

Intangible Vectors of Influence (from "Emergency: Three Romances")

by Brent Robison

The young cop says, "Sorry ma'am, you'll have to wait." In the strobing red-blue glare he looks like a teenager. Melissa wonders if Tony had looked so young when he started, all those years ago. Ever since Steph blurted her confession an hour earlier, Melissa has been thinking of Tony, obsessively thinking of Tony, her ex-cop waiting at home for her return.

The night is blustery and cold; snow will be coming soon. Melissa just wants to get in her little Honda and go home. But there's some sort of emergency in the brownstone facing her parking space (a lucky find, she had thought at the time), and her car is surrounded—in fact the entire one-way street is blocked—by an ambulance, two police cruisers, and an unmarked SUV topped with a detachable flashing light. The sirens still seem to be echoing from a minute earlier and the spit-crackle of radios cuts through the low roar of idling engines. The air smells toxic. Two stone-faced troopers watch the cars and the door. A few gawkers stand around the perimeter waiting for action, swiveling their heads up toward the lighted third-floor windows and back again, but nothing seems to be happening.

Melissa doesn't want to know. She doesn't want to wait, to see someone's misfortune, to learn any tragic truths, and she doesn't want to go back to her sister Steph's apartment. She feels lost and bubbling over with rage. Downtown Jersey City is like a foreign country to her—a dim resemblance to Manhattan, but darker,

stranger. She wants to stamp her foot and insist that these uniforms get out of her way, *let me go home goddammit*, but she knows that would be a mistake. Shivering, she heads for the coffee shop that she spotted earlier near the PATH station. She imagines that Stephanie must have taken this same route and was already out of the train on the other side of the Hudson, strolling the happy bustling streets of the Village.

Melissa feels out of sorts partly because she is out of her world, here in the city instead of home in the mountains. At home she doesn't have to worry about her baby sister's drunken escapades, at least not in such an immediate way, and she has Tony to laugh with. But even solid Tony seems to waver like a mirage just now, because he is home doing who knows what, and with whom? She knows this fear is all based on Steph's admission—or baldfaced lie—an hour ago that, on her last visit upstate, while Melissa was finishing the afternoon at the shop, she had tried to seduce Tony.

Her voice had been pitched with that air of pretense that had annoyed Melissa so often. “And I rubbed up against him and breathed in his ear like this....” Steph was on her feet, moving and posing in front of Melissa as if on stage. Her eyes fluttered shut, her hands and hips seemed to contact an invisible body in the air, her voice fell to a sultry whisper. “Mmm, you smell so good....”

Melissa pasted a smile on her face to go along with what surely must be a joke. “Mm-hm, and what happened next?”

Steph said, “Wouldn't you like to know?” and she made a bye-bye motion with her fingers, laughing with her head thrown back as she closed the bathroom door.

Melissa had been struck dumb, groping to make sense of the whole scene. Now, as she walks, she wonders: why hadn't Tony mentioned it—because it wasn't true, or because it was true and he wanted to pursue it?

She imagines asking Tony that question. She sees his eyes glance down and away as he says, “You know your sister's a total wack job. She's lying, as usual. So whaddya want for dinner?”

Then immediately she sees the scene repeat, but this time he looks directly into her eyes and smiles. "You know your sister's a total wack job. I couldn't believe the, y'know, seductress act she put on. Like high school drama club. Made me laugh." Then he comes to Melissa and puts his arms around her. "Look, baby, she doesn't do it for me, not a bit. She's a skinny neurotic drunk without an ounce of sexiness in her whole stringy little body." He presses his smooth, good-smelling cheek against hers. "Besides, you're the only one for me; I'm not looking anywhere else."

With that image, Melissa's dark mood lifts a bit, but she still doesn't know what to believe.

Now she figures she may as well tank up on caffeine so she can stay awake on the drive home. She shifts her overnight bag from right shoulder to left as she walks. Her plan had been to go out dancing with Steph, proving that clean and sober fun is actually possible, and then have a sisterly sleepover full of heartfelt confessions. But the plan has "gone down the crapper," as Tony would say. Stephanie, after her announcement of betrayal—while Melissa was in the shower for a moment of stunned solitude before soldiering on—had simply disappeared.

For Melissa, the studious older sister who had always valued predictability and had too often felt forced to stand in for emotionally absent parents, Stephanie had always been a handful, really just too much. Tearful trauma over every grade-school slight... a junior-high shoplifting binge... cocaine in college... the list was endless. Melissa knows, and grieves for, Steph's secret scars, both visible and not: the gash on her thigh from an impulsive quarry dive; the gash on her heart from losing again, after so much soulful rehearsal and a "brilliant" audition, the role of Blanche in the latest summer revival of *Streetcar*. And all those men, a parade come and gone, until that September morning she stood on the boardwalk at Exchange Place with a paper cup of coffee in her hand and watched the towers come down, with her new beau in there somewhere, never to return. Since that day, Stephanie's fun-loving side had risen

like a despot, a clown tyrant who ruled with deadly desperation, grinning and dancing all the while.

Steph's dysfunctions are so appallingly transparent. Still, Melissa cannot let go of an image of herself, a mud-bound stone, looking up at Stephanie, a pirouetting feather.

Toweling her hair after her shower, Melissa had called out, had looked through the entire tiny apartment, and then had sat numbly waiting until it became clear that Steph had, without a word, just left her behind. Ditched her. That's when the rage began.

"I love you, Mel," Steph says every time they speak. But the time had come to cut Stephanie off. Say goodbye. Disown her. As she closed the door of Steph's building behind her, Melissa was ranting so loudly inside that she was surprised nobody on the street could hear. She was done with the little bitch forever. And good riddance.

Then she encountered the young cop, the ambulance, the emergency. She was unable to slam her car door and screech away. Now, as she strides down the shadowy street hugging herself, her anger does what her anger always does: transforms itself. Melts into guilt. Surely she could have felt more charity toward her sister. Surely she could forgive, forgive a hurting overgrown child. Be kind to a charming, passionate girl. Surely all this was Melissa's own fault, she was such a loser. Such a loser that Tony would probably rather have Stephanie.

Melissa is on a campaign against her jealousy. Or whatever this feeling is, this burden, this curse. It's her biggest focus right now, the point of all her efforts at self-improvement. In the past, with any tremor in the ground under the latest romantic edifice she had constructed, her first instinct was toward despair, toward the sure knowledge that everyone else is more attractive, more lovable than she is, and that she'll end up without something, something indefinable but crucial. She'll end up without... whatever it is that she needs. A deep, wild fear would rise up in her throat, and she would be obsessed with thoughts of the interloper, whoever she, or it, might be. Over the last five years, Melissa's therapy group and meditation practice have helped immensely, but now her sister's

latest antics have sent her spiraling down into that familiar tangled darkness.

And to make it worse, her daydreams have recently turned toward marriage: an embarrassingly conventional vision of settling in with Tony, getting old with him. He hasn't proposed. Is she crazy, blind to the truth?

As she pushes through the door into the bright noisy warmth of the Grove Diner, it seems unfortunately fitting that she hears her own name on the classic-rock radio piped into the place. "*But back home he'll always run... to sweet Melissa....*" The old Allman Brothers' song was a favorite of her ex, Robert. He would sing it to her often, too often, usually because he was trying to make up for hurting her somehow.

Robert, a sculptor, had persuaded her with much cajoling to quit her jewelry-store job and accompany him, to leave Manhattan and move to a remote house in the Catskills. For more "creative space," he said. At first resentful of the new landscape, Melissa had experienced her resistance sweetly melting as she discovered that she loved the woolly green views, the quiet winding roads, and the unpretentious people that filled her new life in the small mountain town near their home. Then, before a year was out, Robert flip-flopped without warning and fled back to the city. The timing was perfect; the opportunity had just arisen for Melissa to take over the antique shop where she had been working, so she said goodbye to Robert and city life, and stayed on, for good or ill.

A year later, Tony arrived, shaggy and unemployed but sharing her desire for an upward trajectory, and they had trekked together so well, for so long. And now he was established in his handyman business, serving the second-home owners from the city. They were living together, and the future had seemed so simple and good. Why must things always grow more and more complex?

Depositing her bag on the seat opposite, she slides into a booth next to a long window, her back to the door. She remembers yesterday at home, how she had whined that she didn't really want to take this trip down to the city to fruitlessly "intervene" once again

in Stephanie's drunkenness, and Tony had told her, "You should go, do what you can. After all, who knows what intangible vectors of influence are at work?" He spoke like that more and more often these days.

Melissa's eyes tear up. She can't help it; she's in love with him. This won't do. She wipes the tears away and straightens her shoulders. She orders coffee.

Waiting, she considers the pleasures of being self-sufficient and alone, strong without a man. The feeling is good. She imagines getting in her car, tonight, as soon as they will let her, jumping on the New Jersey Turnpike, and driving south. All the way south, to the end, where she could stare out at empty ocean. Starting a new life there, where she could read daily the marker at the corner of South and Whitehead in Key West: *Southernmost Point, Continental US*. She could join the freaks of the Conch Republic, rent a musty little bungalow with windows shaded by palm fronds, make funky jewelry, sell it to tourists every night at the Mallory Square Sunset celebration at the edge of the glittering Gulf.

Her tropical reverie is interrupted by the clink of a saucer and full steaming cup appearing on the table in front of her. Reaching for the little metal pitcher of milk, she glances out the window to the sidewalk, and there, walking with eyes downcast, is Stephanie. As if the glance were audible, Steph looks up just then, lifts her face into the light, and it seems to Melissa that a mask has dropped away, revealing a misery too wild and deep for words. Their eyes connect, and Steph moves directly to the window, her face folding into the teary red clench that Melissa has known for so, so long. Her mouth shapes, "I love you, Mel."

Without warning, Melissa is filled by a sensation in her chest of great heavy doors swinging open, and she knows that her plans for tonight are going to change once again. Midnight is gone, another day has begun, lives change inexplicably every instant.

Then, for one more long moment that seems to lean invisibly toward morning, the sisters stare at each other, gazing without

thought, without past or future, from opposite sides of the cold,
clear glass.

