

The Concert

A short story by Cheryl R. Lane

I parked my car in the employees' parking lot and walked over to the merchandising trailer. I signed my name on the clipboard and was told that I'd be working the lakeside booth for the concert tonight. I made my way through the gate as other employees readied the amphitheater for tonight's concert. Soon the quiet, empty sidewalks would be filled with excited country music fans, wearing cowboy boots even at 90 degrees, and carrying plastic cups filled with beer.

I took this second job to take my mind off of the fact that my husband of 14 years was in the Navy, deployed in Afghanistan, and had been gone for five months. The hours were long, the music enjoyable, and the pay was decent, so it was effective in taking my mind off my lonely house.

I found the lakeside booth, greeted my co-workers, James, Sarah, and Jenny, and began the process of memorizing the merchandise for tonight's concert. The shirts had already been pinned up on the board with their prices, and I helped with the remaining items...hats, belt buckles, a keychain, a poster, can koozies, shorty shorts that, honestly, were actually underwear, and bumper stickers.

The gates opened, the fans started pouring in, and so the night began.

"Baby, which shirt do you like?" a dark-haired young woman said, slurring her words. She almost spilled her beer. She looked at all the t-shirts across the wall behind me. I saw male arms around her tiny waist. There were a lot of people in line at the moment, and so I didn't see the "baby" she was talking to. Until he moved up beside her. Our eyes met.

I couldn't believe my eyes. It was my old boyfriend from high school, Tristan. I'm sure my mouth fell open.

"Hey!" he said.

"Hey," I echoed. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. I hadn't seen him in 15 years. We had dated during our senior year of high school together, had even talked about getting married after we graduated. But then I met Luke.

"I think I like the pink one," Tristan's girl said. "Or the black one with the picture on it. I can't decide." She kept surveying the merchandise, not realizing that Tristan and I were eyeing

each other. He hadn't changed much at all. If anything, he was better looking, even with a few wrinkles around his eyes. Guys were lucky that way; wrinkles looked good on them. Made them look more mature. I wondered if he had matured any.

Before we started dating, we had grown up together. We lived beside each other, and our parents hung out a lot. He didn't like me much growing up. I guess he could tell I liked him, and I must have gotten on his nerves. My best friend and I used to lie out in the sun in our bikinis while he mowed the grass. He mostly ignored us. He had plenty of other girls that held his attention.

Until our senior year. He finally noticed me. I wasn't sure if it was because he really finally liked me, all grown up, or if he had run out of other options. He seriously had more girlfriends than anyone I had ever known. And cheated on most of them. That didn't deter me from still liking him, though. The summer before my senior year, I met a guy at the local pool, and started going to see him a lot. That made Tristan jealous. If I'd known that was all it took, I would have flirted with other guys much earlier.

He finally got the nerve to ask me on a date to go to the movies with him, just him. After the movies, we hung out at a nearby Kelly's Restaurant where he told me he realized he was crazy about me and nervously asked me if I felt anything for him. I knew that he knew that I'd been crazy about him practically my whole life, but I just smiled and said, "I might be." I made him work for it.

We ended up making out in his car in front of our houses. I'd been crazy about him for so long, once we started kissing, I didn't want to stop. My dad actually came out and offered us a piece of pie. I was mortified, realizing he knew what we'd been up to. Of course, we didn't have that piece of pie, but we were inseparable for our whole senior year. I'd been so happy, or so I thought.

"Honey," the drunk girl said, stirring me back to the present. "Which one do you want? I want the pink one," she told me.

"What size?" I asked her, looking at her.

"Small."

I went over and picked up a small pink shirt, and when I brought it back, I held it up for her to look at, sneaking a peek at Tristan around the corner of the shirt. He had been looking at the shirts, but looked at me again when he sensed I was looking at him.

“Okay. That’ll fit,” she said. She put her arms around Tristan. “Did you see anything you want?”

That was a loaded question. He looked straight at me. “Maybe later,” he said.

“Oh, come on. Pick one out now so we won’t have to come back.”

Finally, she paid for her shirt with cash, picked up her shirt and her beer, and pulled Tristan away.

I felt myself relax a little once they left the booth. I hadn’t realized I was even nervous. I wiped my forehead and continued working with the next person in line.

Tristan came back an hour later by himself, holding a beer. It was crowded again, but he’d made his way up to the front of the line again.

“Hey, you’re back,” I said.

“Yeah. Um, I’m going to get a shirt.” He looked at the wall behind me, and I looked at his chocolate brown eyes and his long eyelashes, mesmerizing me once again. It seemed a lifetime ago that he gazed upon me with those beautiful eyes.

He looked back at me, and I blinked, embarrassed at being caught staring. “Could I see number 7 in a large?”

I was thinking while retrieving that shirt that he used to wear medium back in high school. Upon returning, I looked at his arms and chest, realizing he had been working out and had filled out to a size large. I showed him the shirt, and he said, “Yeah. That’ll do. How much do I owe you?” he said, grinning.

“Uh,” I had to look back at the board to remind myself how much it cost. “\$35.” I told him. He gave me \$40 cash, lightly brushing my hand with his. My heart pounded as I turned to get his \$5 change, and handed it to him.

“Thanks,” he said, and slowly walked off.

“Tristan!” I yelled. He turned back around quickly. “You forgot your beer,” I said, smiling.

“Oh, thanks.” He picked up the cup and slowly made his way back through the crowd again.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my khaki shorts, and watched him go.

Tristan came back again another hour later when it was less busy. I couldn't believe he kept coming back. I realized we had some unfinished business and he probably wanted to talk. He was holding a full cup of beer again.

"Are you getting drunk? How many beers does this make for you?" I teased him.

"I haven't drunk them all. I gave the last one to Sharon. Actually I keep thinking of excuses to come see you."

I looked over at Jenny, who raised her eyebrows at me. She knew I was married, so I tried to play it off.

"Now aren't you just the cutest?"

Jenny started helping another customer, and he lowered his voice. "Can we talk somewhere?" he asked me. "Can you take a break?"

I asked Sarah, and she said it was fine. "Sure," I said, smiling, then lifted the bar at the half-door to get out of the booth.

I followed him over to a bench, out of site of the booth I had been working in. It felt good to sit for a change, after standing for hours.

"So, how've you been?" I asked him. "Where are you living?" We had both lived down in North Carolina growing up.

"I'm good. Living here in Virginia Beach. The pay's better here than down home."

"I hear that," I said. "So did you become a doctor like you'd planned?" He had planned to go to a college up North to become a doctor.

"I did. I'm a podiatrist. That's a foot doctor, in case you didn't know."

I laughed. "I did know, but thanks for clarifying that. Congratulations! I knew you could do it."

"Thanks. You always were a big encourager."

"How's your family?" I asked, trying to change the subject. It was getting too personal.

"They're good. They were just here about two weeks ago and spent a lot of time down at the beach."

"Oh, that's nice. I'm sorry I missed them. It's been a long time." I had loved his mom especially. She was so outgoing, unlike my own mom.

“Yeah, it has. How are you doing? What are you doing working here?” he asked.

I proceeded to tell him about marrying Luke, that he was in the Navy, and we’d been lucky to only have been to San Diego and here in the 14 years we’d been married. “We’ve been lucky he hasn’t had to move around too much. He’s in Iraq right now,” I told him quietly.

“That must be hard,” he said. He picked up my hand tentatively with his.

I smiled, squeezed his hand, and then took my hand back out of his. “It is.”

“What happened with us?” he asked me. I knew this was coming.

“I’m sorry, Tristan. I never meant to hurt you,” I said.

We had planned to drive over to the Outer Banks for a night in his parents’ beach house with some other friends of ours from school. I had reservations about doing so. We had been dating about 9 months, and we had just graduated from high school. I knew there wouldn’t be any parents there, and so this could be a changing point in our relationship. He hadn’t pressured me to do “the deed”, but I knew it wouldn’t be long before he did. It wasn’t that I didn’t have the desire to; I did. But I wanted to be married first. That was always my plan. I knew if we went to the Outer Banks and stayed in a beach house with no parents, the temptation would be strong. I just didn’t feel right about it.

I had been working at the Barnes & Noble, and after I got off, I went over to the adjoining Starbucks and ordered some coffee. I wanted to clear my head before meeting up with him and his friends to drive to the Outer Banks.

That was when I met Luke. He sat nearby about 3 tables down, and we kept glancing at each other. I pretended to be interested in the magazine I had brought with me from home, but I couldn’t stop looking at him. He was gorgeous. He had short brown hair, cut like a Navy guy, kind of curly on top. He had bright green eyes and a dimple in the middle of his chin. He wore a short-sleeved gray shirt that was pulled taut across his muscled chest and touched the tops of his tanned biceps. When he smiled, it lit up his whole face.

I got up and went to the bathroom, passing by him on the way, and we exchanged smiles. When I came back out, I almost tripped over a tile on the floor, and he stood up quickly and caught me. He was tall and towered over me.

“Thanks,” I said, embarrassed. I felt his touch all through me.

“Not a problem,” he said, in a gorgeous voice to fit the face.

He followed me to my table and held the chair out for me to sit down on. I was startled, but smiled at his chivalrous manners.

“Do you mind some company?” he asked me, once I was safely situated against the table.

“Sure, since you saved me from falling and all.” I motioned toward the empty seat across from me.

“I’m Luke.” He extended his hand across the table, which I took. I felt all tingly at the touch of his hand again.

“I’m Staci,” I said, mesmerized by his eyes, even more beautiful close up. My heart started fluttering.

“So you work here?” he asked me, pointing to my name tag on my shirt.

“Yeah. I just graduated high school. I’m starting college in the fall.”

“Oh, really?” he smiled. “What are you planning to study?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I am interested in writing, so maybe a degree in creative writing.”

“That sounds exciting.”

“What do you do? You look like a military man,” I said, smiling.

“How’d you guess? Is it that obvious?” he asked, smiling at me with a sideways sexy grin.

“I’ve known a few at my church. What branch?”

“Navy.”

“There’s no Navy base down here. Are you from around here?”

“Yep. I grew up here and got stationed to Norfolk after boot camp. I’ve only been there about 6 months. It’s a nice area. Have you ever been up there?”

“I’ve been to Virginia Beach before with my family, but not Norfolk.” I crossed my legs and pushed a stray hair behind my ear nervously. “So you graduated last year?”

“Yeah. Went to the Great Lakes last August for boot camp, and then down to Virginia Beach at Dam Neck for A school. I’m an OS...operations specialist.” I could listen to him talk forever. He had me mesmerized.

We ordered more coffee and talked for hours and had even more coffee. He was easy to talk to, like I’d known him forever. Suddenly with a start, I realized that I was late for meeting

Tristan and the gang for that trip to the Outer Banks. I sort of gasped, and Luke asked me what was wrong. I explained to him that I was supposed to meet “a guy...okay, he’s my boyfriend. He’s going to freak, but I totally forgot all about it.”

I checked my cell phone, which had been silenced while working, and noticed that I had 5 messages. I checked them, and they were all from Tristan. His voice went from curious to frustrated to exasperated to angry in each subsequent message. In the fourth message, he said if he didn’t hear from me in the next 10 minutes, they were leaving without me. In the last one, he said, “Ok, I can take a hint. You don’t want to go. Fine. I’ll see you when I get back. Maybe.”

I was frustrated and felt bad that I had let him down, but I also felt relieved. And that made me realize that I was glad I didn’t go down there with him. I’d known it wasn’t the right thing to do, and now I felt good about my decision. If I had been excited to go down there with him, I wouldn’t have stopped for coffee first, wouldn’t have been able to wait to meet up with him and head over there. And I wouldn’t have been interested in another guy. I wouldn’t have hesitated.

But I did. And because I did, I met my future husband. I fell for him hard and fast. We were married within 6 months, and I transferred up to Tidewater Community College in Virginia Beach with him and eventually started working for the local newspaper. It was a whirlwind romance, but I didn’t regret it for a minute. Even with the long deployments.

I tried explaining to Tristan that I hadn’t planned to ditch him that weekend. It just happened. I told him that I married the guy I had met that night, the reason I didn’t show up.

“I’m really sorry that I didn’t explain all of this before now. But when you came back in town, you avoided me, wouldn’t talk to me, and then you were off to college.”

“Yeah, well, it really hurt that you didn’t want to go down there with me. I thought you loved me. It was just so...shocking, so unlike you, not to call. You’d always been on time, always been responsible. I was actually worried something bad had happened to you. I finally just gave up after finding out from your parents that you were still at the bookstore.” It was true. I did have the decency to call my dad and tell him I was staying late.

“I’m sorry that I made you worry. I heard you’d found a replacement for me pretty quick.” He married a couple of months after I did – my mom informed me.

“Yeah, well, that didn’t last. We tried to make it work for five years, but it just didn’t. I almost got married again a few years later, but backed out at the last minute. I should’ve never considered marrying either one of them. I never got over you, Stac’.”

My eyes widened in shock. I couldn’t believe my ears. “What?”

“Seriously. I have dated a lot before you and after. I’ve not been able to stay with anyone because I compare every woman to you. And they can’t compare. I made a huge mistake letting you go. I should have fought harder for you. It took losing you to realize how much I loved you and wanted you back. But it was too late. I almost came to your wedding with plans of protesting.”

“Oh, Tristan...” Old feelings were coming back to me of how I felt when I finally got him, when he finally paid attention to me, after all those years of watching him with other girls. I felt a kind of victory. I always thought once I had him, I’d never want to let him go. I was wrong. I didn’t feel love for him, not the way I thought I would or thought I should. Not enough to marry him. Not the way I felt about Luke.

Now Tristan was pouring his heart out to me and saying he regretted losing me. How did that make me feel? I was flattered, of course. Who wouldn’t be? He was saying all the right things, but he wasn’t a temptation anymore.

“I’ve always wondered what might’ve been...” he said softly.

“Look, I—”

“Just tell me one thing, Staci. Are you happy? If this guy makes you happy, then I’ll leave you alone. I’ll never bug you again. But if not, if there’s even a slim chance that you’d have me back again...”

He knew how to stir me up, but I knew I’d made the right decision when I married Luke. He put his life in danger protecting our country, and I worried about his safety every day, but I knew the risks when I married him. He was worth it...it was true love. He was the one I couldn’t live without.

How could I explain that to my old flame, without hurting him yet again? It had been fun to reminisce for a while, but I knew where my heart belonged.

“Yes,” I said finally. “Yes, I’m happy. He’s wonderful to me and for me.”

That was all he needed to hear. He gently kissed me on the forehead and walked away without another word.

I finished working the concert, helped box up all the unsold merchandise, headed back to the trailer, and signed myself out. As I was walking across the parking lot back to my car, I saw the silhouette of a man beside my car. My first thought was that Tristan had stayed and waited for me, wanting to try and change my mind again. But then I realized he didn’t know what kind of car I drove.

As I got closer, my heart started beating faster. Maybe it was some crazy drunk person that wanted his money back, didn't like his t-shirt after all. Or maybe he wanted to rip my clothes off. My mind went wild with the possibilities.

But as I got close enough to see better, I realized who it was. The person I most wanted to see. The person I was happy to spend the rest of my days with. He stood between my car and his shiny black Harley with that sexy sideways smile he reserved only for me. I ran the rest of the way into Luke's arms and wept tears of joy. My husband had come home a month early. What a wonderful surprise!