

SARAH TWO

LIPS AND RINGS

by

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SARAH TWO: LIPS AND RINGS

Sarah was the name I'd given her. I did not know her name, and still don't, but I thought I'd heard someone shout "Sarah" in her direction. So Sarah she became.

Not like the other Sarah in my life. Both woman you want to write stories about, but you have to write different stories about each. The first Sarah, who so masterfully ordered me out of her life when I didn't know I was even in her life, was of medium height with a trim, perfectly-proportioned body from years of aerobic training and teaching, and a face that was Irish in its roundness and Italian in its spacing and features (her father Irish, her mother Italian, that she had told me), a face that captivated and enthralled except when the wrath embedded therein showed forth. I had seen the wrath more than once. I was never sure what a comment or question in any normal conversation might elicit.

---"What am I allowed to tell you," he teased her, as they stood next to the dumbbell rack, only to learn,

---"If you don't stop questioning me, you will stop talking to me," she said with what I hoped was affected rage in his voice and eyes.

I still didn't know what I was allowed to talk about. So many taboos. Most of our conversations were her asking me questions. She knew more about my life than I about hers. We were not lovers and never would be. The first few weeks of our acquaintanceship were rocky. In fact, her reputation at the gym was one day warm, the next icy, overall unpredictable. That did and did not describe our blooming friendship. At times she sought me out, wanted to talk, walked home with me, our apartments being next door to each other, and spoke frankly, as she just had, without actually carrying through. I was learning how to dodge the pitfalls and to enjoy the openings. There were cracks in her shell, the shell she showed to most of the world, a crack just now, having reprimanded me but then putting her hand on my knee, squeezing it lightly and saying with her gorgeous smile, "Workouts to finish." We never worked out together, I being the lifter and she a machinist. I hated the machines with a public rage equal to her hidden rage.

Among the heavy lifters I palled around with at the gym, I occasionally heard a whisper in my ear:

---"You get along with her; nobody else does. She won't give anyone else the time of day."

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---“Maybe you should quit asking,” I whispered back. “Besides, I’m not a threat. Part of my reward for letting aging do its thing. It’ll happen to you someday.”

A look of horror and confusion spread across the whisperer’s face. I wanted more between me and Sarah, but right then I just wanted calm and confidence, which I was slowly learning had been in short supply in her life. I liked her, and fifteen years later I miss her, even after an avalanche she willed had buried me.

Why does Sarah Two, a waitress, recall Sarah One, a siren? Party the name I’d given the waitress. Once named, the two Sarahs began to danced around in my writer’s world. And then there were the lips. Writing about the waitress’s lips, which is what I want to describe, made me think of the siren’s lips, which I felt briefly once. Old Sarah had curved, full lips which fought it out with her eyes for facial prominence. They were also lips for pouting, which, sadly, was all many saw. If she were in one of her pouting moods, her lips flatten out enclosing a mouth slightly ajar and upturned at the left corner, accompanied by a fire in her eyes. Would she dispatch you with an expression? That was a possibility. You could hope she were in her aerobics’ attire so you could admire her body and avoid the dispatching. That would not necessarily save you, if she happened to notice you were gazing at her body. She loved her body but hated to have people look at it. Uncomfortable around people and in crowds, she walked with a well-defined stride, as if that would get her away faster. Passing by people she knew without a word was a trademark. A knot of contradictions I was trying to learn to live with but trying to avoid being smitten. I was losing in the latter struggle. I last saw her fifteen years ago, and I do not know anything about her since. In my mind, though, she was still as beautiful as I remember her being.

The Sarah I met at The Towne Tavern was also beautiful in her own way. About the same age as the siren when I met her, Sarah Two was taller and lankier. Fully dressed, as one would expect at a bar, I could only imagine the shapeliness of her legs inside her jeans. She was long-legged, by comparison, with a small, firm, edgy butt. On the other side a very flat tummy (as if she too were an aerobicist) that tended to accentuate her bosoms. She was not shy about her breasts. Perhaps that’s what waitresses do or are expected to do. Slightly pigeon-toed, most obvious when she walked toward you, she had that shuffle that models employ on runways. A slight sway in her walk added to the litheness of her movements. Unlike the siren, the waitress was all motion, as she slide through the knots of drinkers, seated and standing. She could bend and twist with a tray of potables overhead without losing a stride. And when her way was totally blocked, she used her free hand to push

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ever so gently to open a space for sliding through where no had space existed, as she mysteriously squeezed her body paper-thin. She was beautiful to watch, coming and going, even though the crowd, I could observe, was unaware of her presence except when in need of more booze. She had the longest walk of any of the waitresses because she attended to a line of tables for the center to the back next to the kitchen. Watching her navigate that long course was a piece of drama. I knew her movements before I knew her, and everything about those movements distinguished her from the siren. One angling into life, the other away from it.

The first night I became locked in her thrall I was sitting at the bar next to the beverage dispensary where drinks were picked up for delivery. I not only saw her runway stride, as she approached the dispensary, but I saw her in profile at rest, waiting for her order to be filled behind the bar. I had not been to the Tavern in years, not since an unexpected evening in a booth with a father, ranting about his daughter, who, unbeknownst, had once years earlier been my lover. Another siren, but pre-Sarah One. Uncomfortable, to say the least. I had returned on this evening because a friend was presenting his annual Hank Williams's Song Book, stretching over a period of five or six hours, an event on New Year's night that always drew a large crowd.

The waitstaff was busy. I had joked with the other waitresses when they were standing at the dispensary, but not with the lithe one. It's easy to joke with strangers when you expect them to remain strangers. It's not so easy when you want to dispel "strangeness" in order to meet the stranger, not something I'd ever learned how to do with the ease. I couldn't think of anything to say when she was standing quietly at the dispensary, waiting to load her tray.

Nor did I want to be caught unawares, staring at her as if I had a thing for her, which, of course, I did. I was more at ease watching her coming and going than I was when she stood quietly beside me. During a break when movement around the dispensary had increased so that she was stationed even closer to where I was sitting -- in such close quarters -- she turned and smiled. It was then I noticed her lips, just a fleeting glance. They had a personality that was visible in the dim interior lighting, even at the dispensary. As she resumed her profile I found myself staring at just slightly protruding lips with a sliver of an edge where they fell away into the fleshier part of the mouth above and below the lips. I'd never observed lips with such beautiful edges, especially the lower one. So, after Chris started singing again and during one of her numerous trips to the dispensary without the other waitresses around, I mustered my courage and said,

---“I noticed how beautiful” -- I used that word -- your lips are, as if they’re sculptured.” She turned, smiled, and before she threw her hands up over her mouth I noticed on the left side of the lower lip a tiny ring. I’d missed it before, and while it couldn’t have weighed more than an ounce or two, it was heavy enough to pull the lower lip out slightly further than the upper lip. The sliver of the edge of the lower lip was not lost in the hole of the ring.

With her hands clapped over her lips, and bending forward slightly, I heard her say “I’m sorry.”

---“Sorry?” I said quizzically, “Sorry for what?”

---“The ring is new, and sometimes it embarrasses me,” she relayed in a quieter but unmuffled voice, having pulled her hands away. “But thanks, I’m still trying to get along with this ring.” Poetry, I thought

She was standing directly in front of me so my eyes were just about at her breast line but my head was arched for a full view of the ring, a slightly-burnished metal, a fraction of an inch in diameter. Nestled into the lower lip, it barely dangled. Sculptured lips, now a work of art.

---“If I were to tell you the ring is perfect for the curvature of the lower lip, will you feel less embarrassed?”

---“Yes, I think so...definitely,” she said, pursing her lips and touching the ring with her left hand while her eyes fully aglow became overhead lighting for the sculpture below. Her tray was ready, and what I was left with, as she moved away back into the crowd, was an image that was indelible.

Chris kept singing country-music sadness, forlornness, and more, and while I refused to stare, I took time to note when he stood next to me, now more relaxed, occasionally exchanging a few words. When I was ready to pack up, I stuck a couple of dollars in her apron pocket, when she arrived at the dispensary.

---“I noticed you brought my burger from the kitchen, even though the barkeep served it. It’s your share.”

---“You don’t....”

---“Don’t misplace those lips, I may be back when Hank calls again....”

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She stuck both hands in her apron pocket, accentuated her lips making the ring dance slightly. We laughed and I left without her. My luck with the Sarahs I've known and wanted to fall in love with. The first one ran me out; the second, just a moment or two, not enough time to be drawn in or run out.

And, then, another night at the Tavern. I was at the bar next to the dispensary with several friends, when she came on duty. She walked past me several times before she recognized my face. I noticed the ring was gone. I turned and faced her at the dispensary, ready to ask the obvious question but she beat me to it with the answer. Something had broken, I did not recognize the word, and she hadn't replaced it yet.

---"I shall miss it until it's replaced. I may miss its replacement, and I'll miss your those lips."

---"Thanks," she said in a voice more high-pitched than I remember from the first night. "Tonight, I need that, but what am I hearing? A leaving?"

A woman I should buy a new lip ring for, but I won't. In the distance I hear Hank playing the saddest of all chords, a D, and shaking his head..."There no need for me, to even try/Nothin' will turn out right....I will not take this Sarah on the road either.