

Meant To Be

by vic fortezza

"How's the water, you ol' fart?" said Dee huskily from a chaise longue facing the late summer sun.

Tony, reaching for a towel, resisted the urge to comment about the streaks of light in her long dark hair. Spiro, her husband, seated beside her, might be offended. Tony would get her back triple at work Monday. Besides, as the senior member of the group, he had to accept the barbs the fact engendered, however grudgingly. It was small consolation that he looked younger than any of them, most of whom were in their mid-thirties.

"Beautiful," he said quietly; "little cold at first, though."

"D'jeet at your mother's? Have somethin'."

He raised an eyebrow. "One mother per lifetime is more than enough, thank you."

She chuckled. "You should be so lucky."

He pulled on a T-shirt.

"Whattaya doin'? Take some sun, show off those muscles. I hate that stupid golfers tan you an' Spiro come home with."

"The sun's not good for you. It's in all the papers."

"Smart ass."

He cut himself an inch of a five-foot hero.

"There's woo-woo if you want, Tee," said a petite, frizzy-haired woman.

"You talkin' dirty to me, Too Tall?" he teased.

Her lobster-red face smiled as she bumped against him. "How 'bout them Cowboys?"

He opened his mouth wide and brought his index finger directly before it.

She laughed. "You Giant fans are so jealous."

All chairs taken, he stood by, munching.

"How d'you stay so trim, Tee?" said Arnie, who was seated between Dee and his own wife, affectionately dubbed Tuppy for her prowess at hawking kitchen ware.

"No-fat sausage!" a raspy voice called from a makeshift bar.
Everyone laughed.

"Ay, Mista Chinga Sawd!" Tony shot back in a thick Italian accent, sending Chubby into a paroxysm of laughter that almost everyone joined.

"What?" said Tuppy, shielding her lovely face from the sun.

Arnie rolled his eyes. "'scuse my uncultured wife. She grew up in Florida."

"Hey!" warned Rachel, who'd also grown up in the Sunshine State.

"So what's it mean?"

"Mister Five Cents," said Dee. "What's it really mean, though, Tee - cheap?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? It's probably just some silly term of endearment. Fat Boy hit me with it one day att the blue, had me rollin'. I hadn't heard it in maybe forty years."

He cleared a chair of a large bag of munchies and sat and watched the fathers at play with their children. Nearby, Bull was tossing a baseball with his sons.

"Throw like real ballplayers," Tony chided - "throw like Mets."

Yankees fans grumbled good-naturedly.

"Mets suck!" the older boy returned, his father laughing and nodding approval.

"Atta boy, Junior, tell 'im," said Dee.

Ary, short for Aryan Youth, was helping his golden-haired son and daughter build a sand castle. Tony wondered if Ary had purchased a television yet. While he agreed that a lot of TV was trash, he couldn't imagine doing without it completely.

Sy, Rachel's husband, was wading with little David in his arms. The infant squealed delightedly as waves broke against them.

Eat your heart out, said Tony to himself.

"Ay, rent a room!" came a cry. Teddy Bear, Too Tall's husband, was chiding Chubby and Bea, who were well past half in the bag and smooching.

Flushing, the two parted.

"How long ya been married now?"

"Twenny friggin' yeahs!" said Chubby harshly, putting a comical, exaggerated spin of pain on the statement, which elicited a playful slap from the Mrs.

"You should thank your lucky stars you have a wife like that," said Dee, who then whispered: "God bless 'er with all he puts 'er through."

Bea did not say much, perhaps because Chubby always said too much. Oddly, there seemed perfect balance between them in this regard.

Great people, all of 'em, said Tony to himself, closing his eyes, battling despair; shoulda stayed home.

Suddenly it was quiet. The sound of the ocean predominated. Soon conversation broke out between Teddy Bear and Maureen, his secretary, who looked smashing in a sleek black one-piece. Tony had to fight from gawking, especially as her muscular fiancé, Guido, stood guard perpetually at her side.

"Do I know 'er?" said Maureen.

"She worked in the office before you came," Teddy explained. "She was seventeen when she started with us. She must be what - twenny-four now, maybe?"

"Twenty-four? said Tony to himself. Could it be? Not too young any more.

"I told 'er, soon as I heard the date, I wasn't goin'. No way I was missin' this for a wedding."

Tony glanced briefly at Teddy, whose huge bronze frame was blocking the sun. He looked away, irked that he may have betrayed himself. He felt Teddy's gaze upon him. He was certain the information had been intended for his benefit, no malice intended. No one ever mentioned her to Tony, although everyone seemed to know or sense something significant had passed between them. Exactly what it was, no one knew. Some mistakenly believed she'd broken his heart. He was not angry with Teddy, whose nature it was to gab. He wished he had the same ease with women.

Married, Tony thought, unsure how he felt, fearful, however, of the return of the violent emotion he'd suffered in keeping away from

her; might be at the church right now.

Although he'd known of the engagement for some time, he was surprised. He recalled having overheard her fiancé saying a date had been set. That seemed only a few months ago. How had they secured a hall so quickly? How long had it been since he'd spoken to her - two years?

Four.

His breath bated at the swift passage of time. He remained in place, stone-faced, lest someone suspect he was still carrying that torch. Four years - no wonder he was handling it so well. And why not? He'd been right in shunning her. He doubted they'd have lasted more than a month. They had nothing in common except their physical attraction to each other.

Mom an' Grandpa probably cryin'; Marisol the flower girl, Luis an usher.

His eyes glazed. So this was what had brought him here, lured him from the relative tranquility of home - the forces of the universe. If he hadn't come, if the party had been a week earlier or later, he might not have heard of the marriage for months, which would've take much of the sting out of it. He rarely saw her fiancé or Teddy at work any more. Mercy from destiny was not be expected, however. Perhaps there was no basis for it whatsoever, but it seemed that certain rare things were preordained. What had he hoped - that a long engagement would have had her come to her senses and fly to him?

Dumb, he thought; wrong then, wrong now; probably doesn't even remember you any more; just a kid; different as night and day; no way a match.

Still, there'd been something there, he knew. Why did she seem different to him than all the other pretty girls in the building save one, who was also much younger than he? He suspected that the combination of his loneliness and her attraction to him was what had waylaid him. He feared the other woman, who also seemed to be attracted to him, who he sensed was perfect for him in every other respect, would balk once she learned his age, and he didn't know if

he would be able to handle that.

He sought the cover of the ocean, fearful he would embarrass himself. He submerged, eyes open, burning, creating a reason for the redness. He was chagrined that the tide was going out. He would've loved to have exhausted himself body surfing. Swimming, which he hated, was out of the question. It would only anger him.

At least you're not being pathetic.

He realized he was all the way back to where he'd been before his fall, observing life detachedly, although he wasn't sure that was good, either. He shuddered at the thought of how he'd demeaned himself before his confidante, blubbing like a baby.

"I never saw a man act like that before." The words haunted him.

He slammed his fists into his thighs below the waterline. How he wished he could take those moments back. He'd negated a lifetime of strength, seemingly entirely. He'd spoken to Margarita only yesterday, for the first time in two years. Three times she asked how he was. Had she been trying to find out if he knew of the wedding? No doubt she was in attendance. How fitting that he'd seen her. The two women were inexorably linked in his life.

He looked toward the beach. The others seemed so relaxed, entirely aloof from introspection, the unanswerable mysteries of life. Only Chubby, whom Rachel was snapping at with a towel, seemed deeply troubled, and that might be solved easily, if only he would stop drinking. Tony laughed as the portly frame fled nimbly across the sand. No doubt Chubby had again alluded to the Grand Tetons, perhaps offered monetary reward for a mere peek at them. Soon he would be kissing the top of domes and headbutting males with his sandpaper skull.

Look at 'em. Why can't you be like that?

Most of the middle-aged men had abundant bellies. Everyone was basking in the sun as if it were harmless, even healthy. Some smoked and drank excessively. He was reluctant to have even one drink for fear of being pulled over by police in a random spot check.

Did the right thing; 'nother great success story: daughter of immigrants marries potential millionaire; just like Margarita, black

pearl; America the beautiful.

Suddenly he recalled that today was the twentieth anniversary of his father's death. The timing was so precise that it could not be coincidence, irrelevant, he was sure.

Never be the man you were, no matter how much I read.

Ahead, the frolicking of two adolescent males captured his attention. He smiled as one chased the other, laughing. He slumped upon noticing that one had only one hand, a shriveled limb.

Should be ashamed; doesn't let a real problem bother him; it's called perspective; got it too easy; that's your problem.

Too Tall was calling to him, waving, pointing above her. He floated toward shore.

"A storm's comin'," she said. "We're goin' to my house."

In the distance, beyond Coney Island, the sky was ominous. The others were quickly gathering belongings. As he approached, he was amazed at how big Dee and Rachel were - tall, sturdy, attractive - like....

Half the guests departed. The remainder gathered in the living room, listening to an oldies countdown on the radio, thunder, lightning and rain forming a comfortable backdrop. Tony lay on the thick rug, staring at the ceiling. As "Young Girl" burst from the speakers, many in the group broke into song.

"Sure," Tony muttered ironically, rising. He gave in to temptation and went to the kitchen to pour himself a Woo-Woo, a concoction featuring vodka, peach schnapps and cranberry juice. As the mixture was draining from cooler to cup, he noted an envelope on the counter. It was addressed in the engraving of a wedding invitation. He fought the temptation to open it, certain he would be caught making a fool of himself. Besides, what did he hope to accomplish - self punishment? He wasn't surprised at its presence. It seemed the forces of life had placed it there specifically for his perusal. A volley like this could not be coincidental. Even the song couldn't have been more appropriate. He'd sung the predominant lyric more than once in her presence. Life had meaning, he was sure. There was solace in that, at least

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All evening he thought: They're at the hall now; they're cuttin' the cake; they're on their way to the airport; they're makin'....

During the week it would hit him occasionally: Wow, she's married; she's on her honeymoon. The pain was distant now - but there. After all, pain too, perhaps above all, was meant to be.

Young Girl - Gary Puckett and the Union Gap

