

Lost Things and Missing Persons

Angelina waited tables in the bar of a hotel in mid-town El Paso. She was a young woman and wore a flower—a lilac or an iris or sometimes even an orchid—in her short, straight, mouse-brown hair. She wore no makeup on her lightly-freckled face, her hazel eyes steady and kind.

“You always have a flower in your hair,” Jeff the bartender said to her one night. He was also young, a couple years older than she was. “Why do you do that? None of the other waitresses do that.”

“They should,” Angelina said, nodding once, her hair and flower bouncing gently as she placed an order of drinks on her round black tray. “The customers like it, especially the men. I make more tips.”

“Wow,” Jeff said, smiling. “I never would’ve thought.”

“Of course not—you’re a guy,” Angelina smiled back. She picked up her tray to go serve the drinks.

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Jeff and Angelina chatted casually and got to know each other a little on the nights they worked together, if they weren’t too busy and if Jeff wasn’t flirting with another of the waitresses or one of the customers. He never flirted with her. Though she was a cocktail waitress and wore the skimpy green dress the hotel management mandated and supplied, to him she seemed far too sober-minded and just plain nice to put the moves on. Raised in El Paso, she was a student at a university in San Antonio, working at this bar when she was back home on break. She didn’t smoke, she rarely drank, she made no bawdy comments or lascivious leers—she was a rock-solid Methodist—and she never picked anyone up, nor did she seem to have a boyfriend. As far as Jeff could tell, she had no interest in romance at all.

The second summer they worked together, he was managing the bar along with tending it. Not showing up for a scheduled shift now and then was something most cocktail waitresses could be counted on to do, some more than others. Angelina always showed up, and on nights when Jeff was short-staffed with a waitress calling in sick, or tired, or sick and tired, or simply not showing up and not bothering to call, Jeff could phone Angelina and she would come in, happy to work the extra shift and earn what her flower, her polite, cheerful steadiness, and the skimpy green dress might bring her.

Just before she returned to school at the end of that second summer, she came by the bar one afternoon when Jeff was tending happy hour. It was the very start of the shift and there was no one else there. She followed him onto the unlighted stage by the dance floor when he went up to the deejay's booth to set some music to playing; when he turned, she was there in front of him to say goodbye. She kissed him, and they kissed for a long time, he in his bartender's uniform with its black pants and vest, she in a light summer dress. He was surprised and pleased. He'd had no idea she might want to do this. She kissed well, and he liked the feel of her body under his hands.

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Back in El Paso on her break that winter and working at the bar again, she invited Jeff over for Christmas dinner with her parents—her father a thin, trembling public school administrator who always had a can of beer in his hand and a smile on his face, her mother a level and sharp radiologist who wore glasses and who, while pleasant enough, brooked little nonsense. It was snowing outside that day and a football game was on the color television in one corner of the cozy living room of their modest tract house. Angelina wore a navy blue sweater and new blue jeans, both snug but not immodestly so, and when she stood in the living room with her hands on her hips to look at the television a moment after a touchdown or a field goal, the crowd cheering and the announcers excited, Jeff noticed for the first time the fine, enticing balance of her figure, her narrow young waist and flat belly, the outline of her small and perfect breasts. It never occurred to him she might be posing.

She was quite different from him, religious, a churchgoer, sober and cheerful without giddiness, without noticeable swing of mood. Though he had been raised a Baptist and had read the Bible through, from *In the beginning* to *Amen*, he hadn't been to services in years and was rarely more than accidentally and temporarily sober, his moods depending more than he realized on whatever he was somewhat or largely under the influence of. Though he liked what he saw when he looked at her, he wanted to make some attempt to keep from ill-using her. She had recently turned twenty-two and during one of the slack-time chats they'd had at the bar, had told him she was still a virgin. He was twenty-four and a fuck-around. She pretty much knew by now that he had slept with more than one of her fellow waitresses, though she may not have known, this winter, that on a Friday or Saturday night with the bar fully crewed, she was in fact the only waitress on the floor he had not slept with.

They were snowed-in the last Monday night of that year, when it was just the two of them in the bar, the storm starting in the early evening and not stopping until a half-foot of fresh snow covered the desert city. The hotel's night manager, a middle-aged divorcé with a couple of kids barely younger than Jeff and Angelina, let them have a couple empty rooms after they had closed the bar and changed into their street clothes.

“I insist on it,” he said. “I’m not going to let you two drive home in this if I can help it.” He handed them the keys.

Jeff saw Angelina to her room, their footsteps crunch-squeaking through still-falling snow, then he went to his own, across an open passageway and a few doors down. Inside, he turned on the lights and the cabled-in television and turned up the heat. His overcoat was an old US Army fatigue jacket his father had brought home from the Vietnam War. Out of one of its pockets he pulled a novel about the American Civil War; out of another he pulled a small baggie of marijuana, a pack of rolling papers, and a pack of cigarettes. He tossed these items onto the round table in the middle of the room, pulled out one of the chairs there, took his jacket off and draped it over the back of the chair, and sat to roll himself a joint. Soon as he had it rolled, the phone rang.

“Jeffrey,” Angelina said, “are you still up?”

“Yes,” he said. She was the only person besides his father and the hotel’s general manager who called him Jeffrey.

“I hate to bother you,” she said, “but my heater won’t work. Could you come take a look?”

“Sure. I’ll be right there.”

He couldn’t get it to work, either. Shortly he and Angelina were on her hotel room’s bed, its covers still up, him on his back, her straddling him, both of them fully-dressed and still winter-coated in her cold room with its lights turned out. It happened so naturally and fast, he never could recall just how.

She kissed him and said, “I want you to be the first.”

He never asked her why. Of all the men she must have known, he couldn’t believe he was the best she could do. He didn’t want to mess it up by getting too inquisitive about it. If she wanted him to be the first, he would be the first. As for that night, it was too cold in her room for them to remove any clothing there. He didn’t invite her back to his room, fearing they would be fired if they were found to have spent the night or any significant portion of it in the same room together. The hotel management had strict rules about employees doing that sort of thing. It crossed his mind to be gallant and offer to swap rooms with her, but he was not that gallant. He returned to his room, smoked the joint and a cigarette, lay in his bed watching the Three Stooges on television, read some of his novel, and was awake until almost daylight, unable to sleep. Angelina told him the following night at work that she hadn’t been able to sleep either, as cold as it had been in her room.

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After she returned to school in San Antonio, they stayed in constant touch through letters and occasional phone calls. When she was back in El Paso for spring break, she didn't work at the bar, she was only home for a week, but she and Jeff went to the movies one night, to see Gandhi. It was a long movie, with an intermission that came right after the scene of a massacre; refreshments were out of the question. After the movie, she came home with Jeff to his one-room apartment, where they sat on his bed and made out. With his gentle, murmuring, patient insistence, she removed first her blouse and then her bra, but she wouldn't lie down on the bed and she wanted the lamp on the night-stand left on. She sat with her head down, almost as though she were ashamed. Jeff was wondering if he was still to be her first, or even if they were ever to be more intimate at all, when not long after midnight, his phone rang. It was Angelina's mother.

"Tell her she has to come home right now."

"Yes, ma'am."

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Jeff and Angelina became lovers in May, the day after she returned to El Paso for the summer. They spent a passionate season together, making love here and there: in her bed, in his, on his carpeted floor, on his sofa. She cried the first time. That would be the time in her bed, filled with the stuffed toy frogs and frog pillows she had collected as a girl. She kissed and kissed Jeff, but he kept turning into himself. The bright sunlight beat hard on the thin, flowered curtain covering her bedroom window. She returned to school in late August. It was her final undergraduate year. She and Jeff had talked of their future, of marriage, of graduate school in El Paso, of her becoming a schoolteacher.

The waitress who replaced her at the hotel bar, who even ended up wearing the same skimpy green cocktail dress she had worn, this waitress became Jeff's lover less than three weeks after Angelina had returned to San Antonio. (There are several San Antonios; the one after whom the city in Texas is named is the one from Padua, the patron saint of lost things and missing persons.) Approximately six weeks later, this replacement waitress invited Jeff to move in with her. He accepted.

Before Christmas came and Angelina returned to El Paso for the holiday, Jeff could no longer hide from her what he had done, writing her a letter to tell her he had moved and who he had moved in with. She wrote him a letter in response that so shamed him, he could neither re-read it nor throw it away. He stored it with what he considered his most important papers, not one of which he ever re-read or threw away.

He remained with the replacement waitress, whose story in its details is immaterial here, but who answered a need so deep in Jeff that he did not know it existed until she found it. Nonetheless, sometimes Jeff's relationship with the

replacement waitress was strained. They were young and he was often intoxicated on this or that for days or even weeks on end.

The following summer, during one of these rough patches, Angelina was back in El Paso for a time. She and Jeff ended up making love one final time, on a July afternoon in the bed Jeff normally shared with the replacement waitress, who was fortuitously absent. Angelina hoped, without getting her hopes too high, that Jeff would leave this other woman and return to her, but even if he didn't, she thought it was worth it. It had been almost a year since she had last made love with him, she hadn't ever made love with anyone else—that would come soon enough, and she would not long after that be married to this new and second lover—and she quite simply loved the act of sexual intercourse just as she quite simply loved Jeff, even if she had to let him go. Which she did. He went on to marry the replacement waitress and when that marriage came apart a few years later he would some nights lie in his otherwise empty bed and recall Angelina, the flower in her hair and her kind and steady eyes.