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FORNO'S

The PA system called his name, its speaker only a few feet from his head. He tried to respond, but could not move his arms or legs or even open his eyes. It was as if snake venom had left him paralyzed. Then Jennifer, the tiny nurse – the one he liked – barged in, shouted his name, and grabbed him off the cot. He found himself running down the brightly lit corridor toward Room 203, a blue light flashing over its door. He was still not fully awake. Had he been asleep for ten minutes? An hour? His mouth was dry. He wished he'd had time to brush his teeth.

As he left the room, his patient dead, Dr. Nikki Covo felt weak. He stumbled to the bench across from the nurse's station. Jennifer looked at him sitting slumped over. "Are you all right, Dr. Covo? Do you need to lie down?"

"My first code, and we lost him."

"We lose most of them. You should know that. What did they teach you in med school, anyway?"

"Are you busy tomorrow night?" He'd wanted to ask Jennifer out for the two weeks he'd been on the floor, but hadn't yet found the courage. Jennifer was dark complexioned, petite, nicely formed, and, most important to Nikki, intelligent and competent. Strands of grey accented her short black hair, on top of which sat the crisp white cap of her profession. If she was not beautiful, with a nose slightly too large for her face and body, she was nonetheless compassionate. Now they had worked hard together to try to save a life. It could be a bonding moment. It had to be.

Jennifer ignored his question and retreated into the nurse's station.

"So about tomorrow?" He kept his voice low.

"I'm much older than you, Dr. Covo, way too much."

He had pegged her for mid-thirties, but even a difference of ten years wouldn't have mattered. Jennifer busied herself with paperwork, but Nikki saw that she merely shuffled pages of the bulletin about new hand-washing requirements. She turned to look up at the board that listed names, rooms, conditions, and physicians, then rose to erase "Beskin" and show that Room 203 was empty. She turned back toward him. "Didn't you hear me, Dr. Covo?"

"Please call me Nikki."

"Get some rest, Dr. Covo. We could be busy again soon."

"So let's have dinner tomorrow night, someplace very nice." No reaction. "Something like Forno's?" Nikki named a Spanish restaurant in Newark where rich doctors and lawyers might eat. He knew of nothing more glamorous.

She smiled, and the dimensions of her face melded perfectly. Yes, her nose was a bit too large, but it worked well with the upturned edges of her

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mouth and the hair that swept below her ears. She was pretty. Her dark brown eyes held his for a second. "Forno's? It's very expensive, you know. Are you sure, Dr. Covo?"

"Where do you live?"

He picked her up at her family's house in Kearny, in a rundown neighborhood near an industrial park. He knew that neither of them really had enough money to splurge on an expensive dinner, but they'd made the plan and neither wanted to confess poverty. She'd worn a dress with a full black skirt and grey short-sleeved top. He'd worn his only suit, already a bit threadbare after a few years.

The short ride into Newark had been awkward, each of them trying unsuccessfully to get a conversation going. She'd asked him about his family, a subject that Nikki hated to talk about. In response, all he would say was that his family had been lost in the Holocaust, and the topic died abruptly. Then he returned the favor, asking her about her family and learning in short order that her father had left many years before, that her mother was a bartender who worked long hours, and that her younger brother was in jail. She called her brother a "hooligan," and had nothing more to say.

Forno's was beautiful, beyond anything either of them had ever experienced, and they relaxed in its warmth. They started with wine, followed shortly by salads and grilled salmon. They talked about college and nursing school, Rutgers and Monmouth State, Eisenhower and Nixon, the Communist threat and Marilyn Monroe in Korea. They talked about race relations and, briefly, about religion. Nikki was a non-believing Sephardic Jew, and Jennifer, in her own words, a lapsed Catholic, and their mutual disdain for a Supreme Being proved to each other that they had a lot in common. The conversation turned to music, and they discovered that they both loved jazz. Jennifer had actually known Herbie Haymer, who'd been a few years ahead of her in Kearny High. They skipped dessert upon Jennifer's promise that she could serve ice cream when he drove her home and that she'd play her collection of Herbie's records.

Her mother would likely not return for hours, Jennifer said as they sat in her living room. They listened to "Laguna Leap" twice, marveling at the breathtaking piano riffs of Nat King Cole. They listened to Herbie Haymer's group playing "I'll Never Be The Same," a tune Nikki loved. While they listened, they ate vanilla ice cream that Jennifer had scooped into bowls. She closed her eyes as Herbie played his tenor sax.

And then it was time for Nikki to leave or to stay. They had placed their bowls on her kitchen counter, and tried to take her in his arms for their first kiss. But Jennifer moved just as he stooped, and his chin hit her head.

"Ow!"

"Sorry." He felt like a jerk.

"That's not a good sign, Dr. Covo."

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He could not let their date end on a sour note and gently turned her back toward him. He bent his knees so that he could kiss her properly and felt ridiculous, but she opened her mouth to him for a few pleasant moments, and he stopped feeling anything but desire. He was aroused and pressed himself toward her, still stooping. Then she pushed them apart.

"This will never work, Dr. Covo. You're too tall, and I'm too old."

"We could just get on the same level though."

"I'm thirty-five."

"A bed or a sofa would work."

"I'm married as well." She held up her left hand and pointed to where a wedding ring should have been. He could barely see a circumference of depressed skin. He reached out and took her hand, feeling the skin that the ring had covered, noting its smoothness.

"Doesn't seem so long since you took it off."

"I was hoping Matteo would come back." She lifted her gaze to meet his. "I'm sorry, Dr. Covo, I should have said something."

"Nikki, please."

"So you see why I'm pushing you out, right?"

"No, I don't see. There's no Matteo here now, is there? I'm guessing he's long gone."

"Probably forever, but I'm still married. You know I'm Catholic. Once married, always married. Now will you please leave?"

He opened her front door, not wanting to, but she pushed him out, slowly pulling her hand away from his. The door began to close, and he blocked it with his foot. She pulled the door open again and pulled him back inside.

"Who do like in the World Series?"

Besides medicine and jazz, they had discovered that baseball was their largest common ground. "The Giants, of course."

She shook her head. "No, God, you're wrong ... Nikki. I say the Indians in five."

"Bet?"

"Another dinner?"

They quickly became lovers. Their lovemaking always took place at Jennifer's small house, which was much nicer than Nikki's tiny studio in Jersey City. He forgave Jennifer their bet, and they frequented Gina's Pizzeria on Central Avenue or cooked pasta dinners in her house.

It didn't take Nikki long to figure out that there really wasn't any Mrs. Langone. He confronted Jennifer one morning, more curious than upset with her having deceived him.

"She died of cirrhosis? You should have told me." He dressed in haste

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and worried about being late for work. Jennifer, who had the day off, lay in bed naked, the dingy white sheets in disarray near her feet.

"No need to know."

"I worried she would come home from work and walk in on us."

"You're cute when you're miffed, do you know that, Nikki? Come back."

He considered doing that until he looked at his watch. "Don't you see how hard it is to relax and enjoy love when in my mind that door could open at any time?"

"It wasn't pretty. Never is when the liver is shot. I had to watch her die. But you know of death, I guess." She pulled the sheet up over her torso and head, making herself look like a body on a gurney.

"Look, Nikki. I've been honest with you about my mother. Why won't you tell me even the least detail about your family?"

He sat looking across the scarred table of Gina's and stared at the remnants of the pepperoni pizza they'd ordered. He finished his beer, regretting that his diet had become so unhealthy. He could feel himself gaining weight as his food crawled through his digestive system. He thought of the amylases in his gut that would hydrolyze the carbohydrates into sugars. He thought of the graffiti scratched into the table – JH & LS – which the owners had not cared to remove. He thought about what Jennifer felt like in bed, where he could lose himself entirely in her, where the residency, his family, the war, all faded away for a few minutes. He thought of blessed dreamless sleep after their lovemaking ended.

Yet, she would press him for details, and he couldn't see why he should have to provide them. The last thing he wanted was a permanent relationship, and, anyway, she'd told him that she couldn't get her marriage annulled because of complicated church rules.

"My father was a well-respected neurologist. I had a typical mother, who just wanted to take care of the home and her family. I had two sisters, who could have been anything they wanted if not murdered by the Nazi pigs." He saw her wince at the word "murdered" and stopped, feeling that he'd already gone further than he'd planned.

"You are so arrogant, you know. You act like you have first dibs on suffering. Can I have another beer?" He ordered two.

They stayed together throughout the winter and into the spring, with no further explorations of family histories. He told her from time to time of the patients he treated for schizophrenia, when their antics amused him. She told him of other residents rotating through her unit and the mistakes they nearly made.

Then, as the weather began to warm, without any conversation about where they were going, they saw each other less often. Nikki felt fatigued; the increased stress of his job, he said, led him to need more time alone.

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Something began to bother him about her. She asked if they could go to Forno's again, and she would pay. He declined, telling her of his plan to visit a friend in Highland Park. Two weeks passed during which Nikki knew he should have called Jennifer, but did not. When she phoned him on a Friday night, he was surprised, because he had not thought about her for days. He turned the sound down on the television, but continued to watch the Dodgers game as they spoke.

"We lost a patient today, Nikki. Cirrhosis. Brought back bad memories."

"Sorry." She was looking for sympathy, which annoyed him, because everyone knew that these things happened. Besides, Nikki desperately wanted to listen to, as well as watch, the game. For long seconds, no one spoke.

"You're dropping me, Nikki, aren't you?"

"No." But when he denied her as weakly as he did, they both knew that he could just as well could have said the opposite.

"What is it with you, anyway? You don't like Catholics? Some crazy Jewish thing?"

He hated her accusations because she had hit unpleasantly near the truth. Religion did separate them after all. Baseball, jazz, and medicine gave them only so much common ground. He knew that Christians – in name at least – had killed his family. Why that should have gotten between him and Jennifer, with whom he might have fallen in love, he could not explain. Not to her, nor to himself.

"Are you there, Dr. Covo?"

He hung up, sure that he was not.