

Pattern Recognition

**a short story
by
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I was living in Provincetown all that fall and winter, in an apartment just across the street from the library, with a sweeping view of the bay and the pier and the brightly colored fishing-boats.

The library? It's located in what used to be the Heritage Museum. After conversion, they kept the museum's half-scale model of the *Rose Dorothea* – a famous Grand Banks fishing schooner – on display, even though it takes up nearly all of the second floor and allows for very little space on the third; the boat was built inside the museum and, no matter what lofty reasons they give you for keeping it there, the reality is that no one could figure how to get it out. It's an inconvenient artifact that makes the new library scarcely bigger than the old, which was housed in – well, a *house* – further on down Commercial Street.

The spaces for the books were designed around the schooner, and sometimes when I was feeling fanciful I'd use that as a metaphor, a metaphor for Provincetown itself, reinventing and redesigning itself forever around the fishing, around the sea.

That was why I'd come there: for the sea. Well, the sea... and the ghosts.

Not that I had anything against P'town's current incarnation – a gay-dominated but straight-tolerant summer playground – but what I was looking for was inspiration. The harbor, with its fishing boats and whale-watching enterprises and screaming gulls; the town itself, the East End echoing with the long-dead voices of famous Provincetown Players – Eugene O'Neill, John Dos Passos, Edna St. Vincent Millay; the sense that living here at the very tip of Cape Cod was like living at the very tip of the world, at the very edge of life. Important things could happen here.

Anything could happen here.

During the days I took walks, stared out of my windows, thought too much, read a lot, tried to write. Being perched at the top of one of the highest buildings along the waterfront, I could see all of Provincetown Harbor from my deck, the bulk of Macmillan Pier with its working fishing rigs on one side, its sport fishing and whale watching boats on the other. Gradually the latter dwindled in number, and by November were all gone, off perhaps to the warmer climes of Florida where they could continue to take people out to gasp at the beauty of the last giant denizens of the sea.

The fishing boats, for their part, stayed in harbor. Real fishermen rarely have any other options, anyplace else they can go.

I walked, I read, I thought, I wrote. It wasn't that I was ignoring the gay side of life in Provincetown; one cannot – especially not in the winter, when all but the most hardy of tourists have gone, and those who need to live, to dare, to stay at the edge of the world are the only ones left. No: I didn't ignore it, but it seemed irrelevant. I might have flirted with the concept of a same-sex relationship back in college, when feminism first entered my consciousness in a real way; but then I met James, and James took over the vista of my emotional world for the next fifteen years. And left me in his wake, a survivor, emotionally out of tune and not sure I wanted to ever get back in tune again. Or even whether I could.

“You'll feel differently, once you're working again,” he had told me before I left. As if the black hole I'd been experiencing, the sudden frightening unfamiliar inability to write, had nothing to do with him. As if he had no responsibility in the shipwreck of our emotional life.

He was right in one way, though: getting out of New York, taking the six-month lease on the place in Provincetown, did change my feelings about romance: it made me decide not to try it again. The return of my writing voice, hesitant at first, then stronger as each day went by, convinced me of that.

On sunny days, I walked through the town, out on the pier or over the breakwater, breathing in the mixture of sea air and rotting fish, feeling vaguely guilty for my apparent idleness beside the grim bustling industry of the fishermen below. I walked the other way, too, into the East End, retracing the steps of the literary ghosts I followed, gazing out over the ruins of Lewis Wharf where they had performed, imagining the plays and the parties, the critiques and counter-critiques, the voices of those destined to remain the inspiration for everyone who followed in their chosen avocation.

Most days, I stopped at the Squealing Pig on Commercial Street on my way back from my walks for a drink or – when I didn't feel up to cooking something at home – a meal.

I sat at the end of the bar at the Pig and gradually became a part of its scenery. The pub drew a mixed clientele in terms of sexual preference, young straight working

guys, gay couples, small groups of women. I'm not sure where people placed me, but I managed to fit in, somehow, an unassuming single woman with a book who sat through the time it took to drink one Guinness and then left as quietly as she had come.

Occasionally I was recognized as a regular. The bartender, blonde and slender, with strange violet eyes fringed by dark lashes and hair she kept brushing out of her eyes, took to drawing my beer as soon as I came in the door. "If I ever want something besides Guinness, I'll be in trouble."

The eyes met mine, slightly amused, slightly appraising. "But you'll never want anything else, will you?"

The moment stretched, the tension oddly pleasant, edgy and exciting. "No," I said finally, touching the glass she had just put in front of me, then withdrawing my hand, quickly, as though it had been burned. "You're right." She turned away with a half-smile curving her lips, leaving me wondering exactly what had just happened.

Once, on a Sunday night, glumly contemplating his workweek ahead, another patron ordered kamikazes for everyone sitting at the bar, the blonde bartender and me included. She shook and poured them expertly, then slid mine across to me with a smile and a shrug and another long look; I nodded to the benevolent patron, downed the drink in unison with the others and returned to my book, strangely aware of her moving in the periphery of my vision, oddly unable to concentrate on the words in front of me.

The next day I was in the library, under the schooner, working my way around a gaggle of small twittering children, when – looking in another direction altogether – I walked into the bartender.

We could have been sisters, in our jeans and sweaters and obvious affinity for sparkling jewelry. She had a small diamond stud in her nose; I remember noticing how it caught the light from the pseudo-wharf lamps with which they had infelicitously surrounded the schooner, how it glittered.

The second thing I noticed was that I was staring at her for far too long.

So: something happened there. Even now, after all this time, I can't describe what it was. Communication of some sort passed between us: a crackle of electricity, a moment of complete understanding. When her hand brushed my fingers, I could feel the current running all the way up my arm; my stomach felt hollow, excited, anticipatory.

I think I knew then, in that moment, that we would become lovers, that at some level we had already become lovers, the moment those unspoken words had passed between us. All that was left was to consummate the act itself.

It's the little things you notice. The way you're in synch with each other, right from the start. The shared memories, shared experiences, shared perceptions, shared understanding of things that don't have to be put into words.

I had spent my whole relationship with James trying to explain things that, in the end, he never understood. Perhaps never wanted to understand.

It had started to snow as we left the library, the large magical flakes that never amount to much on the ground but make the world an enchanted place as they're falling. Maybe it was the magic of the snowflakes; maybe it was the electricity I had felt when we touched each other; but it was I who moved toward her, even as her gaze traveled from my eyes to my lips, it was I who pulled her closer to me, who initiated the kiss. And the only thing that was surprising was my lack of surprise.

The first thing that happened to me, I think, was that I really loved being with another woman. I was struck by how alike we were. Exploring her body was not a voyage of discovery, after all, but rather a walk taken down long-familiar paths; the excitement was in the shared vista. That her laughter felt like my own. That I never found myself wondering what she was thinking, or where on earth a remark had come from; the pulse was my own, the avenues of thought and words and reactions the same.

The difference between those perceptions and what I was accustomed to feeling – with James, of course, and after James with the others who shared my bed and meals and thoughts – was striking. I didn't feel any different when I was with Kay; I was just me. I wasn't trying to be anybody else, and that alone was new, unusual, pleasurable, exotic.

She wore jeans that were ripped at the knees, a fisherman's sweater, black suede clogs, a black beret. She had long blonde hair and amazing violet eyes. She listened to Ferron and Mozart. She read Poe and Anita Shreve and was just finishing Mao's *Little Red Book* when we met. In the summers, she led walking tours of Provincetown; in the

winters, she bartended. Once a week she was a disc jockey for a show on WOMR, spinning plaintive Irish women's music and having conversations, as she said with a smile, about "the meaning of things."

If I had said that, I would have said it with some self-deprecation, a little irony, embarrassed by my perceptions of the importance of my work and feelings; Kay said it was though it were the most natural thing in the world.

I envied her that.

The town was transformed by our togetherness. I was suddenly sharply aware of other women as couples, holding hands, arms entwined, kissing in front of the town hall, buying wedding rings.

I was aware of myself taking something in, breathing it into myself, incorporating it into my being. And maybe that's a metaphor, too. There's another history here, a tradition of taking what one wants at the expense of others, of all else.

Here's the thing: if you approach Provincetown from the sea, what you first notice is the Pilgrim Monument, celebrating the fact that the Mayflower stopped here before going on to Plymouth. There's a museum at the monument, with paintings and dioramas that explain different parts of the area's history. I particularly like the explanation for the pilgrims' survival: they were doing poorly as the first winter was setting in, and then they "found" some corn, neatly harvested and stacked; it enabled them to get through the winter.

I don't know about you, but where I come from, that's called stealing. Their survival was directly related to unexpected hardships endured by the people who actually grew and harvested and stored that corn. And then they wondered why some of the locals were hostile.

It's an apt metaphor. The Portuguese fishermen allowed the Mashpee Wampanoag native culture to have their homes taken from them in the famous land-grabs of the seventies; the gay residents allowed the fishermen to lose their homes and move away to North Truro and beyond when Provincetown priced them out of residence; what surprise, then, that all of this was based on somebody "finding" someone else's corn?

And what surprise was there when Kay discovered that it was the place itself that had everything to do with who she was – and who we were? What was it that she felt I was trying to steal from her, that she needed to guard so jealously?

But that was later. After the first spontaneous delight in finding each other, after the notes tucked under pillows, the tea carefully brewed to perfection, a slender hand sliding up the other's thigh, feeling it quiver through the jeans... And when it happened, it had even less to do with me than I would ever have thought.

She was fascinated with my work, captivated by my harborside apartment, content to read or look out at the water while I typed, providing a sounding board when I ran out of ideas. I had a piece for the *Village Voice* coming due; she turned it around, pulled something out of it that was shining and beautiful and new. We sat on the floor and she went through my printouts, pencil in hand, a natural editor. "What are you trying to say here? No, no, that doesn't work for me..."

"But I wanted to show how strong she was..."

"Then don't keep talking about it: give an example. *Show* it."

I remember having a nightmare about James one night, and when I reached out, befuddled, I couldn't tell who it was I was reaching for, James or Kay, man or woman, hardness or softness. And it didn't really matter – I just wanted someone to be there, and whatever body I touched was a fusion of all the bodies I had ever touched in the night. Perhaps we are, all of us, haunted in our beds by those who have shared them, condemned at that most primitive of levels to a dreamtime of warm sticky remembrance that both is and isn't a real memory. Perhaps it is just a manifestation of our collective unconscious, the memory of security, the memory of the womb. Or perhaps I have no idea what I'm talking about.

"You're very perceptive, you know, Patty."

"Not always. Took me forever to realize you were flirting with me!" Giggles dissolving into touching. A melting from one way of being together into the next. I'd never experienced anything like it before. Everything fluid, natural.

We *did* things together: that's what I remember the most. Perhaps, for a time, that was what seduced me, what kept me from seeing that I was writing less and less... and, perhaps, experiencing more and more. Hiking in the dunes, the sea a line of dark blue

glimpsed over hills of sand and grass and the odd stunted coastal trees, the wind sharp and stinging in our faces. I was continually amazed by the variety of life that was managing to survive this inhospitable area: tiny colored mushrooms, bracken, berries.

Kay told me that the dunes had once been forested, the trees used up for the Pilgrims' needs; they remained sand for over two centuries after that. It was a land of undulating, ever-shifting windscares in which Eugene O'Neill lived when he withdrew from the bustle of Commercial Street to write and be inspired by the ocean, the solitude and the impermanence of the lonely shifting sands. His house is now gone, washed away in a storm, and the dunes have been carefully replanted. She pointed out where it had been, later took me to the library and showed me photographs of O'Neill, his wife, their house.

Kay gives me her knowledge of the terrain like a gift, a treasure of community memories and a visceral sense of belonging to a place, something I have never experienced. "There's nothing missing here," she says simply. "Once I came to Provincetown, I knew I never could leave again."

Kay... I should say something substantive about her, I expect; but she was form, not substance, emotion, not thought. Kay was warm breath, warm laughter, warm caresses. A sense of coming home, of being safe, of feeling right; a feeling of being intensely me when I was with her.

In her presence, cold blustery nights became tropical; gray days were illuminated. Kay needed music, there was always music around her, she hummed as she walked down the street or around the apartment, sang torch songs in the shower.

"Listen, listen, you have to hear this CD..."

Darkness came early and evenings blended together, Billie Holiday or Lena Horne singing from the stereo; a bottle of red Bordeaux on the table, half-drunk; leftover crumbs from dinner littering the checked cloth. We made love on the rug, against the kitchen counter, in the bathtub. Snow falling outside, carpeting the beach and the boats, steaming cups of hot chocolate warming our hands, the lonely cry of a gull overhead.

At the lesbian clubs we frequented on her nights off, I watched women dancing together, their jeans and khakis blending and merging, no one trying to lead, no one trying to be center stage, hands together, exploring, moving, all as gentle as the water

rippling in the harbor beyond. Passing the men's clubs, the relentless throbbing of the music sounding briefly through an opened door, pounding beat, pulsing light, all of it hard, demanding. And then the door would shut and the gentleness of the night took us and cradled us again.

We were safe. We were Patty-and-Kay. We were home.

I still sat at the bar in the evenings, but I didn't read much anymore. Now people knew my name, knew I was Kay's girlfriend. Sometimes I went back to the apartment and looked at the lights on the pier and threw myself into my work, writing about anything but the ocean, the immediacy of the moment, the feelings Kay brought out in me. I didn't think a lot. Not about us. Living the experience was enough; perhaps I already knew, then, that there would be time to reflect upon it later. All that I remember of those nights is the waiting: waiting for the bars to close, waiting to hear the downstairs door slam, waiting for her to come to me, to make love with me.

To make love with another woman is to be as fluid as the sea, blending and separating and blending again, an ongoing ballet, intricate familiar dance steps, I never knew exactly where it started and where it ended. There was no insistence, no point: the point is just being. In those hours, being together. Nothing else.

Pattern recognition, they call it in science, and I was discovering my own erotic emotional experiential version of it, my body recognizing the pattern of another. Breasts sliding against breasts, hips fitting together, hands caressing with a sure knowledge: the knowledge of another, which is the same as the knowledge of oneself. That was our pattern recognition; that was our world, the sameness we saw in each other. Our struggles, when they came, had nothing to do with power and control, nothing to do with the need to assert one opinion or option or decision over the other.

Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe, at the end of the day, *everything* has to do with power and control.

Kay lying on the bed, looking up at the cracks in her ceiling, the cracks that were coming between us, her voice husky. “It’s not about running away from the world. It’s about finding a place that’s home.”

I rolled over and faced the wall, my back to her. The shadows were shifting. “Or finding a partner who can be your home,” I said. There was a cold claw of fear scratching around inside me. I wanted her to say something, something specific, something reassuring.

She sighed and said nothing.

Was that the beginning of the end, the point at which the arc of our relationship started declining, the place – if there ever is such a place – where one can say, definitively, that it began to be over? I didn’t know, then; but, looking back, I wonder. It would be so much easier, so much *clearer*, if we knew that sort of thing. It’s only later, when we look back, that we say, Oh, yes, so that was our last meal together, or That was the last time we made love. You’re never conscious of it at the time. Maybe if you were, you’d be more careful. Maybe if you were, it would feel different.

But nothing felt different, just that slow building growing malaise that was banking inside me, coals being slowly inexorably fanned into flame. Like the first awareness of a toothache: something you can almost ignore, pretend isn’t happening, while all the time you know that the worst is yet to come.

The very worst was yet to come.

I suppose that, as conflicts go, it wasn’t the worst imaginable. We didn’t start hating each other, or taking up with someone else, or any of the other stupid petty things that separate lovers. And I knew: at some visceral level, I already knew the truth. Kay was rooted, geographically and emotionally, to a place in the world – to *her* place in the world, and that place was Provincetown. I was rootless by inclination, by choice, by logic; I needed to change backgrounds, to have movement and isolation and transformation part of who I was. It was what inspired me; it was what enabled me to write, which is to say to be who I am.

People ask you, “why did you break up?” There’s always a reason, some moment that you can point to in hindsight, some innocent oblivious thought or decision that set off

a chain of events that ends in separation. But we didn't break up because of us: it was what was between us.

It was Provincetown.

"Why don't you want to stay?" Her voice carefully-casual as she looked out the big sliding windows at the dark harbor, at the sodium-vapor lights on the pier.

"I'd love to stay." It was patently untrue: I had a stack of books in my arms as I spoke, the box standing open next to me. "You know I'd love to stay. I just can't."

"Why not?" The words were more aggressive now; she had turned from the window, was facing me, her arms crossed.

"For one thing," I said carefully, "my lease is up."

"Then move in with me!"

I sighed. How could I explain something to Kay that I barely understood myself, that a resort town in the off-season is easy, the emptiness, the loneliness all make you become more vehemently who you are. I would get lost there, I thought, come the tourist season. It would be like being with James all over again, becoming overwhelmed by too much activity, too many options.

Or maybe it was just that I couldn't write when I wasn't alone.

The point was moot anyway. All my possessions were going into storage: I had a fellowship coming up, a year in Paris. Kay knew that; Kay had known that from the start. "Come to France with me," I said, instead. There were tears pressing hard against the backs of my eyes. I didn't want to lose her.

She shrugged and turned back to the window, dashing angrily at her cheek. "I can't leave P'town."

"No," I said, my voice rising. "It's not that you can't leave, it's that you won't!"

"This is my home!"

"I thought you said I was your home!"

The words seemed to shimmer in the air between us, irrevocable, unanswerable. I bit my lip and watched her, until the words and my voice and all the emotions we were flinging around dissipated and there was nothing between us but emptiness. She couldn't be herself apart from the place, and I was beginning to think that the only way I could find myself again was to leave.

She turned slowly to face me again, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You don’t understand,” she said hollowly. “It’s me – me and this place.” A helpless gesture, her patented shrug. “I only became me when I came here. It’s – it’s one of the only places in the world where we can walk down the street holding hands. It’s the only place I’ve ever lived in, the only place I know, that accepts me for exactly who I am.” She took a deep, shuddering breath. “I don’t think that I can exist apart from it. Not – and still be me.”

I had loved Provincetown until that moment. I really had. But Kay’s words made it into a caricature, a façade. Would we not have fallen in love if we had been somewhere else, somewhere we couldn’t be as open? Was Kay in love with me – or was it, had it always been, the concept of the town that she had loved? Provincetown could give her something that I couldn’t; Provincetown would always win, no matter the contest.

Can you love a rival?

It’s raining today, the day I’m leaving: winter turning into spring. The snow is gone; soon the tourists will be coming back, the hip guys from Boston and New York City opening up their condos again for the season. Provincetown is transforming itself once more, as it does every year. And, in the meantime, something has died.

I can barely see the Pilgrim Monument rising behind us in the mist. I’m double-parked on Commercial Street, the blinking lights from my car’s flashers reflecting in Kay’s face. I close the hatchback on my last box and face her. “Funny,” she says. “It’s almost worse this way.” Her fingertips brush mine, the touch as electric as the first time, in the library. “Not hating you, I mean.”

“I know.”

She takes a long, shuddering breath and shrugs her shoulders. “Anyway...”

“I’ll write you. From Paris,” I say.

She nods. “I know.”

We both know I won’t. I look at her and wonder how deeply the place has gotten under my skin, if I’ll need to come back, if one night in a year or five years I’ll walk into the Pig and see Kay behind the bar, if we’ll be able to talk in platitudes, if it will still hurt.

Her mascara is starting to run, and I get in my car. If I look back from Route 6, I might be able to see the tower in the rain.