the way we came. Half a block later, he caught up to me. "What's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem. You know what a peeping Tom is?"

"Okay, okay. Shit."

We walked another half a block, but I went at a faster pace than I had getting there.

"That girl, she doesn't like me," he said.

"Oh, I wonder why."

"It's not like that. I just wanted to....just, you know, I love her."

I looked over at him and regretted what I'd just said. "Well, you got a funny way of showing it."

We got to the end of the block. I stopped, not knowing which way was back.

"You ever mini-putt?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, "but no, I don't want to play."

I looked at him then. "It's right on the way," he said.

"I don't think so."

"Thanks," he said, his face souring. "Thanks a lot."

He now rushed ahead of me. After about fifteen steps, I said, "Okay. Where?"

"Just up the road." Then he added, "I swear."

We made our way to the main street, with all the stores. It was quiet, more desolate than a desert. It was Sunday, after all, and most of the shops like Vavoline Instant Oil Change and Budget Blinds were closed. When we arrived at the mini-putt, it didn't look enticing. The colors of the golf hut were pink and turquoise and probably hadn't seen a single paint brush since the '70s. And the holes were covered with weathered, green carpet, while the obstacles—a windmill, an upright bear, some waterless moats—were either rusting or broken or in need of a paint job.

"It's not even open," I said.

"No sweat." He then disappeared around the hut. I stood there by myself, watching clouds pour out of my mouth. Then I heard something snap. A minute later he was back with a couple of putters and two balls.

"Did you just break in?"

"The door was open," he said.

I let it go. I didn't want to give him a hard time, not anymore, not on this day.

We removed our gloves and went ahead and played. He pretty much got the ball in on two or three shots while I fought through the flower boxes and windmills and hills. On the eighth, I was supposed

to hit my ball off a ramp and sail it over a moat, but I hit it too hard and it jumped like a water skier out of control. It flew entirely off the carpet and proceeded to bounce five or six times on the concrete path, landing two holes away. I went to retrieve it and when I got back, he said, "Your dad still around?"

I put my ball back on the X. "Yeah," I said, hitting it lightly this time. The ball trickled to within a foot of the hole and I followed it. "We don't talk much, though."

It was his turn, but he was just leaning on his club, staring at me. "We just never got along."

I didn't want to tell him to hit. So I hit my ball in and it made that sound that only a golf ball dropping into the cup can make.

"I'm going to live with my mother," he said. "Full time, I mean."

"You don't want to?"

"I don't know. She's got a boyfriend."

I started to say, "I'm sure she wants you to," but I sort of felt the comment would violate his rule about telling him how everything was going to be okay. Besides, it might not be true.

"Is this where you came with, you know, your dad?"

He didn't answer, but I didn't need him to. "Bum another cigarette?" he asked.

I grabbed the pack out of my inside jacket and tossed him one, along with the matches. The next hole had a metallic brown bear and the ball had to roll between its colossal legs. Carson held the cigarette in his mouth and went ahead and hit first this time. He smacked it

and the ball went rapidly through the legs and ended up within a foot of the hole. When it was my turn, he said, "You gotta hit it hard." I took the club and swung with a whack. But I hit it too hard: the ball ricochet off the bear's crotch, and Carson, trying to light his cigarette, never saw it coming. It struck him straight in the mouth. The cigarette, the matches, they went flying. And Carson dropped like a stone.

I rushed over and bent down. I sat him up. Tears came to his eyes. I pulled his hand away from his mouth, revealing a cut lip and a stream of blood.

As I held his elbow, he showed me the way to the nearest convenience store. "It's no big deal," he garbled, but I sat him down on the curb and went inside and bought a bag of ice and asked for some paper towels. I put some ice cubes inside the paper towel and placed it against his lips. We sat there quietly for few minutes, until he said, "How did you know my dad?"

"I didn't," I answered. "My girlfriend was your father's girlfriend. Long time ago."

He didn't say anything, but I could tell he was thinking. Then, "What's her name?"

"Gina."

"Gina," he said. "Do you love her?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe."

"How do you not know?"

I shrugged. "I think I just need a change."

I waited for him to ask me what that change was, but I didn't know that, either. All I knew was that it was cold, sitting there on the curb. My fingertips were numbing inside my gloves.

"You know," he said, turning away from me and glancing down the road, "there's a mall up the block. It's not far."

I said, "We should probably head back," and just then he looked at me and somehow I knew that home was the last place he wanted to

be. I knew that look. The look of someone who didn't want to face what was ahead, not knowing if you were going to be happy, or if it was always going to feel as if you were barely holding on. It made me think of Gina, and how she loved me even though she knew I wasn't in it for the long haul. She wasn't afraid of the future, whereas I was terrified of it all. I wondered if change wasn't what I needed, and that perhaps the change would be no change at all.

"I think it stopped," he said. He had the paper towel in his hand and he turned toward me to look at his lip. It was true. The cold had begun to crust the wound over.

"You know," I said, "if you love Julie, you should probably tell her. Not hide in the bushes."

"What if she doesn't love me back?"

"Then you'll know. But then again, she just might."

He nodded. I then glanced down the street, in the direction of the strip mall, and then down the other way, in the direction of his home. I said, "Maybe we can hit that mall for a little bit, but afterward we should head back." Then I added, "We have to."

