

MAGIC

I saw magic.

It wasn't a parlor trick, either, but honest-to-God magic, right here in my bar.

This is just your average neighborhood watering hole. Gritty floor. Beer logo mirrors. Christmas decorations that stay up year-round. It's a guy's place. I sell sandwiches bought from a deli and soup from a can. No one complains.

Tate is something of a fixture here. When I get busy, he lumbers behind the counter to help. Instead of saying, "What'll you have?" he just jerks his head, and the customers say what they want.

He's never been a talker—I don't even know if Tate's his first name or last—but he's a good guy. Works hard. Minds his business. Just plants his linebacker-sized self at the end of the bar and listens as the rowdy conversations get going, especially later at night.

He lives a few doors down, above his locksmith shop. I live above my bar. My place is small and dark, but I'm long past bringing home women, so it works okay. Tate never stops working on his place. He's redone the whole building. Even put flowers in the old window boxes, making me wonder if he wasn't a little light in those size 14 loafers.

Then I hired Jenny, which soon put to rest any question about Tate twirling batons.

I wasn't looking for help, but one day in walks this girl. Well, not really a girl. She's female all right, but so skinny and small she's more like a kid, although I expect she's pushing 40.

So in she walks with a puffy, split bottom lip, bruises under her eyes—and a fierceness suggesting her lip-splitter likely looked worse.

Tate wasn't around that night, and the bar was busier than it most ever is. The union drivers won their softball finals and were in to celebrate. I was having trouble keeping track of their tab.

Jenny stood near the door a minute or two, then stepped behind the counter, kicked her gym bag into an empty spot, and started fixing drinks like she's worked here forever.

Quick-witted and sassy, she had the guys from the start. She's no beauty, but a woman behind the bar was a novelty. I sold more beer that night than any since I opened. Can't say it was all her, but I can't say for sure that it wasn't.

After the crowd left, Jenny pulled out her bag. "That garage out back looks empty."
"Mostly is," I said. "Need a place to store something?"

“Need a place to live,” Jenny said. “I don’t require much. I can use the washroom here, work for you weekends and evenings for the rent ‘til I get my feet back under me good.”

“It’s nothing that’ll suit you for long,” I said. “Just a garage, a narrow one at that. And I’ve got a car in there.”

“Good, cause I don’t have a bed.”

I reached under the bar for the keys, handed them over. “There’s cardboard on the workbench. You can cover the windows, give you some privacy.”

Jenny shrugged, like it didn’t much matter one way or the other.

When I came down the next day, she’d already prepped. Glasses washed. Ashtrays empty. Pretzel bowls full.

Like Tate, Jenny doesn’t say much, but she wears her past on her face. A lifetime spent waiting, not getting.

I don’t think Tate sees her that way. From the beginning, he looked hypnotized. Some of the guys started to tease him, but I shut them down. Tate’s a good-humored sort, but he doesn’t need pushed.

I suspect Jenny’s aware of his crush, but doesn’t know what to do. She’ll give him the wrong order on purpose to try to force him to talk, but he takes it with this dopey expression on his face and never complains.

Business at the bar really picked up. The semi-regulars became regulars. The regulars damn near became tenants. Before, it was just a bar. A place to hang out or hide out or whatever. Maybe now it’s things being cleaner or the smell of actual food cooking in the kitchen, but it’s become a place no one seems willing to leave.

Especially Tate. He comes earlier, stays later. Still hardly talks. It puzzles me that this good-looking man who could have his pick of the women would be so hung up on this stringy-haired, flat-chested waif, yet I’ve never seen a man so smitten before.

The customers flirt and tease and make the usual lewd comments to her when Tate’s not around, but none take it further. They don’t talk her up after hours or give her their number. Even the staggering drunks never paw.

As for me, I’d like to adopt her. My life’s so much better. Most nights now I just yak with the boys while she tends bar. When she gets busy, Tate steps back to help, blushing and stumbling if she gets too close.

It didn’t take long for me to move the car and fix the garage up proper, with curtains and a bed and the stuff to go on it. She won’t let me pay her—says that wasn’t our deal. Says she does fine on tips.

But the night of the magic, there weren’t any tips. Our perfect Fall ended with a day of hard rain and fast-dropping temperatures. Soon, everything was ice, then snow piled up heavy and fast. The weight toppled trees, knocked down power lines. Power was out everywhere.

Jenny got a fire going and we were sitting there listening to my portable radio when in wandered Tate, carrying a long, skinny bag. He stomped the snow off his boots, left his coat and bag on a stool, then grabbed a beer and came over to join us.

For several days before this storm, I’d been feeling Tate wanted to talk, but hadn’t got up the nerve. Watching him work the label on his bottle with those sausage fingers of his, I sensed it again.

I fiddled with the radio. The DJ was rattling off weather-related cancellations, including a much-hyped performance of some famous magician.

“Do you believe in magic?” Tate asked quietly.

Jenny shot me a *Hey! He talks!* look.

“Just smoke and mirrors,” I said.

“I don’t know,” Jenny said. “I like believing in unexplainable things,”

Tate smiled. “I’ve seen *real* magic,” he said. “And I can prove it.”

I leaned back in my chair ‘til its legs left the floor. Rocked that way, waiting for Tate to begin. Jenny sat, legs crossed, one little foot wiggling away. Tate seemed lost, watching the fire.

“So are you gonna tell us or not?” Jenny asked.

Tate smiled shyly. He’d probably already spoken a year’s allotment of words, but he took a deep breath and began.

“Several years back, I was the parking lot attendant across from the courthouse. A do-nothing job. Just sit and take money. Been there a few months when one day, I saw this woman come out of the courthouse. I couldn’t stop looking at her.

“Weird thing was, she was old enough to be my mother, but there was something about her that was so . . .” He couldn’t find the right word. “I looked at the people beside her. It was like those people were in black and white, like an old movie, because this woman had so much more color than them.”

I glanced at Jenny, fully expecting to see her *what bullshit* expression, but she looked kind of dreamy. Entranced.

“After a break in traffic, she crossed toward a truck parked at a meter. Somehow, I hadn’t noticed that truck until then, but man, what a beauty. A 1933 Ford BB pickup, painted a shade of red that . . .” Tate looked around, like he was trying to find that same color. “It was a color you don’t see on ordinary things. On things that aren’t, well . . . alive.”

“So the truck was like her? It had more color, too?” Jenny asked.

Tate nodded. “Right about then, I hear a dog barking. The truck opens and this Dalmatian jumps out, its tail whipping in crazy little circles. That dog had so many spots it looked kinda funny. Solid black ears, solid white tail, then a black dot of almost identical size about every three-quarter inches.”

“Did he have more color, too?” Jenny asked.

“Not exactly. Spot had more . . . something. Like he was shiny, not colorful. That make any sense? You wouldn’t be able to *not* notice him, but I doubt you’d know why.”

“So were other people staring at this colorful woman with her living truck and shiny dog?” I asked.

“I don’t really know.” Tate shrugged. “It seemed people always wanted to be around her—around Ruby. They’d hover, follow her outside talking. Most men seemed to notice Ruby right off, then they’d look puzzled, like they weren’t sure why they were looking. That truck always got attention. That sucker *glowed*.”

“Ruby’s husband, Ben, was just a regular little old man. Dressed like a farmer, except his overalls were always clean and he always wore an ironed-looking shirt.”

“Anything peculiar about him?” I asked. He shook his head.

“Just those crisp shirts. They made him look . . . dapper.” Tate smiled. “Ben was great. And boy, did he love his Ruby. Those two were something together.”

“Anyway, it wasn’t long before I was part of their routine. He’d park by my booth about quarter to five and we’d talk until Ruby came out. Once she stepped out that door, it was like I

was no longer there. Ben would stop talking mid-sentence to watch her, this funny little smile on his face. He'd extend his hand, like he was inviting her to dance, and she'd curtsy and take it. He'd take her in his arms and spin her around, maybe dip her, then open her door and help her in.

"Five days a week for almost two years, Ben and I talked while Spot sat by the truck, eyes trained on the door.

"Then one Monday, they weren't there. Next day either. Tuesday, I picked up a paper, flipped to the obits. There was Ruby. I almost didn't recognize her. She looked so different in . . ."

"Black and white," Jenny said. Tate nodded.

"I was crushed," he said. "She and I hardly talked, but I felt like I knew her. The stories Ben told, especially how they met. It was like something straight out of a movie."

Jenny made a rolling gesture with her hand for Tate to continue.

"Ben had been on his way to California. Couple friends with him, and everything they owned. A few days into the trip, Ben drove past this tree stump with a girl dancing on it. Said he damn near wrecked. Couldn't get his eyes back on the road.

"He drove another six, seven miles, then did a U and headed back. His friends were fussing, but nothing could stop him. He was going back for her."

"But he'd barely seen her," Jenny said.

"He'd seen enough." Tate said. "It doesn't take much to know. When they got back to the stump, she was gone. Ben stopped, got his suitcase, tossed the keys to his friends, then started down the gravel driveway next to that stump. His friends were yelling that he was crazy. *What kind of lunatic would dance on a tree stump?* But he kept walking, so they finally drove off.

"When he rang the doorbell at the end of that driveway, the dancing girl—Ruby—opened the door. She looked at Ben, sassily put her hands on her hips and asked, 'What took you so long?'"

Jenny laughed. "I like that Ruby."

"You would," Tate said. "They were together from then on. Never spent a day apart. Well, not until . . ." His voice trailed off.

"I bet he didn't handle it well," Jenny said.

"That was the strangest thing," Tate said. "The day after her funeral, come quarter to five, here comes Ben just like always, pulling into the lot with Spot in the cab. I started to walk over, but wasn't sure what to say. Maybe I'd made a mistake, saw someone else's obit, you know? I was doubting myself, so I pretended to be busy and left him alone.

"By five after, Spot was about going nuts, pacing back and forth, then he suddenly relaxed. Ben started the engine and left.

"Next day, same thing. Ben pulled in, dog paced, I pretended to be busy. But I'd checked and rechecked the obit. It was her. So on Friday, when Ben pulled in, I went and we talked. He said Spot couldn't handle the change in routine, so he'd drive him down to sit for a while. Said he kinda liked it. That it made her feel close.

"That's when I noticed Ben's shirt wasn't crisp, and Spot wasn't so shiny. Even the truck seemed almost unremarkable. It was still spectacular, just nothing like before.

"The next week, they were back, only this time—and I swear I'm not making this up—I noticed Spot wasn't just less shiny, but he was also less spotted. His dots were now about three or four inches apart. By the end of the next week, he was barely spotted at all."

"The truck?" I asked.

“Fading,” Tate said. “First the glow, then the gloss, then the color. From deep red to orange-red to pale pink. Washing out.”

“Ben, too?” asked Jenny.

“From crisp to crumpled to threadbare to . . . gone. One day, they just weren’t there anymore. Not like they didn’t come—I still heard the truck’s engine—but like they weren’t *there*.”

We sat quietly by the fire for a while after that. Finally, Tate stood and walked to the bar, retrieved his long bag, then came back and sat down.

“Any more to the story?” I asked.

Tate smiled. “There’s the magic.”

Jenny dropped to the floor, feet tucked underneath her. She looked pretty that way, backlit by the fire, head tilted. Ready for more.

“Not long after I met Ben, I mentioned Ruby’s color, about how she looked different than other people. ‘I suspected you saw it,’ Ben said. But he couldn’t explain it. Said it was magic.

“When I laughed, he said he could prove it. There was a rosebush nearby, so he broke off a flower. He’d picked a sad-looking rose with limp, curling petals.

“When Ruby came over, Ben gave her that rose. When she touched it, the petals uncurled. It looked instantly fresh.”

Jenny sucked in her breath. Tears in her eyes.

“It was magic,” Tate said.

He reached into his bag and pulled out a rose. Its petals, edged in brown, were starting to droop.

He gave it to Jenny.

Smiling, she took it and asked, “What took you so long?”