

Judith Goode

Last Love

Many men had come and gone in Samantha's life, as husbands, lovers, and the occasional one-night stand. She thought, at sixty-three, that she was done. She had friends and family, and a profession that satisfied her. She had her health – except for the depressions that, like the men, came and went, and which had been with her so long they were not worth the trouble of medication, therapy, or whatever was available to her in 2016. And she was busy because it was a presidential election year and she volunteered at her local Democratic party headquarters. The days and evenings were filled.

Consequently, she hardly noticed a man named Tom when he floated across her radar, first in a dream and later in the flesh. That often happened to Samantha: she dreamed about someone before she met him. Or so it seemed. Since she was not a mystical type, she assumed in these cases that she had met the man in some familiar setting that she had forgotten – on a bus, at a party, at her office By her time of life, so many people had come through her consciousness that it seemed a reasonable assumption.

This Tom spoke to her as if he knew her: "Hi, how are you, it's good to see you again." He reminded her that his name was Tom, and he called her by her name, Samantha. They were at the gym, where Samantha worked out early every morning. To be polite, she greeted him and was about to turn back to her workout when he asked her if she would meet him for coffee later that morning. She was so surprised she said yes.

They met at Bread Alone in Woodstock and sat at a table for two by the window. Tom pushed her chair in when she sat down. Together, they looked like an attractive older couple. Samantha's long, reddish hair was flecked with gray. She was still relatively slender with a long waist. Tom looked like an aging Rob Lowe, with perfect features, a lot of gray hair, and a pencil mustache.

They didn't talk about themselves – husbands, wives, children, divorce – as much as the horror of a Trump presidency. Both were voting for Hillary because she was strong, brilliant, and politically savvy. They agreed that she had her detractors, who brought up Benghazi and the private email. Still, they stood by her. Already they had a bond.

Their coffee date lasted until noon, then went on to one and two. They got up and ordered sandwiches from the menu written on a large chalk board behind the counter. Then they took their seats again, and again Tom pushed in her chair for her. They continued their conversation about the election. Politically, Samantha was left of center – in fact, Samantha called herself a Socialist, even though she voted a straight Democratic ticket. Tom was closer to center.

It didn't matter to Samantha because this was just a friendly get-together between like-minded people on a Sunday in May. She left him at the door of Bread Alone and drove to the Democratic party headquarters in Kingston.

But Tom kept turning up. He would be sitting on the stairs to her house when she got home from work, for example, and she would invite him up for a drink so as not to be inhospitable. Then they would end up watching the PBS news on TV and discussing, down to the last detail, the commentary on the presidential candidates. Both feared a Trump nomination and a Sanders nomination because Sanders couldn't hope to beat Trump in a general election. Otherwise, with her Socialist leanings, Samantha would have chosen him over Hillary.

On one of those evenings, during a public service identification, Tom leaned over on the sofa and took her face in his hands. Samantha thought he was going to kiss her but, instead, he just studied her face for a minute and let it go.

When it did happen, sex was fast and incendiary. For a middle-aged man, Tom was surprisingly virile. The whole event was surprising to Samantha but not unwelcome. Over the months they had known each other, she had been warming up to Tom. It was hard not to, considering that he looked like a TV actor in "The West Wing" who was just a little past his prime.

Now they were officially a couple, and Samantha was unexpectedly happy about it. She was beginning to have feelings for Tom, and he obviously had feelings for her. As time went on, those feelings deepened on both sides. They were in love.

Samantha's depressions faded and her mood was upbeat. Work – she was a social worker – continued to be satisfying. Her clients were typically disadvantaged and she felt she could make a difference in their lives. She also gained satisfaction from working with Hillary's campaign. She enjoyed the blooms and scents of spring.

She and Tom sat out on her patio on a starry night. Looking up, often as a shooting star streamed across the sky, was magical. Samantha couldn't remember when her life had been so rich. Aging, she thought, despite its indignities, was better than she had ever dreamed it would be. Especially when Tom moved into her house

with her and there were no midnight partings and the inevitable pang of sadness when the door closed behind him.

Tom was a fine arts painter who had had modest success in group shows in the city. He also taught fine art at Bard College across the river. He maintained his studio in Woodstock but rented out his house.

It was a mild day in November and the election was over. For the first time in U.S. history, there was a female president. The atmosphere around Samantha was heady. The post-election party in the city had been mobbed with ecstatic campaign workers and Clinton staff. It was the dawn of a new era. Samantha came home that evening and stood, shocked, in the doorway. There were five neatly taped up cartons on the living room floor and she could hear Tom in the bedroom.

“Tom – what’s going on?” she said, going through the living room and into the bedroom without taking off her coat. “What’re you doing?”

He looked up from the stacks of shirts and underwear on the bed. “Well,” he said, “well, Samantha, it’s time for me to move on ... it’s over.”

“What’re you saying, Tom, I don’t understand –“

“—It’s what I said. It’s time for me to move on.”

“... I can’t believe this is happening – what d’you mean, ‘move on’ – we’ve been happy together! What d’you mean, it’s over?”

“Exactly that,” he said. “We’ve been happy and now it’s over –“

“—But why –“

“—Because it’s over. We’re happy now but we won’t be. I know ... you’re not the first woman I’ve been in a relationship with, Samantha –“

“—And is this what you did to those other women – leave them when you’re both happy?”

“That’s right.”

“Tom!” She pressed herself against him. “We love each other ...”

“... That’s the point. We leave each other *while* we still love each other, not when it’s over ...”

He had filled another box while they were talking and now he taped it up neatly. Tom did everything neatly.

“... You’re crazy!” She screamed and left the room. In the bathroom, she locked the door and sat on the closed toilet seat for a while, crying. Then she ran a hot bath and got in, still crying. She soaked, adding more hot water as the water in the tub cooled. Soon she was drowsy and fell asleep with her head against the side of

the tub. When she woke up, the water in the tub was cold, and she was chilled. She got out and wrapped herself in her white terrycloth robe.

She opened the door of the bathroom and looked into the bedroom. It was empty. The stacks of clothes were gone from the bed and the comforter was smoothed out. In the living room, the boxes were gone. The furniture and rugs were neatly in place. On the hall table was a piece of paper. Only two words were written on it: "Thank you."

Samantha called in sick the next day, Thursday, and took Friday off, too. She slept most of both days, a heavy, sweaty sleep that left her exhausted. Friday night she opened a can of soup. It was the first food she'd eaten in two days. She called her friends but found she couldn't talk more than to say, "Tom left me."

Friends came over and brought her food. It was as though someone had died. By Monday, she was back at work and still mostly silent. Her friends and the people she worked with soon stopped questioning and let her keep her silence. She was like a shadow moving through the rooms of her house and her office.

The thought of Tom was compounded by the memories of the other men she'd loved. She was grieving not only for Tom but for the loss of the others. *Loss* became an obsession. She could think of nothing else. Small things, memories of small things haunted her: standing with Tom at the upstairs bathroom window, through which they viewed a darkening azure sky and the bright crescent of the new moon rising from the horizon. Or, later, a sky so filled with stars that was lit up as if billions of lights were shining against the now deep blue of the sky. On summer evenings, sitting with Tom at a table in the garden eating dinner while the breeze ruffled the edges of the tablecloth – a hot breeze on a hot night.

When she thought of those moments now, in November, she felt that her mind was pasted over with grayness; she saw no color. The furniture in her house looked gray and worn. Even her grandmother's patchwork quilt on the bed looked drab. Her depression was so profound it took a supreme effort to get up out of bed, shower, and dress in the morning. Eating was a chore and she skipped meals. She was losing weight. The skin on her arms sagged. Her face was thin.

Friends said she should see a therapist, take anti-depressants. She didn't have the energy to do more than get to work every day and visit her clients in their homes. No matter how disadvantaged these people were, their lives seemed enviable to Samantha's. On weekend mornings, she didn't even get out of bed. Her sister's invitation to Thanksgiving dinner went unanswered.

On Thanksgiving Day, she stayed in bed, sleeping on and off. When she slept, she dreamed about Tom. She dreamt that he was beside her in the bed, or that they were out walking, or that they were holding hands at the movies. She remembered the scent of his skin, the Yardley English Lavender shaving crème he used. Her days were desolate, her nights fitful.

She hated waking from a dream in which they were together, and lying awake at three a.m., unable to sleep. She would get up and sit at the kitchen table, thinking of nothing, not noticing when the pink light of dawn showed on the horizon.

Christmas came and Samantha neglected to buy presents for her grandchildren, her nieces and nephews. She ignored her sister's invitation to spend Christmas Day with them. She did not return calls from her friends and family. Basically, she was not living but just existing. She did, however, make an appointment with her doctor and requested a prescription for sleeping pills. This she filled immediately at her pharmacy.

It was Sunday. The month was January. A dusting of snow was on the ground and icicles hung from the eaves of the house. The bare branches of the trees looked like white lace because of the frost. Samantha put her down jacket and sat in the garden. Her fingers and toes were numb, and still she sat. Finally, she took from her pocket the vial of sleeping pills and raised it to her lips. She tipped it up so the pills poured into her mouth and down her throat. She swallowed water from the glass she had brought with her to the garden. Then she leaned back in her chair and folded her hands in her lap. Soon, her eyes closed. Then, nothingness.

Friends, who regularly checked up on her, found her the next evening, dead from the sleeping pills and hypothermia.

Gay Life

Margot and Josh had been close friends at college and after in New York City. They liked walking by the Hudson in Riverside Park. They were both fiction writers and had the same advisor at college, also a fiction writer who made a name for himself with a novel about the generations of a family in Texas, where he grew up.

Joshua Cohen was Jewish and lived in Brewster, New York. He moved into the city after college. He and Margot were not romantically involved, just very dear friends. They tried sex once and it didn't work: he couldn't keep an erection and she couldn't come. But they always had a lot to talk about and remained close through the various stages of their lives.

Josh was a little heavy with a high forehead and a wonderful laugh. When Margot moved out to Colorado they wrote letters. Their correspondence continued for years. Josh wrote commercial fiction and had novels published by the mainstream press. Margot wrote literary fiction and didn't get published by literary magazines and presses until later in life. She was also Jewish.

When Josh moved to San Francisco he came out as gay. Margot had always suspected he might be, which was probably why their attempt at sex failed. He didn't settle down with one man but played the field—or “cruised,” as he put it. This was in the 1980s.

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Margot's marriage went bad and she divorced her husband. She had two children and stayed in the house in Boulder. She had a career as a technical editor, which didn't leave much time for writing. Plus the children needed her when she picked them up from daycare and took them home. She wrote all this in her letters to Josh.

He was happy with his gay life. He had good friends—also gay—but never stayed with one man. He liked variety, he wrote to Margot. Then the scourge of AIDS hit. Josh was busy helping people die, he wrote. Soon he found out that he was HIV positive. Margot worried. Her single life was hard—work, children, boyfriends, women's rights. She had a devoted housekeeper but she did her own cooking because she preferred it that way, she wrote to Josh.

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Margot had visited Josh several years earlier when she stayed with her best friend, who also lived in San Francisco. Margot and Josh spent the day together and had lunch with a good-looking friend and ex-lover of Josh's. It seemed to Margot that all the men in San Francisco were gay. Her friend told her that wasn't so but she was spending time with gay men so she had that impression.

It was a great visit. Even though he was HIV positive, Josh looked and sounded well. Margot stopped worrying. Josh told her that men who were HIV positive could live for years. Josh showed her all around San Francisco and she was satisfied that he had made a good home there. His apartment on Cilipper Street was charming and in a nice neighborhood.

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Margot was working on a short story and the children were asleep. She got a call from Will, the friend of Josh's they'd had lunch with.

"Margot," Will said. "I have sad news for you."

"Tell me."

"Josh died from AIDS this morning. His sister came from the East Coast and was with him when he died."

"... Oh...thank you for calling me, Will."

Margot hung up. She stayed awake most of the night and called in sick the next day.

A gay life—and death—had taken her friend from her.

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