

Old Flame

by christi clancy

I hadn't seen Paul in eighteen years. His being older shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. He'd aged the way a lot of men in Wisconsin age, by getting thicker, more settled. His cheekbones seemed wider and his face a little swollen and jowly, as if he'd gone drinking the night before and had had a few too many beers. When I knew Paul, he was on the varsity tennis team, lean and tan, and we called beers "quarter taps" because that was how much a glass of beer cost back then.

I only recognized a few mourners, including Paul's friend Dave, who was always the third wheel when Paul and I went on dates back in high school. I once farted out loud when I was talking to Dave in the old Chapman's Department Store, and he told Paul about it. I was mortified. All these years later, that was how I remembered him, despite all that had happened since then: Chapman's was long gone, Paul was dead, and Dave was almost bald.

Dave introduced me to his wife. "This is Christi," he said to her. "She was a big part of Paul's life."

I was grateful to Dave for saying that. Until then, I'd felt like I was in a scene from *Harold and Maude*, crashing a wake for a stranger. Sure, Paul and I had lost touch over the years, but until today I hadn't realized how separate our lives had become, complete with an entirely new cast of supporting characters—friends, co-workers, in-laws. I'd only recently returned to Milwaukee a few years earlier after living in Minneapolis, DC, and Chicago, but I'd heard little bits about Paul over the years through my high-school network. Paul was the kind of person who generated news, like when he was caught and went to jail for growing marijuana in his basement. I knew he'd been a high school teacher, he'd been divorced and remarried, and I'd heard he'd become a father. When I moved back to town, I figured we might bump into each other at the grocery store or at a party. But that didn't happen. I didn't see Paul until today.

The receiving line stretched into the lobby of the funeral home, which was decorated with faded Waverly wallpaper, dirty lemon yellow carpeting, and the kind of ornate white furniture I used to want in my bedroom when I was a little girl. The people in the receiving line, mostly my age, looked out of place. Even though I had two kids, a mortgage, and crow's feet when I smiled, this was the first time I saw myself squarely in midlife: too old for bars, too young for funerals.

Paul's mother, who sat quietly in a corner at the wake, didn't seem to remember me when I offered my condolences. Of course, she had more on her mind than her son's many old girlfriends, but I was surprised that I didn't seem to spark even a glimmer of recognition. I'd spent a lot of time with her when she was in the hospital having her hip replaced and Paul was being treated in the burn unit a floor below. Sometimes I would visit her in her room. Sometimes she would wheel herself to Paul's floor and sit in the little lobby behind the nurse's desk with a concerned look on her face, telling me to come back another time.

Another time. Who would have thought that what should have killed Paul when he was seventeen would get him twenty years later? That was Dave's theory at least; that the stress from the accident was what caused his heart to seize while he was on a run so many years later.

Paul's pretty blonde wife stood at the head of the receiving line next to the open casket. She'd set up giant foam poster boards on easels and covered them with photos of Paul for people to look at as they waited to pay their respects. The photos were in reverse chronological order, as though his life were on rewind. One of the boards was devoted to photos of Paul and his children, a two-year old and a baby. Another featured a collage of his honeymoon on a tropical island. There were just a few photos from high school and the summer camp where we both worked. I didn't see myself in any of them.

I was only sixteen when I met Paul. He was a year older, which made him sophisticated beyond my wildest dreams. On our

first date, he took me to a restaurant on the south side of Milwaukee near the Allen Bradley factory. There's a giant clock on the building, the largest four-faced clock in the world. He told me that people in the area called the clock the Polish Moon, after the Poles who settled the area. At dinner, he ordered wine for us and didn't get carded, and he showed me how to eat escargot with a tiny two-pronged fork. He was handsome, with his crooked nose and a shock of curly hair that hung over his forehead, and he had a lazy, mischievous smile.

We went out pretty regularly after that, and Paul became my first real boyfriend. My mom was concerned about me going out so much with an older boy, so Paul came to my house and made a concerted effort to charm her. She let me go out with him, but she was right to worry; Paul was the one who taught me how to use a bong, how to french kiss, how to give a hand job. There was always a bottle of Jim Beam under the passenger seat of his Chevette and a stash of cold beer in a cooler in the trunk, where the spare tire was supposed to go. He drove fast and recklessly, riding a dangerous edge that set him apart from the other boys in high school—an edge I found thrilling.

One day, late that summer, I was on my way to swim practice when I heard an explosion that made the ground shake. By the time I got to the pool, some of the girls told me that a car had exploded just a few blocks away. There were tall flames, they said, and an old man on fire. After I got home, I learned that the “old man” was Paul, and the car that blew up was his silver Chevette.

By the time I got to the hospital, Paul's face had swollen to twice its normal size and was the brown of a toasted campfire marshmallow. “My gas tank scraped the curb,” he told me. Amid his excruciating pain, he made jokes about turning black, saying that if he could stand up he was pretty sure he'd be able to moonwalk like Michael Jackson. His mother sat in a wheelchair next to his bed, in obvious pain herself. She'd just had her hip done, and when I'd visited her at this hospital the day before, she'd shown me the staples that held together the giant half-moon incision. It made me

queasy to look at her hip, but not as queasy as I felt visiting Paul in the ICU that night, the room permeated with the smell of burned hair, open skin, and ointment.

I went to the hospital to visit Paul after school every day for more than two months, even though his changeable moods made me nervous. My father was bipolar, so mood swings have always made me uncomfortable. My dad had days when he thought he could solve the problem of world hunger; on other days, it would take him an hour to spread peanut butter on one slice of bread. That's how it was on the burn ward with Paul. Sometimes the painkillers were working, and Paul cracked jokes with the nurses and seemed glad to see me. But sometimes Paul was in agony, and no one could relate to him then. When I went to see him, I was always on edge, feeling more like an impersonator than a girlfriend.

"Grab that jar," Paul said one afternoon, pointing with his bandaged hand at a white tub of Silverdine ointment. I'd already learned that Silverdine was incredibly expensive because it was made with real silver. The burn ward reeked of it. Even now, that's the metallic smell I associate with all hospitals.

Paul's face was covered with quarter-sized blisters that he jokingly called "bad acne." Some of his skin was still crusted and dead, but new skin was emerging in mossy yellow and pink buds. New skin was good; it meant he wouldn't scar.

"Will you put some of this on my face?" He asked me. Paul's request was really more of a challenge. He could have called a nurse to put the ointment on for him, but for some reason it seemed important that I be the one to take care of him.

I dipped my finger into the jar. The Silverdine was cold to the touch and thicker than Vaseline. I told him I didn't know how to spread the ointment without popping his blisters or pulling up his prized new skin.

"Just put it on," he said. It was as though he was saying, *Okay, you want to be a girlfriend? This is what real girlfriends do.* When I was honest with myself, I knew I wasn't a real girlfriend. I'd put Paul on such a high pedestal that I didn't know him very well at all. Even

before the accident, I wasn't that close to him because he scared me sometimes. Now he was in the throes of psychological and emotional pain I couldn't understand, as much as I wished I could. Before I met Paul, I played Pac-Man, practiced the cello, and hung out at the mall with my friends. Nothing had prepared me for this.

I put my shaking finger against his face, which was hot to the touch. The heat of Paul's face reminded me of the stories I'd heard about old fires in downtown Milwaukee that still burned underground, years after they started. With Paul, the fire might have been put out, but he was still surrounded by flames. He had told me he hated to close his eyes because the blaze of orange and red was permanently projected onto the backs of his eyelids. He'd also told me that he had a recurring dream that I was in the burning car, banging against the windows for help, and he couldn't save me. He'd call me from the hospital at three in the morning just to make sure I was okay. "You were melting," he'd say. My friends thought Paul's dream and late-night calls were terribly romantic, and I was secretly pleased that I'd been inserted into the narrative of his accident.

I began rubbing the lotion on Paul's face in small, gentle circles.

"Harder," he said.

I pressed my finger into one of his blisters, and it popped. A river of pus ran down his face and neck and onto his dressing gown. I choked back my nausea, and when Paul saw that, he began crying.

"You think I'm disgusting," he said. "Admit it."

I shook my head no.

"Liar."

Once I finished with the cream, he asked me to adjust his moveable tray table. I fumbled with the tray, my fingers still shaking and greasy. I lost my grip, and the tray landed with a thunk on his charred hands. He sat bolt upright and screamed, "Get out!" The nurses came running into his room as I apologized again and again.

"Just get the fuck out!"

I went home and cried on my mother's shoulder. When I finally mustered the nerve to visit again, there were bandages over his

hands where he'd just begun growing new skin. He never mentioned the incident with the tray.

As soon as he was well enough, the nurses helped him into a wheelchair and let him go to the lobby of the burn ward. Paul made a friend there named Mike who'd been goofing around with his car and had put gasoline in his carburetor. Mike's face was so badly burned that he had to wear a metal tray around his neck to catch the skin and fluid that dripped off his face like melted pizza toppings. Mike had a girlfriend, too. She had feathered hair and long, painted nails, and she wore a studded jean jacket. I could tell she resented me, maybe because Paul would recover much more fully than Mike would. Paul's burns were second-degree, the most painful kind, but the kind that would heal, unlike her boyfriend's. She was always there, sad and knowing. She was a *real* girlfriend.

Paul and I broke up shortly after he was discharged. I told myself that it didn't work out because I was a reminder of an experience he wanted to put behind him. Now I think what probably ended it was the tacit knowledge we gained when we discovered the borders of our relationship. I just wasn't the person he needed me to be.

We remained friendly through college but eventually lost touch. I moved on to other cities and longer, more complicated relationships and marriage. When my husband almost lost his leg after a botched surgery, I sat next to his hospital bed without ever once considering what my role should be or what the situation's romantic value was.

One summer morning, while the rest of my family slept, I was drinking coffee and reading the paper on the porch when I stumbled across Paul's obituary.

I was late for Paul's wake, and I stood near the end of the receiving line. By the time I met Paul's wife, she was tired and strung out, and her breasts had damp rings around them from lactating. Something in her weary smile reminded me of Mike's girlfriend in the lobby of the burn ward: her recognition that her life would never be the same again.

Finally I stood next to Paul's open casket. We were in the position I most remembered us being in, from all those visits in the hospital:

him lying down, me standing at his side. Even with the makeup and the many years that had passed, he was entirely recognizable, despite also being entirely different.

I wanted desperately for him to open his eyes and crack a joke or acknowledge me the way he might have if we bumped into each other under other, better circumstances. I knew what a big role he'd played in my own life, but since I'd arrived at the funeral home, I'd struggled with the feeling that any memories of me, of us, had been lost, and that our relationship, in the context of the long, full life spread out on poster boards, was minor.

Just before I left, I took one final look at Paul. His hands were crossed over his chest, revealing the scars I'd given him when I dropped his tray. They stood up in shiny ridges of dark, purple flesh that he'd probably looked at every single day. They were still prominent, even after all those years, and in their own way they said what Paul couldn't: good-bye.

