

Homicide: The Game

Presents

Painseeker

"At First Sight"

by Lance Wagner

Love at first sight. The phrase is so old the meaning was drained dry before we were even born. But it exists. I experienced it once and it was the most beautiful and unfortunate thing I have ever lived through. Unfortunate because when it's taken away from you, there's nothing which is able to replace the gaping hole it leaves in your life.

I pour three tequilas in me and I pour one story out. Rekindle Raychel in my mind. Alive, this time.

August 16, 1997. That was the day I looked at the crowd and saw only her.

I was onstage at Safehaven at the time. I was reading a couple of short stories to the crowd to lukewarm interest. That was understandable, but not because my work was sub-par. It's just what happens when you have an audience full of performers. Most of the people were really there to show themselves off, so there was usually little interest given to you when you were actually applying your trade on the audience. But to a performer, a crowd is a crowd, and attention is anticipated even if not truly expected. So when I glossed over an ironic line in one of my works, I was surprised to actually hear a single gunshot snort of laughter from the audience. Momentarily thrown from my reading, I looked up.

Raychel was sitting in a corner booth alone. Why I had no idea. Her long blonde hair washed back over her tilted head, dropping away over her shoulder. A wry smile played across her face, but her downcast eyes gave no betrayal of the thought driving her smile. Pen in her hand, she was writing in a small notebook. But the shadows were what really made the moment. They swirled about her, cascading and retreating.

Teasing me with tantalizing hints of the woman within the darkness. The shadows tried to hide the secret. But I knew it. And I was blissfully frozen in that moment.

The rest of the room, however, was not. A moment stretched into awkward pause which eventually gave way to an uncomfortable silence. The thaw in the moment came along some time after that and I regained my composure and finally – after a few false starts – returned to my rambling in short fiction.

Once my ship of composure was righted, I ran through the rest of the story frenetically. I looked up as often as possible, trying to keep an eye on Raychel. I didn't want her to leave before I had the chance to finish my story and talk to her. I watched Laura slide into Raychel's booth, and strike up a conversation. I couldn't have been happier, as Laura has the gift of extended gab. They exchanged words as if they had known each other for ages, and I grew jealous. Why hadn't Laura told me about her?

Finally, a few minutes later – an eternity in my time – I finished. Unfortunately, my work was inconveniently received and a number of my writing friends prevented me from rushing to Raychel. I was held up, stopped, and pulled aside by almost every one of my friends who were only too willing to pronounce my story one of their favorites of mine (which in retrospect was probably damning with faint praise). By the time I made it through the gauntlet to the corner booth, she was gone. Laura was sitting alone in the booth.

I pumped Laura for information about Raychel. I learned her name, that she was a poet, and would be coming back the following week to read from her own work. At the time, nothing seemed to satisfy, not even the knowledge that she would return the following week. Laura claimed that she had never talked to her before but had seen her around. I found her statement doubtful, as Laura talks extensively to everyone, anyone who might recognize her painting as the work of a true artist. Regardless, I was without Raychel, and, for the first time, I felt diminished for that knowledge. As trite as it sounds I knew I had found my Muse. Someone to drive me to greater heights of artistic expression.

The following week passed painfully. For the first time in years, I was stagnated in my attempts at writing. I would start work on a story, get a paragraph or two in, and drop into a haze for hours thinking of Raychel, and how I would approach her, introduce myself, and let the flames of passion wash us away. I planned my approach in staggering detail.

That plan was immediately thrown screaming into the fire, as Raychel arrived early and was already reading from her poetry before I arrived.

Raychel read her poetry for over an hour. During that time, she introduced herself intimately to everyone. Who she was, where she came from, where she had been; all in graphic, enraged, visceral detail. Her poetry was an autobiography, and everyone in the room listened intently, horrified and moved. No secret seemed sacred from her poetry. She was totally free.

When she finally finished, the room fell silent. I looked around and saw nothing but shocked faces looking back. It was as if a bomb had gone off. The explosion hit a moment later, as the room erupted in wild applause.

I got up, intending to go straight to her and welcome her into The Bleeders. However, it seemed everyone else had the same mind, as we all swarmed about her. I cut through the crowd as best I could, but I couldn't get close to her. By the time I got to where she was standing, she was gone. Not only from the spot, but from Safehaven. Laura noticed me looking around and laughed right at me. She said that she had spoken to Raychel about me, and that she did want to meet me, but she had an appointment that she had to keep this week. Laura said that Raychel would talk to me the next week.

The next week between meetings passed more painfully than the first. My one solace was that she had left Laura to speak to me. I tried to divine an intention from her message. Did she feel the same, or was I being put off? I reached peaks of emotion and fell from them as quickly as contradicting opinions crashed dramatically through my mind.

At the next week's Bleeders meeting, I found her immediately. Sitting alongside Laura in the same corner as I had seen her two weeks before, I knew immediately that something was different about her.

Laura stayed just long enough to officially introduce us to one another, excusing herself to introduce another artist onstage. As soon as she was gone, I tried to engage her with a few observations about her work from the previous week, but she wouldn't talk about it. She wouldn't talk about much, actually. Honestly, she was caustic, spiteful, and inattentive – constantly shooting down any hint of romantic interest from me. My mind gave credence to all the dark thoughts from the previous week. She was suffering my attentions only insomuch as she could ensure that I would never come back. After a half hour or so of aborted conversations, I attempted to get out of the booth, and muttered a half-hearted apology for taking her time.

That was when she turned. She reached out across the table and asked me not to go. She didn't want to be alone. I hesitated, unsure that she wasn't just being apologetic after all the rejection she had just handed out. But as I looked into her eyes, I understood that she was telling the truth. If only for the moment. Before I could respond, she asked me to take her home. I hesitated, and then realized the futility of that and immediately acquiesced. Maybe it isn't the greatest love story ever dreamed, but when two people admit they need each other, without regrets or reservations, it's love nevertheless.

What passed in the following hours is best left to describing as the beginning of our relationship. But it was during that time that she confirmed all of my thoughts about her from her poetry. She was fierce, almost masculine.

Afterwards, I went to hold her, but she would have none of it. The trappings of love seemed to matter little to her. She just rolled over and ignored me after the first night that we made love. That was something ingrained deeply in Raychel – almost poetic in itself. I couldn't hold her. That was the price of being with someone who is by nature totally free. No matter how much I wanted to keep her with me, no matter

how I tried, she had to be able to run at a moment's notice. Things like marriage don't matter when you're that free.

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I didn't mean to write that. I don't like that it sits there. I wish I could select that text and delete it, but I can't. Because it's true. No matter how I might want to change it, that line will always be written there for me. I don't plan to revisit this section, or edit it. I'll just keep moving on. And maybe that's how I should deal with my loss of Raychel.

But the truth cannot be outrun or escaped, it must be survived.

Maybe I have unfinished business with my relationship with Raychel. Maybe I will find whatever that was in the pages I will write in the future. Maybe I will find it in something someone else writes. Regardless, I cannot let her go so easily.

Love at first sight happens quickly, but it never dies!