

A Missed Connection

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Eric sat at the bar, pensieve. It was quite empty, only a couple of regulars and Joe, the bartender. It was a Friday, traditional happy hour time for the college kids in the university nearby, but it was, as noted before, still early.

“You gonna keep staring at that Yuenling or are you going to drink it?” A bellicose Roger asked, his speech slurring ever so slightly. Roger was a regular at Joe’s bar—he was always there within the hour of completing dinner and would always begin with the Three Wise Men before chasing it with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse followed by copious amounts of beer. Joe could never understand why Roger did that since the two mixers were very similar to begin with, and would cost a pretty penny each. But Roger never got drunk. He was probably the most sober of all who drank at Joe’s bar. Joe didn’t drink, of course. It would be stupid to be nothing short of being stone-cold sober when one was the barkeep.

Eric stared at the untouched glass of beer in front of him, seemingly oblivious to Roger’s exclamation. The latter waited a bit to give time for Eric to process what he said and seeing that no response was coming, got annoyed and repeated himself.

“You gonna keep staring at that Yuenling or are you going to drink it?” Roger waited. Joe, on the other side of the bar, watched the encounter from the corner of his eyes. Roger and Eric were generally harmless, but it never did bode well when Roger’s questions were unanswered.

A low whine started to come from Eric.

“All gone... all gone...”

“No,” Roger started, excited at finally eliciting a response but still annoyed at its inanity. “Your damn Yuenlin’s still there.”

“It’s not the Yuenling.” Eric replied slowly before pausing. Roger was suddenly aware that Eric was about to unload something heavy. It was always the same with the depressed drinkers—they come in, order something to drink, maybe drink it (or not), but they always kept very quiet, until someone came up to them and started showing some attention. Joe’s ears perked up from the other side of the bar, and inched his way closer. As barkeep, it was normal for him to hear grouses, especially from the regulars, but since Roger started it this time, it was wiser to just observe.

“Oh? If not the Yuenling, then what? Women?”

Eric stayed silent for a while more before taking a sip from the glass.

“Yes.”

“Oh lord...” muttered Roger under his breath, not unkindly.

“So, you wanna talk about it or something?” Roger asked.

Eric went mum for a while. For a moment, Roger thought that he had once again hid-

den back into his shell, but really Eric was just considering the offer seriously. He weighted the pros and cons for telling Roger, and tried to figure out how the whole embarrassment factored in. Roger stared intently into Eric's unblinking eyes for a few seconds before motioning to Joe for a glass of beer. Taking the opportunity that presented itself, Joe grabbed a glass and dispensed beer into it before walking to where Eric and Roger were and placed the glass on a coaster in front of Roger.

"Well?"

"Sure, why not. Maybe you may have some advice for me or something."

Roger guffawed uncontrollably at that last remark before checking himself hastily. "Son, I'm not sure if I am qualified to give you advice on women, seeing that I am already divorced three times at this point." Roger paused, saw Eric's disappointed face, and attempted to soften his words a little. "But of course perhaps I may have something to say after all. But I can't say anything till you've told your story, right?"

Eric took another big gulp of Yuenling. It really wasn't potent enough to make him tipsy or give him the well-known "liquid courage", but the act of chugging a little beer itself seemed cathartic. At this point, Joe was standing right in front of Roger quietly, and appeared disinterested as he started wiping dry some of his glasses and mugs with a towel. Roger knew Joe was trying to look busy while listening in, but it didn't seem that Eric realised nor cared if Joe was eavesdropping albeit in an overt fashion.

"You know I went to the US to study, right?"

"Yeah, I remembered you saying something like that and disappearing for around two years."

"Right. So I was studying in the US for my masters' degree. I worked hard, spent lots of time in the lab I was assigned to, designing and running experiments for my master thesis. There was nothing else that I did there other than what I had described. Until roughly six months into the programme.

"I was starting to run a little nuts. Worked too hard, felt burnt out. Losing trains of thought, got depressed, you know the usual things that come with burn out. I went to the school counsellor for advice and he suggested I join some of the activity groups on campus. I've always wanted to mess with martial arts, but opportunity never showed itself, till then."

"There was this Japanese martial art called 'aikido' that seemed interesting," Eric continued.

"Interesting?" Roger interjected as Joe watched on. Around them, the bar was still relatively serene. The Friday college madness had not descended upon them yet.

"Yes, interesting. It said that it could be used for self-defense, and was highly effective if one were less physically imposing than the opponent. I thought it was interesting, and went to one of their club meets or training sessions. The teacher was a professor on campus, and he was friendly and good at the art. I saw a lot of cool joint locks and pins and throws and he made it all look so easy. Mind you, he was nearly seventy and yet he was casually tossing spry twenty-somethings all over the training mats. I knew I wasn't super fit for any

of the more ‘usual’ martial arts, and if a seventy-year-old man can do it easily, I should be able to as well without hurting myself.”

“Wait, wait, Eric. I don’t mean to interrupt you as you regale us” Roger broke off momentarily glancing at Joe “with your tale, but how has this got to do with your woman trouble?”

Eric sighed and picked up his glass of beer and chugged the rest of it at one go. Roger and Joe stared at him in disbelief and waited impatiently for him to continue.

“I was getting to that,” Eric finally found his voice to reply. “I only told you all that to set up the background. Otherwise you won’t have enough to give me advice.”

Roger nearly laughed again, but he caught a quick disapproving glare from Joe and managed to halt himself in time. “I’m sorry, please do continue.”

“So for a year after that, I took part in the aikido training. It was deceptively hard—I always went home sore all over, but that was due to my lack of fitness rather than an error in instruction. At around the ninth month mark of starting the aikido training, a new girl joined us.

“Her name was Julia. She was a graduate student working on her PhD and was introduced by a friend of hers to the club who was already a member. I cannot forget the first time I saw her when she came to training.

“She was fit-looking, but was paradoxically stiff everywhere, making it mildly comical to see her pinned and her joints locked with relative ease. Throwing her was quite funny, because the stiffness made it super easy to do so.

“At first, I didn’t realise what was going on, but now as I looked back, I had started to be smitten by her.”

“Oh lord, please don’t tell me you fell in love with a girl you just met? If that were true son, I think you are hopeless,” Roger pronounced as he took a few mouthfuls of his beer.

“No, no, no...” Eric replied quickly. “I wasn’t immediately falling head-over-heels for her. It’s just that as we kept training together, I started to find her more and more attractive.

“But I never really told her how I felt. I mean, she was introduced to the club by a guy, and I thought...”

“... that they were lovers, and you had no balls to ask her out? God son, you are dense!” Roger exclaimed.

“No, no, no... not no balls. Didn’t want to make things awkward. The club was small, and if she or both of them left due to my faux pas, I could never live with myself.”

“Alright, I get your point,” Roger replied gruffly. “But none of that French thing please—it gives me an indigestion.” Eric finished the rest of his drink and sat there for a while. Wordlessly, Joe filled up a clean glass with more Yuenling and placed it on another coaster next to the empty glass. Eric did not seem to notice nor care except to just pick

up the non-empty glass to take another gulp.

The bar was starting to see the first wave of college kids entering. They were of little concern to Joe—the early stragglers in to the bar were the second well-behaved group, with the first of course being the regulars. The newcomers took up a position on the other end of the bar, and one of them motioned to Joe that they wanted him to take their orders. Joe shrugged and sauntered off to his new customers as Eric and Roger sat there quietly, each drinking from his own beer at near consistent intervals. At that point Roger suddenly realised that Eric had been aware that Joe had been listening in, and was even approving of it as he stopped his tale there and then.

Joe took the orders from the newcomers and laid out their drinks on coasters in front of them, taking in the ones and fives they handed to him to put into the cash register. His business on that end done, he tried to find an excuse to make his way back to the side where Roger and Eric were, only to see Roger waving and gesticulating to him to just get the hell over.

Joe put aside the dispenser and grabbed his towel and cleaned the bar top as he made his way back to the other side of the bar.

When Joe finally made his way back to where Roger and Eric were, Roger's glass was empty. Without hesitation, Joe quickly filled another glass of Yuenling and placed it in front of Roger.

“So up to that point,” Eric continued as though there had been no interruptions, “I just carried a torch for her. We talked here and there, nothing of consequence really, mostly about current affairs and public policy. Then it was time for me to graduate, and I tried to play some video games with her, which worked out well.”

“Hold on a second, son,” Roger started, agitated. “You spent a good one-and-a-half years with her and all you talked about was current affairs? Lord... just what's wrong with you? Couldn't you have just asked her out proper once you figured out that she likes the club enough and is sufficiently matured to not act stupid to your advances? And video games? Son, you are seriously clueless on things like this huh...”

Joe was still pretending to be uninterested, but Roger caught him nodding slowly in agreement. Eric just sat there, moody as before, his face revealing that sudden realisation of the manner in which he had screwed things up.

“And that's your woman troubles, right? Wait, hold on... you graduated a year ago. Oh lord... please don't tell me there's more?” Roger said, his eyes suddenly widening.

“Yes.” Eric mumbled quietly.

“Jesus Christ...” Roger ejaculated. “Hey Joe, you might as well drop the act and just listen in all proper and speak your mind. I've a funny feeling I might break character and start laughing Eric here out of town as his comedic tragedy continues.”

“Awww shush Roger,” Joe boomed with his rich baritone voice. “Let the kid state his piece and then we say stuff for him to hear. No point laughing at things now—we were young once and didn't know better then.”

“Thanks Joe,” Eric said in a quiet voice. It seemed that Roger’s ribbing had finally gotten to him and had taken a lot of the initial enthusiasm he had in sharing his tale.

Roger fidgetted with his new glass of Yuenling and took a tentative gulp from it. Eric just stared at his, morose, while Joe kept himself busy with drying the washed glasses and keeping an eye out on the other side of the bar where things were starting to get a little loud.

Eventually though Eric’s reticence gave way once more.

“It took me nearly a month after I graduated to finally confess to Julia about my feelings. She expressed shock at first, but that quickly turned to pity as she kept saying ‘you should’ve said so earlier and perhaps it might be different’. We kept in touch from that point on, using the chat programs to transmit text messages across the Pacific.

“At first, we were very enthusiastic, chatting with each other at all hours of the day. Slowly things started to change. The messages started to cool off in frequency, the contents started to be more generic. She soon started on a new fan fiction project thing, and that became the second time sapper, the first being her graduate studies of course.

“All through this I tried my best to keep in contact with her. But slowly things seemed to be falling apart. She was starting to talk about the opinions of a new guy, and when I read about that my heart sank. I kept imagining her going out with him, especially when she said that they would check out the concerts that were nearby and what-not. When I couldn’t stand it any more and asked her about him, she said he was a friend, and that he already had a girlfriend.

“What went through my mind was that perhaps she was his girlfriend.”

“Now hold on right there,” Joe interjected. “I think you are over thinking things. Why would you think that she was lying given those particularly chosen words? Are you being a little jealous of someone that you obviously don’t know a lot of?”

Eric fell silent once more, the weight of Joe’s words hanging on him severely. Joe had a very good point, something that the alcohol didn’t manage to warp with its reality-distortion powers. He thought of the things he knew and remembered about Julia, and found them to be superficial things, the kind of things that one hears from another who was showing the world one’s public face. That sudden realisation made Eric feel a sudden bout of inexplicable sadness coursing through him.

“Uh-oh Joe, I think you broke him,” Roger said when he saw Eric suddenly quietening down with his eyes staring nearly dead ahead, still against the stimuli around him.

“Hush Roger. Kid needs to process what I just said.” Turning to Eric, Joe continued. “Kid, I know your thought process now. Don’t take it too hard. You might have a missed connection, but at least she didn’t say an outright no. Talk to her more, kid, figure out more commonalities. And more importantly, cut loose if the ship is sinking, and don’t hesitate.

“Now if you’d excuse me, I hear a rowdy crowd coming in that I need to tame.”