

END OF AUGUST

Lance Phillips

It was a Saturday, like any other Saturday. A quiet morning. God, do I love to sleep. I thought that I could spend the afternoon cleaning as usual, taking care of all my creatures and definitely get some time at the gym. My only day now to use the weights- at least try to keep in shape. I even got up earlier than usual. Maybe I could go to the tropical fish store. Try and find some small angel fish, or others that I might like. So hard now a days in New York City to find a good pet store that has what I need. So much has changed since Covid. A different city- so much is no longer there as it was before.

Sleeping has always been a prominent feature of my weekends since I started back to working full time. There were so many months spent keeping away from everyone during the “Plague” of 2020. Afraid, alone, listening to the news. Deaths, mounting bodies that fill a refrigerated truck, like stacks of wooden beams, ready for the fire. So close to me- yet over there. Not a part of me. Make-shift hospitals in Central Park. I was disconnected- all was distant from me being quite removed, high above inside my ivory tower of brick.

I had learned to be alone. Happy alone. So many years spent just working, writing, taking care of my critters, being content to be safe and alive- and healthy. Close the door, *ahhh...* I made it home. Leaving New York out there. As Garbo said, “I want to be alone.”

I had been without any intimate contact for three years now. Sex with strangers must have gone way underground in the city. Besides, I had accepted the fact that I could not perform as I once did. I don't mean on a stage. I gracefully accepted this as part of getting older. It had kept me safe- away from danger, staying at home where I love to be. No one to share myself with, no one to make me sick or disturb my things. No explanations needed, no special meds to use, silence. And why should I use special medication for this when there is no one to impress?

My novel has become my escape from reality. Re-writing again and again until I had it right. I would find myself lost in the characters. I really felt that I was part of their world. Everything about it has captured the essence of my former life. My loves, my hopes and dreams of one day being a famous singer. But my former career did not happen that way. I found that after so many years, I just wanted to feel content in a home of my own. Giving up what I had worked for so persistently and for so very long. Suddenly, it was over. This was why I came to New York City in the first place.

I had given up gladly the thought of being in love again as well- of finding any man that would dare want to spend time with me. Now at sixty-five, there are so few choices available, so few options especially in New York City when you are older. God, just get me through my birthday. But I am no slouch. No bag of potatoes. Most people think that I am much younger than I am. Youth is a state of mind- and good skin products.

I found peace and contentment in being safe and secure with my best friend, my Beauregard. The best dog anyone could ever wish for. And my J.J. A bastard of a blue-jay I rescued from the street. And when I would come home after work, I really felt at peace with myself. Besides, I could never ever trust another man, as I had in the past. My sixteen years in Santa Monica had ruined me to think that love might come again. That I could be attractive to anyone. And finding out about the betrayal that had lasted for years behind my back (and in my bed) only added more strength to my writing. I had spent so many years in NYC with only casual, superficial contacts. A means to an end- no names,

five minutes please. But once again, Covid put an end to that.

And so I had become a solo act. For decades I had been free from any constraints- no one to answer to. No one to make any demands of me. No tears to shed, no heart left to break. It had been torn and shredded years ago, leaving an empty space. Far from any one disturbing the quiet of this grave inside of me.

Saturday, sweet unaffected Saturday. I took Boo out for his walk earlier than usual, since Fridays were spent shopping, sushi then hours on the couch. Laptop, writing- quiet. Go to bed early.

Walking on my beloved boulevard I had for some reason notice a tall man across the street. Unusually tall I thought, and by the way he was moving and turning, it seemed like he was walking a dog as well. So thin, or should I say lean. A stranger to the neighborhood, the bright summer sun shining on his head of wavy black hair. No notice other than a casual glance. Boo and I kept walking. For some reason, maybe fate- maybe chance this same young man was at the entrance to my building when I returned, with an older chihuahua that I know, a neighbor's dog with only one eye. What was he doing with this young, tall and approachable young man? There they were, under the scaffolding of my building, as if they were waiting for someone.

“Hi”, I said. “What's up? Anything I can help you with?”

“I am not sure,” the young man answered. “Trigger just came to this building, and I don't know what for.”

“Trigger? I had always called him 'Popeye.' Do you know someone here?” I said.

“No. I am dog-sitting for my cousins who live up the block. Trigger pulled me up the walkway here. I guess he thought he was expecting someone- or was looking for a treat from the doorman.”

“Yeah, all the doormen have treats, some better than others.” I wasn't sure, but when we locked eyes, it was if I already knew him. Such a feeling of familiarity. That this was not the first time we had met.

We introduced ourselves and shook hands. Even in the touch of his hand I felt an assured strength, a calm in the safe harbor of his brown eyes. He continued to look at me longer than what strangers should. But more, what I was sensing was this shining man was not average, not the everyday kinda guy that you just smile at and continue on your way. Much more behind that youthful face. A presence and knowledge that I was just now discovering.

I told him that I was an author and had finished my first novel that took me eighteen years to complete. He actually seemed interested in the story I had created. His voice was so rich and his words seemed so different from anyone I knew. But still, he was rather odd to look at. Shabby hair, very tall and lean, Asian eyes- but with much more mixed in there. Mysterious- yet almost geeky to a degree. Actually, kind of like a present day hippie. Definitely nothing fancy or special in his manner or in the way he dressed. But passionate in his attitude, warm and affectionate in everything about him. So unique as well and alarmingly handsome.

“If you would like, you could come over later tonight and we could talk some more- about my book. I'll be home all night.”

“Yeah, that would be nice,” he answered, our eyes still locked on to each other. “Trigger used to be my dog- at my family's home in Aurora... in Colorado. But my Dad didn't want him anymore, so my cousins took him in who are on vacation. Since I live here now, they asked me to come over and take care of him.” He lived in Brooklyn he said, almost another state away from Manhattan. This far uptown was almost the suburbs, for Hudson Heights is full of trees and greenery- and quiet. A far cry I am sure from the streets of a Brooklyn apartment (no snobbery intended.)

I thought of him on the subway to the tropical fish store near where I work - mid-town. But I could not remember his name! Damn, that is so stupid. I ran over so many names until something clicked in my brain. I remembered thinking of leaving him my business card on my door with his name on the back. The letters shouted out to me “P e t e r.” Such a beautiful and simple name. I should not read

into it, I told myself. Be cool, don't push things. Chances are he won't even remember our conversation earlier and totally forget about coming over later tonight.

Saturday night, blessed free night. Feeling stronger from the gym, a few of my cocktails already making me better than before. I thought I would make raviolis and salad tonight, something simple that I can whip up. Then get the laundry started. Same routine every week.

I started getting everything ready, and then the doorbell rang or in this case, buzzed. No time to think of who it could be, I opened the door and there he was- with Trigger at his side. I was surprised to say the least, and he brought cookies as a gift. Can you believe that in eighteen years of living here, this is the first time anyone had brought me something to my door. Peter came in, and I immediately went to kiss him, I was so moved by the idea of his gift. It really touched me.

“Whoa, not so fast. We'll kiss only like friends.” So, it was quickly on both cheeks. He smelled like pastries- sweet and vanilla. Later I realized that the cookies had already been opened, bringing me the rest. But I don't mind at all. His sweet scent only made him more intriguing.

We talked about the book, my novel that is quite complicated to explain since there are many characters and sub-plots that eventually merge into each other. I didn't plan it that way, but through the course of almost twenty years, it took on a life of its own. He seemed fascinated. I asked if he had dinner and he said not much, just some Humus. So, we sat down finally and ate, letting him talk. Of course I should have been prepared for the “G” word- girlfriend to pop out of his mouth, and the fact that he was twenty-two. Already two warning flags and the evening had just begun. I showed him the idea I had for the cover of my novel on my laptop, and he proceeded to tell me I needed a new updated computer, “only \$1,200.00.” Then when he sat down to eat with me on the couch, he said that my television set was so “2002.” As if I would really care to know that it was “retro” or outdated. Both items work just fine- for me.

“Dude, we have to have some rules here.” But there were none stated. I am sure that he meant that “I am not gay,” which is fine. I did not touch him sexually, so I wasn't worried. We sat after eating and he told me more about himself. Parsons College, computer graphics-design, his interest in Tarot cards. He even drew his own kind of Tarot cards, somewhat abstract, but quite fascinating. Yet throughout the two hours or more he was here, we easily touched and looked deep into each others eyes. More powerful than I had experienced in a very long time. He and I were quite similar in many ways, and felt that we were meant to meet. *I know you, we have met before. Another time, another place perhaps.*

Suddenly, it was time for him to leave. I realized later it was because he had to call his girlfriend before midnight, just so she would know he was at home. We walked up the street with our dogs, in the warm quiet of a Saturday night above the Hudson River. The Linden trees offered places of complete darkness. I turned to him near one of the many trees lining the street, and we hugged. So strongly, so united- I felt that I could be this way forever. Just holding each other- almost as one. Amazing, but I had never hugged anyone taller than me. I whispered to him, “I will never hurt you.” I am not sure what I meant by that, but it came out with no effort. Maybe that I would never lie to him, cause him pain, or expose him to anything ill. I let him go. As he walked to his building, we waved goodbye and I turned to leave. *What was I thinking? What was I feeling? Don't you realize you are playing with fire? And you are going to get burned?* But I didn't care. I was willing from just knowing this man for one day that I would put myself out there, willing to be open for the chance to feel love again. Maybe in some other world we could be together. Two strangers in this strange world. We were both dreamer, willing to act foolish, willing to be at risk with expressing ourselves. These are the things that seemed to bond us so suddenly. We never had any of the cookies he brought over. And I couldn't stop thinking about him.

Sunday brought me back to work once again. I left my business card for him on my door with his name on it. It said, “Peter, keep it touch.” It was brief, no dewy sentiment. Sunday came and went without any word from him.

Monday I came home and the card was gone. He left in its place a drawing of his, so very much like the Tarot cards he made. It was two computers on long stands, one bending into the other. Almost as if they were holding, caressing each other. I treasured that drawing. At the time it seemed to mean so much to me. Peter had left two e-mails as well, saying that he would be out in the gardens of our complex tonight, asking me to join him there. But these were written at 10:30 pm. I was still at work. When I got home, I answered these e-mails, saying so. But he had already turned in for the night. What could he want of me at night, in the dark? To stare at the sky, the stars shining above? The gardens look out over the Hudson River, across to the palisade of New Jersey. The George Washington Bridge to the left connects both sides, New York and Jersey. So picturesque, so romantic, so dark. What would he want of me... in the black of night? I didn't know what to think of this. I turned in late as usual- five am. heading for bed.

There are certain moments in my life that I will always remember: Meeting my first lover, the death of my mother, leaving my hometown. Performing "La Cage" for the first time. The beginning of my long relationship with Jerry G, and how much I will always, always cherish my life with Rob. All of the good times we shared.

Another of those moments is when Peter came to my door at 6 am on a Tuesday morning. I was almost falling asleep, the sun was barely rising and there was a buzz at my door. Who the hell would be coming over to see me at 6 am? Only one person sprang to mind. I staggered to the door, already knowing who it would be, and there he was- with Trigger in tow once again. "What are you doing here at 6 in the morning?" I asked of him. "To see you," he said, as if there was nothing in the world wrong with being at my door at the crack of dawn, as if I had nothing better to do than to sleep. I asked him how he got into the building. He said he had a key. I didn't question him anymore. I was so vulnerable in the pale light of morning. I swept my arms around his neck and pulled him into me. "You can't deny there is something here, something real between us, Peter." I asked him to lie with me. No answer but "yes" would be accepted. He took off his shoes, fell into bed with me- plus Trigger and we held each other. Was I seducing him with my words? Did he really feel anything or was I making him respond to me- because he thought he should? I wasn't going to rape him, or touch him intimately and I said so. Yet it was one of the most beautiful hours that I have ever spent- just holding each other, touching him, kissing his neck. The subtle taste of body cream crept on my tongue. Perfumed kisses I gave him, touching him, stroking him down to the small of his back, touching lower than I should. Everything was black and gray in the soft light of early morning. It was like something out of a Merchant/ Ivory film. I could have died right there, and would have died happy. "If I had changed a single day- that went amiss or went astray. I may have never found my way to you... I wouldn't change a thing that happened- on my way to you." To this day, I expect a buzz at my door at any time.

Eventually he left. We made plans for him to come back later at three to have lunch with me. I tried to fall asleep again, but wondered... did that really just happen? Why... why did he come to my door at 6 am? Was he just an early-riser, or is he crazy? Should I read anything into this? Should I just be glad that he was here with me and say that that was enough?

Monday, yes Monday was already here and I got up feeling much too tired to still face another day. By 3pm I was already expecting Peter to make it over for lunch, but 3:15 came and went, and no Peter. I hooked up Beauregard to his leash and headed out the door. My time is very limited when I am on a schedule, and every minute counts. Heading out the door and going through the basement, we arrived on the boulevard, heading up to meet Peter, or at least to see if he was anywhere in sight. There he was, with Trigger. Playing his miniature recorder- a random song of notes to match his nonchalant attitude. Like some 21st century Pan, entrancing the woodland creatures with his magic. He seemed to not even notice that it was much later than we planned, but still I escorted him back for lunch. He told me that he had found a great place on the roof to smoke some pot and see the skyline along the river, all

the way down the length of Manhattan. The view from any of the roofs here is stunning, something I never take enough advantage of myself. The location of our complex is right above the Hudson River, so the views from anywhere are spectacular. Especially if you are high.

He relished my Breakfast Burritos, and doctored them up with whatever spices I had: Cajun, Cayenne Pepper, Seasoning Salt and Lemon Pepper. He was almost orgasmic, as he said, about what I fixed for him. Seldom do get such rave reviews.

I wanted to read to him a poem that I was including in my novel. I am not going to explain the synopsis of my epic now, but let's just say that it is a romantic and historic novel never seen before. The poem, written by the hero of my story goes like this...

*“ I am like the endless stretch of lonely sand- ever reaching beyond the limits of my eye.
Forever changing- I am neither land nor sea. Yet there- unseen. Infinite.
Cast over me once more the tide of your presence, return to me unrefined. For I am as vacant at that
minuscule emptiness- longing to be fulfilled again and again by your tempest surge. Come to me-
wash over this endless sameness, this numbness, this sleep. Arise Morpheus, let me Dream of
Heaven no more. Make me one with him again. Never to leave, never to be finished, never to be one
without the other.”*

Peter actually “swooned” to my poetry. (No added drama intended.) I was rather taken with his reaction myself and told him that if one wanted to write anything of merit, they should only sit down with their thoughts, feelings and a lap-top when they are at least forty years old. Of course, later that night he sent me a poem, emulating a feeling of maturity, but lacking substance. I would never say that to his face, for I would want him to grow into a better writer, unhindered by my words. I certainly would never curb his experimenting with the written word, and where his imagination might take him.

It seemed like a day of so many highs. Maybe he was high as well, but it didn't matter. We made plans to see each other Wednesday, since that would be his last day here before heading back to Brooklyn with Trigger for another week. I had to get out the door by five pm to get to work. He left in time with a big hug, our arms wrapping around each other in a strong embrace. Real or imagined, I still was not sure. Would the time left mean anything? Would “see you later,” turn into “goodbye?”

I let Wednesday happen as it will. I did not go searching for Peter, nor did I worry if he would come over this last day or not. I had made Munster grill cheese sandwiches with roast beef (no pastrami at the deli.) He finally showed up later and he brought his home-made Tarot cards. Peter seemed occupied by the Tower card- something about destruction or perhaps renewal. I guess it is all how you want to look at it. He ate with me, and laid out his cards. One card seemed like a man in a robe, reaching out with his right arm- a very non-specific drawings. Another seemed to be wearing a halo over its head, not sure. Another card seemed to represent soldiers in a line, with a commander in the center. He brought his Tablet computer and his red folder as he had before. Peter decided to record this session between the two of us, since he found my impressions and commentary intriguing. It was another amazing hour we spent together. There never, ever seemed to be enough time for us. We always spoke freely, and everything out of his mouth was so fresh and unique, I couldn't get enough of him. I mean that truly. The most amazing young man I have ever met. Once again it was approaching time for me to go to work. I tried not to seem concerned that we would not see each other again, and he said that he could come by next Tuesday, when he brings Trigger the one-eyed chihuahua back here to his cousins apartment- just up the boulevard.

Something clicked in him. I am not sure what prompted him but he gave me this long, Hollywood kiss on the mouth. No full lips- no tongue, no saliva of course. But our mouths held each other close for almost eight seconds. Closed mouths. God, was I surprised. I ran my hands under his shirt. I felt his soft and tender nipples with my thumbs, the tight eight-pack of his lean stomach. Then, for no reason he blurted out, “I love you.” Of course I answered, “I love you, too.” It was the first time that I

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could remember someone saying this before I did. Was this a love-affair of the mind? That he loved how I thought and what I could put on paper, while I felt the same about him? For what he put into sentences, his staggering imagination and original thinking? The boundaries of sexuality and age, of minds and imagination seemed to mix and become blurred to me. All I really wanted from him was a sense of reality- that I was not seeing this whole affair as a mirage. I knew he had been with another man before. But I could never compete with a “girlfriend”. The most dangerous word besides “wife” to a gay man. Peter would return to his other world soon, but then... where would we be? Was I merely a diversion? A ridiculous fantasy?

Saturday, bloody Saturday. I should have known that things would come to a bitter end when on Saturday I fell off of a step-ladder, trying to clean my ceiling off Beauregard's ear splashes. An infected ear of his has liquid that he shakes off, and ends up on my walls and ceiling. Stepping up without proper balance, I fell back and hit my head, breaking a table and cracking my scalp on a marble slab. So stupid. I tried to pull myself together, stop the bleeding and act as if it would all be fixable. That all would be fine. But little did I know that this fall would be so prophetic. It was the Tower card once again.

I suffered the six days apart, after being close to each other for the past week. I left him alone those six days, no e-mailing whatsoever. I had to go in early this Tuesday to work because of new additions and changes to the menu. By the time Peter showed up at 3:06 pm, we had only twenty minutes left to speak. I had made his chicken wrap with veggies and sauce ahead of schedule, knowing our time would be limited.

I could have died when I opened up the front door. There he was. His wild hair tamed, his polo shirt properly wrinkled, and his eyes empty of me. He had all those days apart to forget about me, to leave whatever we had behind... here. Only for me to step over every time I went out on to the street. His eyes were slits, as if he wanted to leave me out of his life. That anything we had here in my apartment was just for fun- a fantasy. He had already moved on, without me even being aware. I did not question him. I said, “I can see it in your eyes, Peter. I am not there anymore. Really, you don't have to explain.” I was even planning on telling Peter all about my health- my HIV status. But that moment never came to pass. He had already made up his mind. There was nothing here for him that he wanted.

I could not get out of there any faster. I wanted him gone. “Be on your way. I'll learn to let you go. Someday I'll forget you- forget us. It is so easy for you to go “home” to your girlfriend and forget. But I have to face every place we walked, everything I shared with you every day, every night of my life. Go, be on your way.” Of course I did not say this to him. I was in shock and in too much pain to utter a sound.

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Look, I made a lot of mistakes when I was 22. God knows. Too many more than I would like to admit. At 22 you think you are an adult. Living an adult life, but you are not. You haven't tasted life enough. So sweet it may seem., the bitter you realize sometime later. You stumble, you fall and trample over people you didn't mean to. Maybe I am still paying the price for the mistakes that I made when I was 22. Maybe my life at this point is still not free of the debt I still owe someone from my past. But will it ever be enough? I wonder... Will I ever stop playing the fool? Go now- face the facts- go back to being alone.

I pray all the time to let Peter go. I lift this pain up to heaven and ask, “ Please Lord, take this from me. I don't want to carry it anymore.” Time is the other way to be free. But time only numbs the pain. We'll see... But part of me- the smallest, tiniest bit of me hopes through my tears I hear that buzz at my front door again.

Now, if I could only get rid of this pain in my gut.

