

Tiny Dancer

by Gita M. Smith

Marti's apartment is in the same Peachtree Street building as Elton John's. It has become such a landmark that now she doesn't have to give Atlanta airport cab drivers a street number. She just names the building and they take her there. Although well grounded in reality in some ways, the girl is just insecure enough to value that kind of cachet. She has invited me over for a late lunch, which is being provided by Proof of the Pudding catering. The last time Marti cooked, George Bush-the-Father was president.

"Leave your shoes at the door, Hon," she says. Instantly I know from the Miles Davis on her stereo that this lunch will be more liquid than solid, at least on Marti's part.

Miles slurs a note. Marti slurs a word. Misery likes company.

"It's early for toddies, no?" I ask, with the lightest tone I have.

"Sun, yardarm, somewhere," she tosses back.

If this is about what I think it's about, I want none of it. I have only so many nursemaid chromosomes in me. Over the years, I've exhausted most of them, and now I have only enough left to care for a plant: definitely not enough to tend Marti through another breakup.

There's a golden rule of friendship for women in their middle years and, if I can recall correctly it goes: Listen generously, talk honestly, lend money for rent but not new shoes and take away her car keys after three drinks. Nowhere is it written that you must become an accessory to her bad relationship choices.

This latest married man who lives at a great distance has leeched her energy in that very particular way such men do. He has become more fascinating to her than flesh-and-blood lovers who live in her own sphere. He eats up her store of attention to things in the moment. He keeps her in a constant state of waiting. And all of that spills over onto me. I weigh and measure my own expenditures of

time and love toward Marti. Next to him, I am as interesting as long division, and suddenly, I decide that I am no St. Jude, no taker-on of hopeless causes.

Marti sets out two plates on her granite breakfast bar and, in her absent mindedness, two knives apiece. I go for the forks while she dishes out hot black bean quesadillas, a salad of arugula and romaine with toasted pine nuts and strawberries. Miles is slurring more notes and I wonder why, in his later years, he remained an icon.

"He wasn't even trying anymore," I murmur, but Marti doesn't hear. She's half a continent away, wondering what the married man is doing right now, making small involuntary tapping gestures toward her cell phone as if, by morse code, she can will a loving text message into existence.

My appetite is gone, both for food and for Marti's soap operas. It has taken me much time to arrive here, and now that I have, I see that there will always be "a situation" and we will always be seated in a situation room. Sometimes it will be decorated as a restaurant, sometimes a bar, sometimes her darkened bedroom in which she sobs and I comfort. Change the wallpaper. Lower the lights. Bring in the clowns.

I push back from the sleek granite counter and find my purse and shoes. I whisper "Later, Darling," and let myself out.

The elevator door opens and I slip in, ignoring the other occupant while catching a glance of myself in the mirrored ceiling. I look tired. The elevator music is "Tiny Dancer," by Elton John. It occurs to me that the building management has done this on purpose, to remind visitors of their most famous tenant.

"Kind of an old song, eh?" says the short man in the large sunglasses behind me. "Bit tired of that one, to tell ya the truth."

I smile, then, face forward.

"Yeah," I say, "but not to worry. It'll always be a classic."

