

The Circles in My Mind

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

HOW silly I was then for not having been daring. I might have had a chance.

Not that she had given me any such encouragement. But perhaps with a bit of insistence from my part ... Now of course it's too late. A year on it's not worth lamenting about what could have happened if and what didn't happen because.

Slightly older, a hindrance perhaps, yet still regarding myself as personable, I was so bold as to hope she would see a facet in me, no matter how small, that would charm her. To be truthful, I doubt she did. It most likely was strictly business. She didn't even raise her head from her order pad, simply asked: same as usual? And I'd say yes, trying in vain to attract her eyes which were visibly attending to other thoughts.

When I first sat in her shop she'd ask me: what would you like? I'd reply, my smile meeting her eyes: coffee and toasts with jam. Same every morning at 7am in the same corner, sitting on the same chair, at the same table with a couple of ferns on it. Come to think of it, those early days were carefree, open to fantasising. The place in the morning, infused with a warm coffee fragrance, had a feel about it of awakening promises and desires.

I know what in her attracted me most and right from the first day. It wasn't

the usual parts of her body that instinctively come to mind, although I could not dismiss any as her entire image pleased me. It was her waist that caught my eye. Ever so tiny I could hold it easily between my two hands. The temptation was there every day to try. I even curled my hands to form a ring, just to pretend. And I'm still doing it now, a year after, holding nothing but air. I never did try then. If I had done so I'd have lifted her up in the air, so light she was: a very petite woman.

Her ankles also dazzled me. I knew I could hold one with a hand around it. Likewise, one of her wrists between my thumb and forefinger. I had them all mentally measured and audaciously held in moments when alone my eyes and hands were under no restraint.

I was a regular there, a short drive away from my office. She now simply put coffee and toasts in front of me. Rarely a word, barely a glance. In a sense I appreciated the spontaneous link she made between me and my order. Rather than seeing it as an occupational trait, I liked to interpret it as a prologue to a possible friendship with some intimate development to follow eventually. And always her hand would tempt me as it approached the table, softly alighting like a dove, and laying the plate in front of me.

If only she knew that her face popped in front of me at regular intervals

during the day. If only I weren't so awkwardly shy. I watched her
serve the
others. Was there someone else yearning for her, I wondered.
Jealous of any,
yet with no reason to be. She seemed to navigate from one to the
next with
the same air of nonchalance.

Her smiles and cajoleries were kept for invisible callers. During
these
conversations her voice would whisper sweet nothings and her eyes
caress
unseen images, tenderly and mischievously. Nothing escaped me.
Peering
above my newspaper I could tell her feelings in the way she held her
phone.
Encircling it just like I would hold her wrist or ankle. The other hand
also
fascinated me as it frolicked about, touching objects in proximity,
fiddling
with a lock of her hair, with the top button of her blouse, twisting
and coiling
her pendant around her fingers. Give me your hand, I would plead
silently.
I had no chance. I knew it. On those days, which fortunately for me
never
seemed to last, I had lost all hope of ever being able to ask her out,
let alone
hold her hand. Like a seesaw my feelings were swinging up and
down. The
downs appeared to linger forever, and the coffee in my cup to lose
its subtle
savour of intimacy.

Months later, as I was in a particularly self-absorbed mood, I
waited for

her to come near me to lay my cup and plate on the table, when, in an irresistible move, my only bold one, I caught her wrist and held on to it tightly to feel her flesh and bones and perhaps leave some sort of message.

For a second I looked at my tender capture, mesmerised, pressing this fragile alabaster piece, before I raised my head to her. What I saw in her face immediately made me realise my impudence. I quickly let go of her wrist. Her frowns and her eyes alone spoke. A prompt sorry didn't help. I left my toasts and coffee, my chair, my familiar corner and never returned. Maybe I should have stayed and come again the following days, face my shame which might eventually have been redeemed by a return to my usual quietly reserved behaviour.

To think that one gesture had been enough for the edifice I had so patiently built, day after day, piece by piece, to crumble, bewildered me. Even if that structure had been unfinished, roof, windows, doors and walls still missing, I felt the first stone for the foundation at least had been laid, although, to be frank, my mind could very well have been seriously deluded. At least, so have the hushed voices of reality said many times to me.

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A year after, I was telling a visiting friend what had happened in the coffee shop I pointed to him as we were driving by. He offered to pay it a visit and to share his impressions. When he came back, a grin on his face, I knew I should have kept my secret. There would always have been a risk of distortion. Shrugging his shoulder, mocking her looks and her style, he suggested various unflattering, even rude,

descriptives. Clearly, his eyes hadn't been mine for him to make such a warped assessment of her. Offended, I inwardly began to question our friendship and didn't respond to him. Instead I looked beyond him, entered the little coffee shop, sat down in the corner and looked at the pleasant memory I had of Ann.

What he also had noticed was the diamond on her finger. (The hide he had to grab her hand, pretending to admire the gem. At least that's what he told me he'd done.) Ann was engaged. Someone will hold her dainty waist, lift her up in the air, take her out, on a holiday, on a world tour. Hiding my emotions in his presence, I let them loose and fly all around me in circles once I was on my own. I took her hand, caressed it up to her wrist until the bright stone blinded me.

