

Heading Home

William Cass

"Your flight delayed, too?"

I glanced over and met the friendly gaze of the man who'd settled onto the empty bar stool next to me. He was about my age, mid-thirties, and presented in about the same manner I suppose I did: weary expression, unknotted tie, sport coat with his plane ticket protruding from an inside pocket, brief case settled at his feet. I nodded. He did the same, then set his cell phone upside down on the bar in front of him.

One of the bartenders came over, and the man ordered a draft with a chaser. He handed the bartender a credit card and told him to keep the tab open. Then he glanced my way again, pursed his lips, and said, "Well, at least it's Friday. And a three-day weekend ahead instead of another work day."

"That's true," I mumbled, though that prospect did hold happier than usual anticipation for me.

The bar was located just outside a confluence of busy gates and was crowded, mostly I guessed, with other people coming off the road late on a Friday afternoon and trying to make it home like I was. The man pointed towards the briefcase at my feet and asked, "Sales?"

"Marketing." I set down my beer. "Been at some promotional meetings. You?"

"Chasing new accounts for wireless service."

We nodded some more. The bartender brought his drinks, and I watched him knock back the shot without flinching. He was a little taller and thinner than me, roughly handsome in a worn sort of way, and looked like he'd probably been an athlete; his movements had that fluidity and confidence to them. He reached over with his beer and said, "To the long weekend."

"Here, here," I said and tapped his glass.

We both drank. A little burst of laughter arose from one of the tall-top tables behind us followed by an intercom voice announcing another flight delay. I glanced past the man's shoulder out the big windows at the thick, drifting fog.

"So," he asked. "Where's home?"

"Right now, Cleveland. You?"

"St. Paul."

I cocked my head. "No kidding. I used to live there...well, Minneapolis. Got transferred a couple years ago."

"I've only been there a few months. Since April. Pretty nice so far."

"Wait until you've gone through your first winter."

"Yeah, that's what folks keep telling me." His fingertips slowly turned the base of his glass. "So, I've never spent any time in Cleveland. You like it?"

"You know...it's a city on a lake. Friendly enough people. Shitty sports teams."

He snorted a little laugh. "Minnesota can rival that."

I chuckled along with him. We tapped glasses again, then lifted them to our lips.

"By the way," he said. "Name's Stan."

"Tom."

We shook, then drank. More people crowded into the bar, one of whom was a young woman who squeezed between us clutching a ten-dollar bill between two fingers. She waved it at the nearest bartender who was pouring two beers from separate taps a few feet away. She called to him over the din for a white wine, and he nodded at her. I was pretty sure he would have ignored her

if she hadn't looked the way she did, which was like a model out of a magazine. She wore a tight business suit with tennis shoes and smelled nice. The woman completely ignored Stan's glances or mine while she exchanged her bill for the long-stemmed glass the bartender handed her, then wormed her way back into the throng, her scent lingering. Stan and I both turned to watch her go, then met each other's gaze with raised eyebrows.

I said, "That was nice."

"I'll say." He took a long swallow of beer.

"Oh, well," I said. "Here today, gone tomorrow."

Stan smiled, then waved his hand like he was shooing away a fly. "Can only window shop, anyway. I'm spoken for. Happily so."

I glanced at his fingers: like me, no ring. "You engaged or something?"

"Nope. Just a girlfriend, but she's a keeper." He watched me cover my left hand with my right on the bar. "How about you?"

"Divorced." I shrugged and took a healthy swallow of beer myself, draining my glass. "Few years now. Her idea, not mine."

"Shucks. What happened?"

"Not sure." I shrugged again. "Told me she wasn't happy."

A long moment passed with just the noises around us before Stan said quietly, "Ouch."

"Yeah."

I looked down into my empty glass. The bartender came by, and I heard Stan order us two more beers. Another spattering of laughter came from behind us.

"So," he said, "you haven't found anyone new yet in Cleveland?"

"Nope. But my ex..." I shook my head and looked at him. "Kind of hard to replace."

"That's gotta be rough."

I nodded some more while Stan pursed his lips

again. The bartender brought over our new beers and took our old glasses away.

"Thanks," I told Stan.

"You bet."

We repeated the tapping ritual and sipped. Stan wiped his lips and said, "Not sure what I'd do if my girlfriend said something like that to me. Ended things like that. Think I'd be pretty much a hot mess afterwards."

"Well, I sure was."

"But I guess, like they say, time heals all wounds."

"Hope so. Mine still have a ways to go."

Even after that long? You said a few years, right?"

I nodded

"Any kids?"

I nodded again and thought of my boys who'd just turned seven and ten.

"You get to see them much?"

"Some. Goes without saying, not like when I lived there. Talk or text with them a few times a week. Fly over whenever I can, maybe once every couple months and play like Santa with them in a motel. And they're with me for alternate holidays, parts of the summer." I drank off some beer. "Truth is, it pretty much sucks. I miss them...still miss her, too, if I'm being honest." I shrugged again and tried to manage a grin. "But, hell, enough with my miseries. How about you? What's so special about this girlfriend of yours?"

Stan shifted on his stool, and a contented sigh escaped him. "Gosh, not sure where to start. She's sweet...sweet as all get-out. Kind. Gentle. Funny...fun, too. Great mom." His own grin was sincere. "And, you know, sexy as hell."

"Of course." I nodded and offered my glass; he tapped it. "Well, good for you," I told him. "Hold on to that as long as you can."

"I will." I was startled to see what looked

like tears at the corners of his eyes. "I plan to," he continued. "You can count on that."

Stan's cell phone began vibrating on the bar. He lifted it and flipped it over. I saw her name on the screen before I recognized my ex-wife's caller ID photo beside it. I went stiff. It felt like a bolt of lightning had struck me. My breathing had suddenly gone shallow; I found myself blinking rapidly.

"Speak of the devil," Stan muttered, sliding his fingertip across the screen. His shoulders seemed to ease, and his eyes sparkled. "Hey there, sweetie," he said into the phone. "I was just talking about you..."

I didn't wait for more. I snatched my briefcase, clambered down from the stool, and began pushing my way out through the crowd. As I did, I thought I heard Stan say, "Tom, wait...", but I couldn't be sure. I was numb, in a daze, and not a good one. I made it out onto the concourse, somehow located my gate, and found a seat hidden a little behind its check-in counter. I sat there and tried to slow my heart. I'd begun to sweat.

My own cell phone vibrated in the pocket behind my plane ticket. I grabbed it, looked at the screen, and saw a text from my older son blink across the top. It said: "You still coming tomorrow?"

I hesitated, my thumbs hovering, then replied: "Absolutely. Can't wait."

He wrote: "Love you."

I bit the inside of my cheek and responded: "I love you, too."