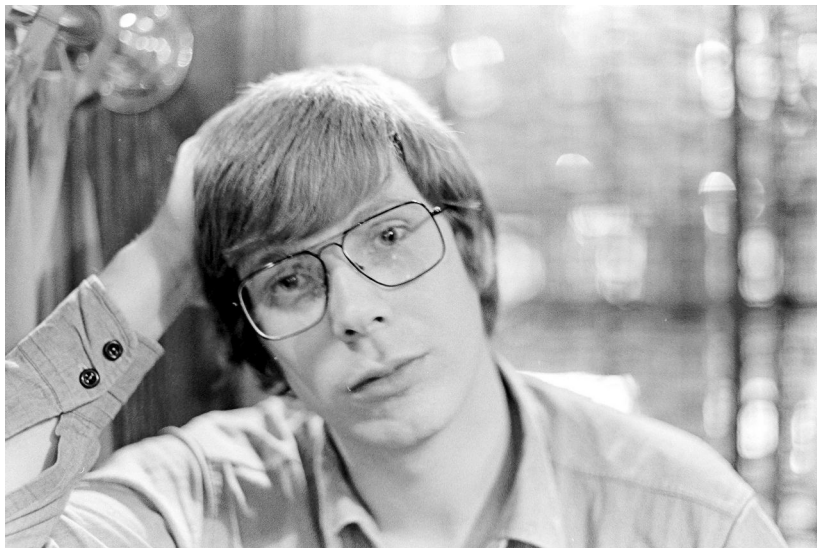


The Wizard



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Can you see
The whole of your life
in a single image

Can you look
at a photograph
and see the boy you were
the man you will become

And if you could
would you agree to it
or would you fight

Would you fight
against the magic
of your life

~~

The Wizard

“For Christs sake Tay”

“Wha, what’s up” came from the bed

“You slept with Lou you bastard, I’ve been working on her for a month and you slept with her.”

“What are you talking about I didn’t...”

“She’s right there you prick”

Huh, at a small noise behind him, Tay realized someone was glued to his back Oh

“Get up you prick, I’m going to tear your balls off.”

“Shut up you asshole, and get out of here” came a voice from behind Tay. Stunned, Jerry stared for a moment, then turned around and left, slamming the door.

Tay looked over at Lou and started “Look I’m sorry...”

“Shit” she said, “I wasn’t going to sleep with him. I’m just wondering why I slept with you.”

Tay gave her a crooked grin as if to say “don’t ask me, I don’t remember last night”

“You want to make up for it? She said, spreading her legs, “give my your head” and with that she grabbed his ears and shoved his face between her legs.

It was.... fragrant... oh yeah, as far as he could remember, they were at broomball then the bar and then...

Right, thought Tay, you’re going to get The Butterfly as he whipped her clitoris from side to side with the very tip of his tongue. She arched and bucked and finally collapsed muttering to herself.

When she let him up Tay said “do you want breakfast... um”

“Lou” she said “I’m in your ethics class” and with that they both looked at the bedroom door and giggled. “And I want a shower first”.

Every University used to have a Wizard. He was a guy who listened to problems and tried to fix them. Sometimes he did. You’d think a guy like that would have it together, but that’s wrong. A Wizard was more screwed up than most, it’s just that he constantly tried to sort out why. And before you jump down my throat, there were female Wizards.

It’s good now
The sun has come out
go back to your room
and get some sleep
the world will wait
and you will greet it

But now here am I
a man on a ledge
looking through toes
to the ground below
So easy to push off
into sweet oblivion
so easy to move
into peace into quiet

But some small voice
deep in my mind
Is it my old friend Death
Says no
and I climb back
into the window
and go on with my life

~~

Nobody called them Wizards, they were just someone who sat in one spot, easily found, usually a coffee shop. They sat and wrote in their books and thought, and when someone joined them, talked. A Wizard would talk just long enough to start the other person talking, and then shut up and listen. Really listen. When the talk slowed down, the Wizard would speculate, throw out some suggestions, or in desperate situations, a bit of philosophy, and start listening again.

Often you saw them talking for most of an afternoon to someone, and sometimes the discussion would drift to a bar, and sometimes the discussion would continue in someone's bed.

Tay was a Wizard, although if you asked him he'd say he was just fucked up. He got drunk, he woke up with someone beside him and he'd have to think through the haze of a hangover to figure out what happened.

And who she was.

Because often he wouldn't know. There were his girlfriends, as he called them, women who slept with him often, and then there were the new faces, new people to get to know as people, rather than as someone with a problem. Problems were easy, they mostly boiled down to being away from home and the parents for the first time. People were hard.

It was good that new faces showed up because the girlfriends would be there a lot, then less often, then maybe whenever the moon was blue. When they finally stopped showing up, Tay tended to forget them. He didn't know why they came and often didn't know why they left, but he didn't worry about it much.

Tay and Lou wandered into the shower and Tay tried to wash the grit from his eyes, wondering once more at the ability of women to drink him under the table yet never be hung over. Lou took the soap and started to wash Tay's back, she slid down and washed his asshole with a finger which made his dick hard again.

"Oh Ho" she said, spinning him around. She jumped up into his arms, slamming his back against the tiles. She put her feet up on the rim of the tub and started to pump just as fast as he'd flicked her clit. He was way too far ahead so he looked at her.

This was his secret technique, he forgot about himself and looked deep into her eyes, giving her his complete attention. As he expected, she caught up quickly and they came together.

As he let her down, he noticed blood on his penis. When they towelled off and went back to his bedroom to dress, he checked the bed. Blood on the sheets. “Are you a virgin” he asked.

“Not any more, but I’m on my period so don’t worry about it.”

“Good” he said, “virgins are a problem, they have to be in love with the guy who breaks it, even if they can’t stand him”.

“You didn’t hear me” she said, “I’m on my period and I was a virgin up to last night, now I’m not, but don’t worry yourself, I’ve had lots of sex, just never had that stupid piece of skin ripped open”.

Remembering the way she had thrown her head back in the shower and howled, then bit his neck to keep from disturbing the house mates, he decided she was experienced enough. Too late to do anything about it anyway.

“We’ve got oatmeal, cereal, bacon and eggs and toast, what would you like”.

“Bacon, eggs and toast” she said as they walked into the kitchen. Tay washed out the frying pan and put it on the burner to start warming while he leaned into the fridge. “And he cooks too” Lou said, leaning on the door frame with her arms crossed.

Tay made a sour face at her and said angrily “I eat!” This she ignored completely and grinned at him.

As they sat eating, Tay asked what they were talking about last night. “Not a chance” she said, “not in the daytime, it’s too nice today. You know, I could get used to this”.

“You’re welcome here any time” Tay said.

“Fuck you Tay, you’re not doing me any favours by allowing me to come visit. You had a good time right?”

“What I remember, certainly this morning”.

“Well you’ll see me again”.

“OK good, we better put these dishes in the sink and get to class... uh”

“Lou” she said, without raising her voice. She seemed to understand that he was going to need a while to remember her name. She seemed to understand a lot about how his mind worked, and again he wondered what they were talking about last night.

“Jerry...” he began. “I’ll talk to him” said Lou.

II

Ethics was as exciting as always, Tay counted 12 people in class, of which four were asleep. Philosophy at 8am didn't seem to make any sense, but not much did, at that hour, he thought.

After class Lou declared that they were going to spend the day together. "It's a great day, the sun is shining, it's warm, let's walk". Tay's hangover was slowly going away and a walk would help, so he let her take his arm and they walked. He had some sort of idea about something... ah, coffee. "Coffee" he said to a big grin in answer. He turned them down the lane they were passing but she pulled him back. "Let's go around". "Why?" "Let's go around, OK"

They walked in silence until they got to the coffee shop and sat down. Tay got two coffees and a danish because he loved the way they cut them in half, slathered butter all over the slices and fried them until the sugar was just a bit runny. The very thing for a hangover.

When he got back to the table he sat across from Lou and raised his eyebrows. "I don't know", she said, "I just didn't want to go that way. And don't sit in your doctor's chair like that, come here and sit beside me".

Shoulder to shoulder, comfortably drinking his coffee, Tay decided that maybe it felt like they had been together for years, and that he ought to write a poem about it.

Meeting you yesterday
we pick up our lives
of many years

Sitting for the first time together
here on this bench
where we have always sat

I feel the warmth of your shoulder
and the pressure of your leg
and am content

This moment has come
as it always comes
as it always will

~~

“What’s that” said Lou, and he passed his notebook over to her.
“Is that for me” she said. “No, it’s for me but it’s about you”

“You write a lot don’t you, I’ve seen you bent over a coffee
with your pen and your notebook”.

“I can’t seem to get shit out of my head” he said “without
writing it down. If I don’t, it just bounces around in there”.

“Am I some shit in your head?” Seeing his face she cupped his
cheek and said “No, I was teasing, don’t worry about it, and
thank you for showing it to me, it’s lovely”.

He smiled, “Have some danish before it gets cold”. They sat quietly for a while, each to their thoughts and Tay was happy. Surprised he thought to himself “I’m happy”.

Wizards seem to emit a “do not disturb” field around themselves when they are talking seriously with someone, and on this day none of Lou or Tay’s friends came near. In fact the strangers around the place didn’t get all that close either, and talked in hushed voices at the big table in the middle of the room, the one with a booth at either end between the support pillars for the library above.

The two spent most of the morning and lunch (bagels with cheese and tomato) quietly sitting. Just once Tay looked over at Lou, meaning to ask what happened the night before to bring her to his bed, but her look made him stay quiet. Curiouser and curiouser he thought.

In the afternoon they split up for different classes but Lou told Tay he would meet her in the bar for dinner and beers at 5. He just nodded and wandered off with his normally preoccupied look. Sitting in his bio-mechanics class he kept looking to his right. “OK she’s not here, never was here” he said aloud. He was starting to get freaked out. Yes he fell in love easily, was never really out of love, but he’d spent a morning with her, and he now remembered her name. That was definitely not usual.

He left class early and went to the bar to have a beer and to think about this. On the way he went down the pathway she wouldn’t use that morning, but he saw nothing.

To Lou

I remember you
I remember your name
even though I don't know you
Have never known you
still don't know you
yet you know me better
in these few hours
than anyone else

You know what I'm thinking
know what I'm feeling
Are you reading me
like I read others
Who are you little virgin
with the finger trick
Where did you learn
how to interest me like that
~~

When she showed up and said "I'm buying you dinner", Tay didn't object, he just ordered a pitcher of beer and another glass. They ate the chicken burgers and Tay would have sworn they had changed the sauce. There was something different, definitely better, about the food. "Maybe it's the company" he said aloud, not meaning to. "Mmm" was the response.

They talked about their afternoon classes, Lou had gone to a Zoology lab, and then they talked about trivial things while having their beer.

At some point, they became aware of Jerry heading across the floor. “Listen you bastard...” he said, grabbing Tay by the shoulder. Tay reached up casually and twisted Jerry’s wrist so that he fell face first onto the table. No beer was spilled because Lou had scooped up the glasses, but she was looking hard at Tay.

“I thought you didn’t hurt people” she said. “I didn’t, he’s fine” Tay said, letting Jerry up. “Jerry, Lou will talk with you later and explain things, for now go away”.

With that, Tay turned to Lou and said “OK now I want you to explain things to me”

“First show me the poem”. Tay shoved his notebook across the table, open to the last page. Lou read it and laughed when she finished. “Finger trick eh? I’ll show you a finger trick some day jacko. Let me write one for you”.

How many years
have I searched
How many lives
How many men

I know where I will die
I know whose arms will hold me
when I close my eyes
for the last time

~~

Tay looked up carefully into her eyes. “Is that what we were talking about last night? Are you feeling like you want to end it?”

Again that grin, and Tay decided she was starting to piss him off. “What Did...”

“Right, before you punch me, I’ll tell you and it will explain why you don’t want to remember”.

“Last night I was well drunk and complaining to you about not being able to find a guy who wasn’t a jerk, somebody like you, and that’s when you offered to stay with me forever, to get married, buy a house, have kids, the whole thing. Any wonder why you don’t remember?”

“No, that can’t be right, I would never make that offer to someone I wasn’t sleeping with, I’m sure of that”.

“Oh you were sleeping with me all right, for about two hours, I was scrubbed raw, still am”.

“Oh” was about all Tay could get out, “and the poem?”

“You figure it out genius”.

“You’re not sick are you?” he said, which earned him another look, “so what do we do about it?”

“I plan to do nothing loverboy, you live your life, but I do intend to stick around for a while. There’s a reason I said yes.”

They spent the next week together, the room mates got used to seeing Lou around the place, and Tay continued to talk to people. It's what he did, he didn't know why, but he always had. As it happened, from the coffee shop to the bar was as far as any of the women went. They seemed to know someone was already in Tay's bed.

Of course they did, any woman can see when there's another woman in a man's bed. And he reeked of it.

Lou must have talked to Jerry because one day he apologized, saying he didn't know that Tay was already involved with Lou. Confusing as that timeline was, Tay was just happy his buddy was going to stop trying to beat him up.

Another thing he noticed was that he was getting more and more calm. Tay had always been strong and reliable to those around him, those who never saw his breakdowns late at night, or read his poetry where all his doubts and fears spilled out. But the poetry, the journals, were suffering from lack of attention.

Tay didn't have a clue why this was happening, but his roommates suspected it was because of Lou. Tay was famous for his fuming, snarling silences when he was depressed, often released at whichever girl was sharing his bed at the time, but when he snarled at Lou, she just seemed to soak it up and never gave Tay the feedback he needed to keep up his foul mood.

It wasn't that she was weak, never, she was quite capable of tearing into Tay or anyone else she felt needed a good jolt. This happened one day when Tay came home absolutely full of

himself, proud over some victory or other. Lou froze him out for a few hours, refusing to talk to him until he got back to his old modest self. Another time he was absolutely furious over some event half way around the world, and was winding up to one of his all night rants when she suddenly slapped him. He stopped, stunned, and she stepped even closer to him, as if daring him to focus his anger on her. Instead he grabbed her tight and started to cry over the injustice of the world and his helplessness. Lou simply whispered “you can’t save them all”.

Black sand. He hated the black sand. It was gritty and he suspected it was iron filings, not sand at all. Featureless, but drifts and dunes that, under a weak sun cast no shadows at all. How could there be shadows on sand the same colour as shadow. That made the dunes swim in and out of focus and that made his eyes ache. He hated the black sand.

Coming out of the distance was a figure in, of course, black. Out of all the things he saw in this place, that figure made him the most nervous. Each time he saw it, the figure was a little bit closer. What would happen when they came face to face? He didn't want to know, he suspected he would disappear, that they would both disappear. And so he struggled to wake up. He pinched himself hard on the chest and that worked, he came to a groggy wakefulness, as if he had not slept at all. His eyes seemed full of the grit from his dream, the iron filings.

Desperate, he reached out, hoping there was someone in bed beside him, hoping the touch of another body

would flush the feeling of dread that the black sand always caused. He reached out.

III

Eventually Tay was feeling like he did at the start of a new semester, there was a spring in his walk, he was paying more attention in class, and more attention to the people he talked to. But there was still something a bit off-centre about him. That's when Lou declared she was going to stay at her place for a few days and at the same time asked Tay how many of the girls he'd been talking to needed his special late-night counselling sessions.

That's what she called it, and when Tay started to object, she kissed him and told him to do his job. With that rather cryptic statement, she walked out of the house.

Tay spent that night alone, and found he kept reaching for Lou, finding only a pillow. He grabbed his notebook.

A week can be a lifetime
I reach for you and find only the space
the hole in my life
that your leaving has caused

How did you get so deeply into me
as if you have lived with me
my whole life
and now have ripped away a part of me

~~

He looked it over and thought how much of a drama queen he was. It was clear that Lou meant it when she said she was

going to stay, in everything she said and everything that she did, the message was loud. She did intend to stick around.

For the first time in my life
someone has walked away
and I know, deep in my heart I know
that she will come back

~~

That was better, that's what he was feeling and it swelled in his throat until he either had to sleep or cry. He slept.

The next day he found himself talking to one of his clients, as Lou had called them. Strange way to describe a friend, but Lou was a strange girl.

Lisa was deeply depressed, she was from a rich family and had never been asked to decide what to do with her life. She felt ill equipped to deal with the recent breakup with a boyfriend, the schoolwork, her roommates, whom she hated, and her life. She was thinking of jumping out a window or going home to be the dutiful daughter for the rest of her life.

Tay sat across from her in the bar, nursing his beer and listening hard. He said little, watched a lot, and asked the occasional question just to keep her talking. She got a little drunk and eventually looked at Tay, actually looked at him, something she hadn't done all that evening. Ah, he thought, always a good sign when they get their eyes off their shoes and onto his.

Before she got too much more drunk, he asked straight out, “would you like to spend the night with me”. “Yes please” was what she answered, draining her beer. Tay made her sit for one more, as much for his own courage as to let her second thoughts show up.

There were no second thoughts and Tay spent the night talking, holding her, and generally fucking her ass off. Around about 3am she dropped into a deep sleep on Tay’s shoulder and he resigned himself to a dead arm the next day. He felt no twinge of guilt about Lou, after all she had told him to do this... no, that wasn’t true, he was terrified and the part where he justified himself by saying she told him to do it, was just a big shell around his deeper feelings. “God it’s like an onion” he thought, before going into an uneasy sleep.

The next morning Lisa woke up first and Tay woke up to her mouth on his dick. Well fuck Ethics he decided and pulled her up onto himself. After they were done he looked seriously at her face, but all he saw was a horny, sleepy girl. She stretched lewdly at him and they had a shower before heading to the kitchen for breakfast.

Which was on the table, along with Lou and three cups of coffee.

He looked from one to the other and said “uh...” “Lisa” she supplied, “this is... uh” “Lou, glad to meet you Lisa, how are you this morning?” “Glorious” Lisa said, looking from Lou to Tay and back again. She grinned, Lou grinned, and it all seemed to be settled.

Breakfast was filled with light, happy chatter about courses, the weather and nothing much, and Lisa left to pick up her books and head to class.

Tay was finishing the dishes when Lou reached around his waist and hugged him. “Come back to bed when you’re done” she said and walked into his bedroom.

As Tay followed he noticed his notebook open on the table. Looking in it he found:

Roses are red
Violets are blue
Come for a kiss
‘cause I miss you

~~

Still laughing, he tumbled into bed.

As you might have noticed, sex is very important to Wizards. It’s a way they can get beyond the barriers their “clients” put up, and it’s a way for them to dump all the pain they absorb. Each climax helps cleanse the soul, if you want to put it that way.

After Tay got his kiss, and quite a bit more, he asked Lou how she knew that he’d had someone in bed last night. He asked but she didn’t hear and said “get your face out of my crotch, it’s hard to understand you when you’re down there... no, not until you’re done, shut up and go back to work”.

When he asked again Lou said she was simply coming over to have breakfast but noticed the clothes strewn around and so decided to make breakfast for the three of them.

“And you’re OK with that?”. “Do I not look like I’m OK with that? You’ve got your work to do and I’m here to help”

“What work? You keep talking like I’m some sort of whatever and that I’m doing some sort of job by fucking”. “You’re a wizard at helping people, and I don’t want you to stop. There aren’t many like you boyo and your kind are to be treasured”

“My kind?” “Wizards, yes, your kind”.

Tay was thoroughly confused, as far as he could tell, he was just screwed up and trying to unscrew it. He certainly didn’t do any sort of magic.

“You think not?” said Lou “What sort of shape was Lisa in when you met her yesterday, and what sort of shape was she in this morning? She has changed, or at least she has accepted a little, what she is becoming. Whichever, the process will probably continue”.

“Yeah but these sorts of things are always complicated, it’s always messy”.

“Not today, Lisa knows you’re involved with me, and she knows I’m OK with it. She really doesn’t want any complications any more than you do, she’s happy, she doesn’t need the downer of another breakup, and now she’s clear that there’s nothing to break up over. She got some demons out and

now they have flowed through you and out the window instead of sticking in your brain and messing you up. That's magic loverboy, that's real magic".

Tay thought about it, he really didn't feel as confused and uneasy as he usually did after one of his first-nighters. Was it because Lou was so cool with it? He started to ask her about that when she grabbed his ears and said "back to work" and shoved his head between her legs.

IV

There were other girls over the next few days, the backlog Lou called them, and Lisa came over again but simply wanted a good fucking. Lou was there in the morning with breakfast and it all seemed to work out well.

“What about a threesome?” Tay said. “Wouldn’t work” Lou replied, “you have to be alone to do your work, unless all you’re thinking about is the sex”. “What work!” Tay wailed “I have no clue about this work you’re describing, or what it means”.

“It’s important that you don’t, or you won’t be able to do it, just understand that you are helping these people, the women and the guys you talk to as well”. “So it doesn’t have anything to do with sex” said Tay. “Sure it does, especially for the girls but the men need the sex too” said Lou.

“I don’t have sex with men” Tay almost screamed “what are you talking about”.

“You don’t think having someone listen like you listen, is sex? Of course it is, man to man you just plug into the sexual pathways in the brain”. Tay couldn’t take it any more, “Please stop, forget I asked, no threesome then, unless you want one for fun, and if you do, then you figure it out”.

“Just be happy to know that you’re helping people who will graduate and go on to help others. They can’t do that if they drop out. If they graduate bitter and warped, they’re no good to anyone”.

With that cryptic remark, and still not believing he was doing any sort of magical healing thing, Tay just gave up asking about it.

I see us
in every place we've fucked
on this campus
Three places on Johnston green
Six in the library
In the flying club
The photo arts club
The workshop in crop science
And the basement of animal science
At the back of the bullring
with FM playing
The back of O-level
with Long John Baldry wailing
I see us all over this campus
and I see some spots that need filling
~~

“We didn’t fuck in all those places Tay”. “No, but it scans, we can fill in the blanks right?”

Lou laughed and said “let’s go to the library”.

V

Tay had had enough of the university and so he suggested to Lou that they go to the beach. She was happy with that idea and they piled into Lou's truck. Two hours later they were walking on the beach in a thick fog. They hadn't planned on swimming anyway, and the silence that happens inside a fog suited them.

The fog swirls around us
as we pass
Like little cat feet
on a cat caught in a washing machine

~~

You are seriously fucked up – Lou

They could hear the fog horn sounding all low and mournful and Tay had just put his arm around Lou when he felt her tense. Thinking it was him, he started to let go but she hugged his arm and stared off into the whiteness away from the water. She was still for half a minute and then relaxed, kissed Tay and walked on down the beach. Tay twisted his head as they went, trying to see what she was looking at, but there was nothing. By now, Tay knew enough not to ask so he filed it away to think about later.

They spent a lovely afternoon in Tay's home town, had supper at a bar with the ghost of Tay's old man, and drove back to their home in time to have a couple of beers in their local bar, the one steps from their apartment rather than the bar on Campus. They saw a few friends, but sat by themselves, not

wanting to ruin their mood. There were definitely no clients here.

“Thanks for taking me to visit your ghosts” Lou said. Tay gave her another look, wondering just why she used such strange but hellishly accurate phrases. He leaned over and kissed her as gently as he felt.

That evening she told him that she was home, that the underwear in his sock drawer would stay there, and he would have to build her some shelves. Tay lay on the bed and looked at her for a long time while she looked back, then opened his arms and said “welcome home wife”.

VI

Tay's time in the coffee shop, the bar and in his bed with his clients had begun to taper off. It wasn't that he had lost his talent, just that he was losing his interest. Lou suggested that he was quite a bit older now than his clients, "not that you're getting less able to fuck them, the opposite, you're better now than ever old man, you last longer, you've learned a lot. You're just good at sex, and for that I thank you".

"How would you know, you were a virgin when I met you child" "Fuck you gramps" Lou said and stuck her tongue out at him. But that had started Tay thinking again about when they first met over a year ago.

The next time he was alone with one of his roommates from that time, he asked him about coming home with Lou. "You didn't come home with her" he said, "You came home super pissed and passed out in bed, next thing I knew, Lou was in the house. She said you'd gone on ahead and that she was to follow later".

That night Tay confronted Lou about their first night together. "Just what was going on". "Interesting, you said was, not is" "Don't avoid the question, what the hell IS going on".

Lou paused, looked at Tay carefully and said "does it matter, I mean, really matter. What would change now, if you hadn't invited me back that night?" It was Tay's turn to sit back and think. "Nothing" he said.

“Will you drop it?” “If it’s a question of you and I breaking up if I don’t, I will” “That will never happen on my side” said Lou, “it isn’t a consideration”.

“But you don’t want to tell me what happened that night” Lou seemed to make a decision. “OK fine. You didn’t remember talking me into bed because you didn’t. I found you, I watched you for quite a while and I went to your place when you were drunk but didn’t have one of your clients with you”

“I wish we didn’t call them clients, it still bothers me, it makes me seem like some sort of professional, and it makes me feel like I was apart from the girls I slept with. I was definitely not apart from them, the relationships were serious and some of them tore me up when they ended.” Tay complained.

“Yes, absolutely, that’s why I call them clients, to give you some distance. Look Tay, you can’t love everyone, even though you do, you can’t fix everyone, even though you try. You can’t have a relationship with three or four people at a time, it does, as you say, tear you up. So take a step back and call them clients, it gives you a bit of perspective”.

Tay exploded “Who the hell are you? It seems to me you showed up and started to manage my life, who the hell are you to do that?”

Totally calm, Lou started talking. “Think about what you were feeling just before you met me. I told you that I was watching, and you were about to explode, you were over extended, too involved in too many lives, and your own self, your ego if you

want to call it that, was just about zero. So I got into your bed.
Now think about how you felt after a week without clients.

Concentrating on me, someone who didn't need your help, let
you get your centre back, and you haven't lost it"

"I'll give you that, but why, why did you help me? Tay asked.

"Now you've asked the right question. It doesn't matter who I
am, I'm just me, but why did I help you? For the same reason
you help others. Because you needed it. Can you just accept
that I am the one that helps you".

Tay admitted that was true, and he told Lou that he didn't think
he could go back to being without her. About this time Lou
broke into a huge smile and jumped onto Tay's lap, at which
point he forgot all about asking questions and just tried to keep
up.

Where, my little elf
where did you come from
which tree
what pond birthed you
into my life

Will you vanish
if I guess your name
Please oh please
magic away my memory
If I ever guess your name
~~

VII

The next morning Tay asked Lou what was going to happen as he withdrew from the University. “Let’s go to the coffee shop this afternoon”.

Over coffee, Tay looked at Lou and raised an eyebrow. “Look over my right shoulder, by the wall” she said. There sat a frosh, listening intently to another frosh. Tay could see the connection, he could see exactly what was happening, the Wizard, and he had to admit it was a good name, was absorbing the pain and confusion from her companion as he opened up to her.

“Is that me?” he said. Lou nodded “Now that you’re outside, you can see what’s happening. Like I explained, each place like this, like the University, tends to have a Wizard. It was you for many years, now it’s her” “But how did you find her?” Lou smiled, “I watch, you listen and I watch”. “And who helps her in a few years when she’s about to explode, or was that just my problem” Lou shook her head, “no, it happens to most Wizards, and if they are lucky they find someone to help. They usually do”.

“So if I’m a Wizard, and she’s a Wizard, does that make you a Witch? As in, men are wizards and women are witches?”

Lou laughed, and said “She’s not a man you dolt” but then she thought “In the sense that a witch is someone who helps in a low key way? A witch being someone who can see what others can’t? Then I suppose that’s a good name.”

“Where do Wizards come from? Tay asked. “They just pop up, it seems to be a specific response to need and volume. Places like Universities have a lot of young adults in a new and stressful situation, and when there’s a need, Wizards show up”.

“Right, that’s me, what about Witches, you didn’t object to the term so I assume they are different from Wizards, and it seems to me that there’s a lot more to finding all the Wizards that need help than just keeping your eyes open”.

Lou began to suspect that Tay was a lot smarter than his marks would indicate, a lot smarter than he let on. His next question confirmed this. “Wait, how do you know so much about this, you’re no older than I am, but you know a lot more. You didn’t learn all that just by watching”.

This was it. Lou either explained or she would lose his trust. He was too close to the answer, Lou hoped he could take the next step without freaking out. “Tay, listen carefully to me. Wizards are spontaneous, but I was trained by my mother, who is also a witch.” To his open mouth, she continued “maybe we’d better go visit my folks. They want to meet you anyway”.

But Tay wasn’t finished. “So that’s the new Wizard, and I’m growing away from this place as you seemed to know, so what happens to me”.

“You’ll never stop being who you are, we’ll find out what happens next when it happens. Until then, you keep doing what you do, and I’ll keep doing what I do” “And what’s that?” said Tay.

Lou kissed him hard and said “you look after the world, and I look after you, it’s a simple equation.”

Lou kept an eye on Anne, the new Wizard, and a year or so later reported on her progress to Tay.

“Do you remember that boy she was talking to? Well it turns out that for a first try, she was very unlucky. His name was Mick and as you saw, he was damned good looking, but his problem wasn’t the usual trying to grow away from home, it was much deeper. She ended up taking him to bed, but it did nothing, in fact it made things worse, he started to push her away. It turns out he has some serious attachment issues, something early on made it very hard for him to trust, and on top of that, he had serious abandonment issues.

He has no problem with sex, he has lots of partners, but it seems that he would push away the ones that truly cared for him, the ones who were most kind, and he absolutely gagged for the ones who played games. He was right into the games himself, and what resulted was a couple of people just tearing each other apart emotionally. He couldn’t see the ones who would have helped him heal, because he didn’t trust them, or himself, and the ones that rejected him, he convinced himself he couldn’t live without. He felt abandoned by them, and that needy side would bring those girls back, but then he would push them away. A very stupid game that’s hard to stop.

In the end, I had to step in and help Anne understand that what he had wasn’t something that could be easily fixed. He’d have to work through his issues by himself. So she stopped sleeping with him, which attracted him to her, and she managed to turn

him back into a friend. He's telling her his problems and she's quietly trying to get him to understand what's good for him. It's a long process, maybe years long, but by being there, he is slowly learning to trust her".

Tay thought for a moment and said "he needs to stop confusing sex with intimacy" Lou could only stare at him. "I'll tell that to Anne if you don't mind, it might help."

Sand on the side of his face. Heat on his back. Before he opened his eyes he knew where he was, on the beach where he grew up. When he did open those eyes he saw every girl he had ever picked up on that beach, looking back at him.

"Am I in trouble?"

One of them smiled and shook her head. They all leaned forward and put a hand on his back and he felt such a surge of contentment as he had never felt before. We liked you, one of them said, and we liked the time we spent with you. You need to stop worrying about us, we're fine. You weren't much more than a nice boy on the beach, sorry to say that, but you need to understand you weren't that important to us, a bit of fun, and you certainly were fun.

We soaked up some sun, drank some wine when the sun went down, held each other when it got cold, and some of us liked fucking you, all of us who fucked you, actually. It didn't hurt, and we weren't hurt so stop beating yourself up over invented trauma. Now stay still

while we give you a cuddle, you're going to need it soon.

He was so mellow he didn't hear that last bit until much later. Their bodies were warmer than the sun.

VIII

Two days later Tay came home to find Jerry in the kitchen with Lou. She hadn't forgotten Tay's challenge that if she wanted a threesome, she would arrange it.

"But I'm straight" said Tay in the hallway. "We'll see" said Lou "but this isn't about you my boy, it's about me. If I hadn't found you I would have let Jerry talk me into bed in about a week anyway, I like him, and he's a good friend to you, so enjoy the ride loverboy, I intend to".

As it turned out, Tay did enjoy himself, Jerry was a caring lover of Lou and that brought Tay even closer to Jerry in some roundabout way.

A week later they were in Lou's truck and heading for her parents house. Tay was greeted with enthusiasm by Lou's parents, and felt instantly at home. He kept looking for signs of Jan being a witch, but detected none. It wasn't hard to see that Dave was a Wizard, now that Tay knew how to look and he asked Lou if this stuff was genetic. "Ask my mother" she said.

But when Tay sat down with Jan and asked, she told him he was mistaken about things. "I'm no sort of caretaker for Warlocks, and Dave's no Warlock." She said "Lou has been feeding you some sort of stories, she was always inventive, always making up stories and I'm afraid you've fallen into one of them with her."

Tay looked at Lou who was looking at her mother, obviously furious. Both Tay and Dave decided it was time to retire to the porch for a beer. Tay looked at Dave as he accepted the beer but Dave shook his head. "I don't know what's going on any more than you do, tell me what's been happening". Despite knowing that he was being "cliented," Tay told him the story as far as he understood it.

Dave listened, and listened for the next couple of days as Lou and Tay hung out, took walks, and generally acted like kids at home. Lou stayed angry in a generalized way, and Tay said nothing. He didn't ask because she obviously wasn't ready to talk about it.

There was someone sitting on the edge of the bed. He opened his eyes and realized it was his father, dead these thirty years and more. He waited for his father to speak, sometimes he would, sometimes he was silent. It was hard when he was silent, hard to know why he was there.

He spoke. I just wanted to check in on you son, I worry about you. The last time I saw you there was a lot of trouble with a girl, she was making you crazy.

There was always a girl, father, and they were always making me crazy, even after you died.

Is it OK now?

I think I got tired of fighting, dad, just too much energy for me any more. I've been with a good woman for a

while now, and I don't think it's going to change. Is that all you wanted to check on Pop.

Don't call me Pop, you know I hated that, but yes. I made such a mess of my own relationships I wanted to make sure you were not making my mistakes.

We didn't talk that much Dad, so I wouldn't know how to make your mistakes, but I seem to be OK now. This woman loves me and I love her, and she doesn't seem keen to break my balls much.

Great, go on back to sleep, and he sat watching until his sons eyes closed. Just before he lost consciousness, the weight seemed to lift off the bed.

The day they were to leave, Dave called Tay aside and said “Look, I know something is going on, have known since I met Jan, but she always denied it. From what I can figure, people like you and I aren’t supposed to know what we are, and people like Jan and Lou do, but they keep it quiet. That Lou told you anything, story or not, would seem to me to be a pretty good sign that she loves you. I was never sure that Jan loved me that way, but we are comfortable. Be careful of Lou, you could hurt her deeply.” The shocked look on Tay’s face was enough to make Dave smile and gather him in for a huge hug. “I know you won’t do that son” and that’s where it rested.

As Lou and Tay drove back home, he turned to her and said “I think I get it, thanks for taking me to your parents, and I’m not going to push you any more”. Lou squeezed his thigh and put

her head back to sleep in the bright sun coming in through the windows.

Driving through the afternoon
Sun warm in cloudless sky
I glance at you often
sleeping beside me
Trusting me
to get us safely home
~~

Figuring Lou would talk when she was ready, Tay let things lie.

He stood at a window, behind a table from 1956, covered with bric-a-brac and dust. A lot of dust. He stood looking out the dirty window that overlooked a harbour. Across the harbour were grain elevators and tied up at the docks were the fishing boats that he'd known all his life.

He looked down, and on the street was his father's blue 1967 Pontiac Parisienne. He slowly realized that he was watching himself washing the car, storing all his father's tools in the trunk and would soon be vacuuming the seats.

He knew that across town a girl was waiting to be picked up for a first date.

Hey, he said to himself, I know this one, I know how it ends.

He graduated, and started working for the Crop Science department. He enjoyed the work, out in the fields in summer, in the greenhouses during the winter. Lou had a year to go, so both of them were still well plugged into the campus.

They had Jerry over a few more times, Lou enjoyed the attention of two horny boys and she told Tay he needed Jerry.

“What for” said Tay, just to be difficult. “You need him because he doesn’t need you” was all Lou would say, and Tay decided she was right, again. It was good to have someone around that wasn’t needing something except a bit of company.

IX

Tay seemed to be talking as much as he ever did, but the sex with clients dropped right off. “So am I helping people, I never thought I was, and I’m even more unsure now.”

“You are” Lou said softly “you can’t see it, but you are, it’s just that you’re developing some distance. Look at the martial arts classes you teach, and the time you spend in the bar afterwards, talking to the students. Can’t you see them taking in your advice?”

“Yeah but that’s just because I’m their teacher, they want to learn how to beat people up, so of course they listen”. Lou shook her head “They may ask how to beat people up, but that’s not what you’re telling them” “Well no”, said Tay “martial arts aren’t about beating people up, they are about beating yourself into a better person”.

Lou made her “duh” face and turned back to the dishes.

You spin, you turn
and come up smack against your opponent
If he’s smaller, he falls
If you’re smaller, you fall
Simple physics

Now feel his intent
understand his interest
agree with him
if he pushes, you turn

if he pulls, you enter
Who can be defeated

~~

“Yeah, just like that!” said Lou and clapped her hands. “Just like that, and you tell me you’re not still showing people how to love themselves and each other? This is your new way my love, and it’s a lot less work on your liver, not to mention the lost sleep. You’re not a boy any longer you know”.

That earned her a swat on the ass which led to many others laid out over the bedspread until she arched her back and howled, then collapsed panting. “Damn Tay, you can make a spanking into sex. You’re not lacking you whiner, you’re just getting more inventive.” Tay, astonished, had nothing to say to that.

It looked like a postcard, some Indian maiden and a sleeping giant on an island. So much water, you would have to be a giant to get there.

"Am I the giant", he wondered, "or the Indian maiden"?
But they are not doing anything.

He looked closer and realized the Indian maiden was trimming the toenails of the giant, and the giant had turned his head and winked. He cupped his hands and yelled "but what does she get out of it".

The maiden opened her cupped hands and there, displayed like precious pearls, she showed him the toenails

Later he thought it over and decided that he wasn't bored with only one girl, Lou was too inventive for that. Once he had settled that, he turned to this teacher stuff. "Lou" he said "You told me Wizards don't charge for what they do, what if I charge for my martial arts classes". "No" she said, "I told you that you can't know how you do what you do, if you knew how, and charged for it, you'd be no more than a televangelist. If you charge for your classes, but don't know how you're doing the thing, you aren't charging for the thing, so you stay clean".

"Do you know how I do the thing" said Tay. "No I don't and seriously, do you think I'd tell you if I did? You, as I've told you a lot, are important".

"But what if I stopped doing the thing, or found out how and charged money for it, would you leave me and find another Wizard?"

Lou got very quiet, forcing Tay to lean in to hear her. "Don't do that Tay, don't doubt my love for you, don't test me, and don't hurt me like that by doubting yourself. I'm your wife, I'm here. Don't you remember that I will die in your arms?"

Tay felt like he had just kicked a puppy, wait, no, he had. He shifted his chair around and took her head and laid it in his lap, where he stroked her hair and sang a lullaby to her.

Oh my sweet babe
don't you cry

He didn't remember how it went so he sang that over and over again until she fell asleep. He kept singing until she woke again and smiled up at him. "I'm sorry babe, sometimes I'm an asshole" "No, not an asshole, just a boy who gets scared that the world will turn bad. You're a long way from childhood but you carry it with you for a long time. Let it go when you can, in the meantime, love me and never, ever fear that I don't love you".

His tears were running down her cheeks.

Oh my sweet babe
don't you cry
never fear for love
for I am here
and my love for you
is greater than my life

Oh my sweet babe
I won't cry for you
because you love me too
You say it and I know it's true
I am here
and you are here

Come tempest
we keep each other warm
~~

X

Once again, Tay noticed Lou staring fiercely down a laneway. They had gone downtown for coffee and were walking back to their house, the house they had bought and were paying off slowly, both of them now working as technicians at the University.

Lou had gone on to take a Masters degree, so she made more money, but that didn't bother Tay much, his pay cheque went directly into the joint account which Lou took care of. You don't miss what you never had he figured, although he was following the Japanese system as he understood it. Give the money to the wife, she gives you an allowance. Tay wondered where the allowance was sometimes.

Lou was brilliant, but never spoke of going on to a Doctorate. When Tay asked, she told him that with a PhD she would have to move somewhere else to work, and she wasn't going to move either of them. They belonged here, where his work continued.

But Lou was staring again and this time Tay asked her what made her scowl so.

“It's missionaries, and don't look so confused, they're after you, they can sense someone who can influence people. They want you for their own, to use you to bring in the punters and soak them for what they can get. And you could do wonders for them, you have charisma, all you'd need to do is start talking about the glories of God instead of helping people to find themselves”.

“Lou, you don’t have to worry about that, I’ve met those guys before and I have no interest in them. I see them as clearly as you saw me, I saw them for what they are. Confused, greedy, and misguided. They see people as sheep and they are the shepherds. They see people as things”.

Lou looked relieved “missionaries are one of the worst dangers to a Wizard, they can convince people like you that your gifts come from outside, from their God, and bring you into their delusion”

“Didn’t missionaries burn witches” Tay said with a grin. Lou grinned back, “I’m not that kind of witch, but yes, they still do, where they can get away with it, it’s just the ‘us and them’ technique”.

Thinking that put them both in a bad mood, which disappeared when they saw Jerry walking toward them. Taking his arms, one on each side, they marched him back with them to their place and had a lazy afternoon in bed with the sun pouring through the window.

The lazy sun
barely seems to move
when you are beside me
on our flowered bedspread

Here time is not allowed
here, this moment, is forever
and as I look at your face
I know that for now, immortality

~~

She had plants. Lots of plants. They grew all over the apartment and especially near her bed. The day she brought him home, he seemed a little nervous to see so many green things, so many growing things.

They were happy for a while, but soon she wasn't fast enough with the food, not thin enough, not quick enough to apologize. Came the day when he hit her, and the plants began to grow toward the bed.

The hits, the grabs, the shakings continued for a few weeks and each day the plants grew. Finally, the day he choked her unconscious, the plants touched him as he slept. Thin fibres entered his skin and grew, they filled his lungs, they filled his veins and he never woke again. By the time she regained her wits, there was nothing but a shrinking husk where he used to be. Soon there was nothing left of him but some bits and pieces of skin. She swept it up and said nothing.

XI

Ten years slipped by pretty fast, Tay kept up the martial arts, and his post-class trips to the bar seemed to be all he needed to do his special thing. Whatever the hell that was. He had been thinking of what Lou had said about not knowing how he did it being so important. The parallel in the martial arts was striking.

To study the kata, the forms of the schools, with some idea that they were formulae to learn how to win a fight was silly at best. The forms were there to teach the deeper principles and it was those deeper principles that kept you alive. “The kata will kill you” as he shouted at least once a month.

So his Wizard thing must be the same. If he knew how he did it, he would be tempted to make a formula out of it, and then try to fit everyone he met into the formula. This would make what he did into some sort of new age spirituality thing, or if he pushed it, a religion. No wonder Lou was so watchful of missionaries.

As he and Lou got into their mid 30s, Tay noticed that Lou was getting a bit more angry. She had always had a temper, but it seemed to be a more generalized anger at the world. Then one day he thought he had it.

“Lou would you like to have kids?” “Yes Tay, yes, a hundred times yes, if you want them. I have been thinking about that for a couple of years now and I’m not getting any younger, but are you sure you want kids? They will change our lifestyle, and I wasn’t sure you would be OK with that”.

Tay hugged her and said “I think I can cut down on the wild nightlife for a few years, and you know it’s only a few years right, after they get into school they’ll spend more time getting away from us than needing us”.

“Don’t say that Tay, that’s a terrible thing to tell me, even though it’s probably true. Right, let’s get at it” and with that she grabbed Tay’s hand and dragged him toward the bedroom. Tay objecting all the way.

I’ll never know
why you picked me
and now you want my children
Where do you come from
my little elf

I don’t care
from which other realm
you were born
only promise me
that you will not go back
you and our children

But if you must
then take me too
for without you
I am nothing
a dust mote in the sunlight
Let me fly with you
Sprinkle me with your fairy dust
~~

He woke up. There was someone in his room. Although she had been very quiet, he somehow knew she was there and he woke up.

She saw that he was awake and she turned his desk light on. In that dim light he could see that she was smiling at her failure. She kept smiling and kept looking at him as she opened her hoodie, exposing nothing underneath but pale boobs. The jeans were next, and panties came down at the same time. She wasn't trying to tease, she was undressing as if she had done the same thing for years.

He had never seen her before, but he began to doubt his memory. Was he like that fellow who forgot his wife and had to be reminded each morning?

She stepped out of the pants and walked easily to the bed, stepped over him and claimed his spare pillow as she sank down under the covers. She squirmed close to him, giving him her shoulder and flank, but then she, ever so slightly, opened her legs.

Thinking not to be rude, he put an arm over her, brushing her boobs, her shoulders, her neck, her face. She turned her face to him and he knew that he was expected to kiss her. He did.

She smiled again and nudged his hand downward, he drifted over her belly and into the thick hair at her crotch. Using his fingers, he slowly, and then more violently, made her orgasm. She turned her head away

from him and bit the pillow at the height of it, then relaxed and sighed.

He buried his face into her hair and held her until he felt her slip away into sleep. He followed her into that landscape of dreams.

In the morning, as the sun came in through the window where he was sure he had pulled the blind, he woke slowly, then more suddenly as he remembered her. She wasn't in the bed, but when he looked toward the door, he found her fully dressed and waiting for his eyes.

She smiled again, gave a small wave, such as you would give to a friend heading to the store, and closed the door behind herself.

He would check for a note later, when he got up for the day, but for now, he closed his eyes.

XII

The kids were wonderful, they had three eventually, a girl and two boys. The girl had the boys well under her thumb as soon as they were all walking. Once they got into school she defended them fiercely, along with her friends and even those she only knew a little. When they were old enough, the boys did the same.

“They are pretty good kids” said Tay one day to Lou, “but they don’t seem interested in taking my advice.”

“You mean they aren’t affected by your gift of gab? Of course they aren’t. Look, their job as kids is to grow away from us, we’re going to die before they do so they need to find their own way. You know the damage done by parents trying to control their kids after they leave home and go to University, most of your work consists of fighting that. You want to become one of those parents? And besides, your “talking therapy” doesn’t work on kids, it only works on those breaking away, so you may be able to help them later, but just by being a supportive dad.”

“Now, if I ever start to look like a helicopter mom, you can smack me OK?” “Gladly, any time” grinned Tay.

As the years slid by, Tay and Lou were content to move along with it, watching the kids grow was fascinating enough to make up for any imagined loss of lifestyle or exotic travel or whatever. And neither of them felt any loss of progress in their jobs, because their jobs now were to raise the kids.

He was a small boy, clean and dressed in clean clothes. Beside him was a battered suitcase and he seemed to be waiting for something.

Soon enough, a man appeared and hugged the boy, who hugged him back as if he was doing something that he'd seen on TV

The man picked up the suitcase and they walked out of the train station into a car and drove away.

Two days later, on Sunday, the boy was back in the station, same as before. Clean, quiet and with the suitcase, he waited patiently and when the train pulled in he got on.

Every weekend. Month after month, year after year and the only thing that changed was that the boy got bigger. He was always alone, never with a friend, never seeming upset, he just stood and waited in the gap between two worlds.

XIII

Being parents didn't mean new things weren't coming up. Tay took a position in a photography studio that Jerry showed him. Jerry had been working as a photographer for years, and Tay took to it immediately. He had little interest in landscapes (a tree is a tree, shoot one and get over it) or street photography (strangers walking by, why?) but he dove into model photography with a passion. He loved fashion photography because he could talk with "the talent" for hours as the models got made up and dressed. And he certainly talked, working his talent at the same time as he learned to see in a different way. He was the listener, Lou the seer, but he started to appreciate using his eyes.

Eventually he drifted into nude photography, and discovered an even more intense connection with the models. Put simply, he learned how to gaze with his ears open. The models put themselves into what they considered a vulnerable state, being nude was like stripping off their protection. It was like when he took a girl to bed, when she would strip away her clothing and allow him in. The nude work was easier, he didn't get as emotionally tangled up, he kept his clothes on and watched and listened.

He discovered that the gaze was incredibly powerful, the models would come alive under the close examination. He decided that people need validation, that it was hard to believe you were invisible, unremarkable, or worthless with someone staring at you for two or three hours. Tay wondered if that was what Lou did for him, if she "saw" him so intensely that he couldn't feel as if he was becoming hollow. Not since she had

come into his life had he felt like he was an empty shell with someone else running him around like a puppet. When she looked at him he felt seen. He couldn't find a better way to put it, but it felt wonderful, he never lost himself.

A few years into his photography, Tay met Sam. She was a nude model, one of those who responded best to the gaze. You could say she blossomed, and Tay found himself working with her quite a lot.

At first Sam seemed to have it all together, but it didn't take long before Tay discovered her pain. She was obsessed with a boy who obviously wasn't interested in her. It seemed to Tay that he led her on because it made him feel good, but he had no idea, or didn't care, how much he was hurting Sam.

For her part, Sam was quite emotionally inexperienced, and hadn't had her heart broken often enough to see what was happening. In these cases, there wasn't a lot Tay could do. He would listen, but Sam wouldn't talk about it, talking upset her and she couldn't make the connection between being upset and talking or thinking about it, between knowing she was being made unhappy, and the need to resolve things. Having never resolved anything like it before. She just didn't have the template in her head to deal with this brand new situation.

It was difficult, Tay didn't have a lot of words for such an obsession, and what little he said just made her angry and upset. All he could do was watch and on the days she was scuffing her feet and looking at her shoes, he would cut the modelling session short and go for a beer with her. Hoping that

one day she would open up and he could help her. She was useless as a model on those days.

The problem is, Tay knew exactly what the problem was, he'd had it often enough himself. He'd obsessed most over those girls that he couldn't get when he was Sam's age. Something about his makeup caused him to desire what he couldn't have. He suspected it might have had something to do with him not wanting to get involved and eventually hurt, so he put all that hurt up front, in his longing for the unobtainable.

It was insane, in a world of people begging for connection, he wanted the few girls who wanted only disconnection.

Even those who led him on, he couldn't see. He just took their come-hither / piss-off actions as, what, being coy, playing hard to get? What it actually did was create vast pools of desire and obsession in his brain, pools that he never actually grew out of. Obsessions that, being the man he was, he came to believe were entirely his own fault. If only he'd have been a better person, she would have come to him and stayed forever. Yeah, insane.

Because he didn't see what he was doing to himself, what was being done to him, he was still obsessed by some girls who, in his mind, were still 19 and still available, even if they were now decades older and had moved on to relationships and lives that weren't anywhere close to the girls in his memory.

The big problem, he decided, was that they hadn't a clue what they were doing to him, in fact, they figured they were doing nothing to him, and in many cases it was Tay himself that

created the relationships in his head. If they had been proper bitches (and some were) he would have seen them for what they were and said goodbye with ease, forgetting all about them.

The ones who were nice, who flirted but didn't see what was happening, stuck around long enough to stick in his head. What you do to yourself is very hard to undo, it involves some radical surgery on your self-image. Something Tay hadn't done yet, and so the girls remained bouncing around in his head, causing a steady output of whiny boy-verses as he put it to himself.

He didn't know if he'd ever see Sam content, but he figured she was worth keeping near because she was fun when she wasn't pining after the boy. In fact, he looked up one day while building a set and caught her looking at him in "that way". She had fallen in love with him, and when he registered that, he realized he loved her too. She wasn't a client, he couldn't fix her problem, but he knew that now she was part of his life.

He let it happen, and pretty soon he was fucking her, mostly at the studio but wherever else they found space and privacy.

The years kept drifting on, the kids grew up and started the process of leaving home, Tay's mother, who adored Lou and the kids, slipped away, and then Lou's parents. All of which meant that it was back to Tay, Lou and of course Jerry when he was in town.

The dog looked out the window and saw not much, black, pinpricks of light, and at the bottom of the window, a haze of blue.

He knew there was an inside and an outside, he could see the outside but he couldn't get to it. The window was quite smudged with his nose prints where he found out it was a window.

This place was strange, first there was a great weight, then none at all, and he would have flown if he wasn't tied down. He had no food or water and he was getting hungry.

And cold.

The view pulled back from the window and now he could see that the dog was in a space capsule. Russian.

No, he said, I am not watching the dog die again, I'm not.

XIV

As they hit their 50s, the pair were content, but Lou, going into menopause, slowly lost her desire for sex. She still had her time with both Tay and Jerry, but they could see she wasn't as enthusiastic as she once was.

Jerry responded by moving quietly to another town. It didn't matter where he lived, his job was mostly travel anyway, but now he wasn't so handy to Lou and Tay.

But Tay had a harder time. So much of his self-image was tied up in sex, he had a hard time dealing with someone who didn't want his ass.

Lou saw this of course, there wasn't much she missed, and one day she told him "You are in love with Sam, and you're screwing her regularly at the studio, so open it up you dog-botherer, she'll be good for you". The fact that Lou knew they were having sex didn't surprise Tay much, there wasn't a lot she didn't see on his face, but... "What, you mean she's a Witch!"

"No Witch Tay, she hasn't been trained, but she can be your witch, she's got a great connection with you, knows what you need, loves sex and loves you. She would be good for both of us, I like her too and I'd even like to have a threesome with a woman once in a while. I'm not completely uninterested in sex you know, it's just that you are so insistent that I come every time. You make her come, I make her come and we'll all be happy right?"

Which is how Sam came into their lives. Eventually she spent so much time with the pair that they sort of drifted into living together as a trio. The kids didn't make a fuss, if mom and dad were good, they were good, and Sam became part of their lives too, a sort of bridge in age.

Tay carried on with the martial arts and the photography, Sam became his assistant in both, Lou kept a watch on the Wizards who passed through the University, sometimes anonymously hooking them up with their own Witches who she somehow found when she needed them.

These kids didn't know they were Wizards and Witches, not least because those were private definitions between Lou and Tay, but they ended up as happy couples who did the work of keeping others together long enough for them to grow up to be good people. And that was the whole point.

The kids all left home with lives of their own and time moved on like it tends to do.

XV

Came the day that Tay had to see a doctor for a pain that wouldn't go away. He had waited too long and it was diagnosed as stage 4 pancreatic cancer. It was a death sentence.

Tay found himself consoling his doctors, after forty years of martial arts, he was at peace with death, so the diagnosis just gave him a timetable. It wasn't a shock that he was going to die, and decades of practice at dying with every kata he ever did, gave him a certain perspective.

Except for his family. That could upset him deeply. He dug out his old journals and found Lou's poem again, the one where she said she would die in his arms.

"Hey, Witch, you were wrong, it looks like it will be me dying in your arms" Tay said one day, trying for a bit of lightness.

"I wasn't wrong my love, I have died already, I died when you told me your diagnosis. I'm sorry, I shouldn't tell you that, but I've never kept anything from you. I am dead now because you were my life. You are my life damnit".

Tay was sobbing as if she had indeed physically died. "I'm sorry my love, you are my life and I'm sorry I'm going to leave you. I'm sorry for all the arguments. I'm sorry for what I never gave you. I'm sorry for not being a better man".

Lou covered his mouth with her hand and leaned close to his ear, she was crying too but she said. "Oh you stupid, stupid man, you were yourself, I knew who you were when I met you.

You gave me children, you gave me a life that was long and full, and before you ask, yes you were a great dad and you helped thousands of people. Don't you ever doubt that you were a good man, and listen carefully to me now. It was an amazing life with you."

Death is an old friend
I meet with him often
and I know he will come for me
when I can't live
he will let me die

We will not meet again my love
but we will never be apart
we come from the universe
and to the universe we return

I will wait for you everywhere
but please don't hurry
I will have all the time there is
You have yours

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Tay asked Jerry to move back, and he did. In fact he moved into the house. With Lou and Sam, he helped care for Tay as he faded, and Tay was content.

The kids were not allowed anything more than visits, they had their own lives and Tay had all the help he needed. Still, they spent hours talking with Dad, and Tay could help them now, help them get over his death.

One day Tay was crying for no apparent reason. Lou came and sat beside him, and asked what was wrong. “Nothing at all sweetheart, I noticed the light on the wall and it was so beautiful I couldn’t stand it. Shall I tell you a secret?” Lou hugged him harder “I know how I do what I do, I have for a long time and it’s not a secret, not really.

I don’t have any filters, never have had. It all gets in, it all hurts, always. When I talk with someone I can feel what they’re feeling, directly. No wonder so many Wizards retreat into themselves or suicide. No wonder their relationships end so badly, it’s always been too much, and it never lets up.

I lived so long because of you, Lou, because you were my filter, well no, not my filter, but you grounded me. Like electricity, you let me ground all that pain into you, and you did it by loving me. I don’t think your mother did it that way, but I was the luckiest man alive to find you, to be found by you. I love you so much I can’t tell you how much, I only have clumsy words. I love you, I love you”.

They eventually fell asleep on tear-soaked pillows.

As it turned out, over the weeks together, Jerry and Sam became closer and then intimate, which pleased Tay greatly. He knew that they would be fine without him, and he hoped like hell that they would stay with Lou, another threesome, another enclave against the cold winds outside.

Tay refused any more therapy when his time got close, and refused to move into a hospice. His pain was high but he was

used to that, and it was manageable as long as one of his family, his lovers, were there to put a hand on his brow.

At the end, he died in Lou's arms, whispering to her "live, please my heart, live"

Oh my love
my only love
you have gone from me
but you have not died
for I love you still
and you are here
here in my heart

It is I who has died
although I breathe
although I walk
the part of me
that was indeed me
has gone away
and I will wear
a widow's tears

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